CHAPTER 2

Who Is the Subject of Atrocities Prevention?

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Abstract

This essay poses the question, who is the subject of atrocities prevention? Borrowing a rhetorical and argumentative model from Jacques Ranciere's work on the subject of human of rights, the essay explores the conceptual frameworks for the subjects of atrocities and queries their relevance to the specific context of prevention. The concepts that dominate work on mass atrocities were articulated in relation to atrocities that were underway or had concluded; they are a poor fit for prevention. New work on prevention, like that on ‘factors of restraint’ or resilience,’ suggest revisions to the concepts and cases that currently dominate study of mass atrocities. Crucial amongst these concepts that require adjustment are how we address the subject of atrocities prevention.

Keywords

mass atrocities – prevention – subjects

Introduction

In 2004, political philosopher Jacques Rancière asked: ‘Who is the subject of the Rights of Man?’1 A question at least as old as the French Revolution, it is implicitly posed in the title of that period’s central document, the ‘Déclaration des Droits de l’Homme et du Citoyen’(1789), ‘Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen’. Provocatively, the subject of rights is addressed as both ‘man and

citizen,’ with ample space for theoretical query about the status of the conjunction. Does it connect or separate the two potential subjects of rights? Nativity, the mere of fact of existing, is implied as the foundation of rights in ‘man’ or more appropriately ‘human,’ while inscription in a political community forms the basis of ‘citizen’ as subject.

However, neither ‘human’ nor ‘citizen’ provides a satisfying answer. If rights only belong to ‘citizens,’ they appear as a tautology: political rights belonging to those who have that status of rights-holder within a political community. However, if rights belong to ‘human’ based on mere existence, as Hannah Arendt argued in the wake of the Holocaust and the post-World War II refugee crisis, they are revealed as rights that cannot be claimed. In Arendt’s words:

The conception of human rights based upon the assumed existence of a human being as such, broke down the very moment when those who professed to believe in it were for the first time confronted with people who had indeed lost all other qualities and specific relationships—except that they were still human.3

In short, human rights are meaningless. Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben develops this position further, positing that these ‘human’ populations exist as ‘bare life,’ that is, life without political meaning, deemed outside the law, and thereby outside all protections. And so the question of the subject arrives at a dead-end: rights are either a tautology or void.

Unless, Rancière continues, we have asked the wrong question. The critical work is not to define the subject, but to understand the work of claiming rights. The political subject, named ‘man’, ‘human’ or ‘citizen’, does not describe a finalized condition, but rather forms the grounds of contestation, what he calls ‘dissensus’:

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2 Rancière is acutely attuned to the exclusion enacted by the term “man” as a substitute for “human.” The example he develops in his article is of a woman, Olympe de Gouges, rallying for women’s rights during the French Revolution and demanding equal treatment as a political subject. De Gouges, as she mounted the guillotine, proclaimed that if a woman could be publicly killed for her political actions then she deserved the full rights of citizenship as well. The state had already acknowledged her as a political being with punishment; logic dictated that political life be acknowledged in its positive manifestations as well.
