The "progress" of the twentieth century has been constant along its journey of horrors—from the massacre of the Armenians, to the planned famine in the Ukraine, to the Holocaust, to the killing fields of Cambodia. The enormity of the genocidal horrors of our century is indicated by our almost schizophrenic attitude toward it. We move between attitudes of despair on one hand and denial or avoidancy on the other. These attitudes are actually mirror images of each other. They both seek to deny reality by avoiding any responsibility for the need to understand the phenomenon so that we can avoid repeating it again and again. Our first obligation, therefore, is to face it squarely.

If genocide is the destruction of a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group, the study of genocide is the attempt to understand this phenomenon, both in its genesis and prevention. Far too great and too grave has the suffering caused by genocide been for it to be ignored. Far too many resources—scientific and other—are spent to destroy rather than to enhance life. The study of genocide can only have one goal—and its very object of investigation demands that it be to preserve and to promote human life. All else would be perverse. Therefore, any scientific effort to study genocide is bound to combine both theory and action—is bound to be praxis; praxis designed to change the conditions that have led to genocide in the past, or could do so in the future. It is, and must be, change-oriented interpretation and theorizing, action-oriented scholarship.
Massive human suffering caused by people is not unique to genocide. In fact, much more suffering and death are and have been inflicted worldwide in ways that technically are not called genocide. Millions may have died from genocide in recent history. But hundreds of millions succumbed as a result of human induced starvation or war. What, then, makes the study of genocide so important, so compelling? What should make genocidal killing a more important object of study than the killing through war or anonymous economic mechanisms—particularly if more lives could potentially be preserved by studying the latter? Clearly, there is no reason why the study and prevention of genocide should have precedence over the study and prevention of other processes that are equally or even more destructive of human lives. Rather, what has emerged may be seen as a division of labor among like-minded scholars holding similar values, nurturing similar hopes, and working with similar intentions: to prevent the destruction of life, to create life-enhancing social conditions.

Scholars have been more concerned with the study of war, poverty, and disease than with the study of genocide. However, since the genocidal destruction of life cannot be clearly dissociated from other but equally destructive processes, any study of genocide must also be informed by and connected to all other efforts to understand and to prevent the mass destruction of human lives. Therefore, a scientific praxis to understand and prevent poverty, disease and war will also directly enhance the understanding and prevention of genocide.

The term "genocide" was coined against the aftermath of World War II, indicating that the study of genocide, as we know it today, is about fifty years old. The motivation to focus specifically on genocide—as opposed to other life-destroying processes—may greatly vary from one individual to another. However, the twentieth century experience with genocide is still too deeply engraved in societal consciousness; the pain of survivors and relatives of victims is still too vivid; the remaining injustice suffered by members of various ethnic groups is still too deep for it not to have had an effect on the scholarly community and some of its practitioners.

To say that the term "genocide" and the effort to study and prevent it is new implies that the phenomenon itself may be recent to human history. In other words, processes that destroy groups on the basis of their religion, race, ethnicity, or nationality may be correlates of modernity and the tremendous social differentiation, that is, the hierarchically and horizontally highly segmented society that characterizes it. By implication, then, genocide would not be expected to occur in societies with little social differentiation.

Indeed, when consulting the historical wisdom on this point, it appears that the first mass killings where genocide might have been involved occurred in societies with sufficient differentiation to be classified as agricultural societies. All previous human history—agricultural societies emerged only about 6,000 years ago—did not seem to know genocide although lives were destroyed in warfare.

Mass Warfare

In essence, the phenomenon of mass warfare is connected with civilization. It is possible only within conflict situations peculiar to civilized societies. Although human beings have possessed the technical skills to create weapons such as axes, clubs, and spears for about 25,000 years, it appears that the species did not deliberately make weapons in order to wage war until the emergence of Neolithic man. In fact, no weapons specifically designed to be used against other human beings have been found that can be dated before the emergence of Neolithic man—founder of agriculture—in approximately 10,000 B.C.E. This is not to suggest that earlier humans did not sporadically kill other humans with hunting tools, rocks, and other such items. Early humans were aggressive and often violent. Yet organized mass violence was not yet part of human behavior.

Ritualistic Practices in Warfare

The institution of mass warfare occurred during the crucial stages of the transition to civilization. Archaeological and anthropological evidence suggests that it can be found in the later neolithic period. The first identifiable weapons are found in communal sites used by societies with a mixed economy of hunting and agriculture. It is in this period that we also find the first evidence of fortified settlement, perhaps the most telling evidence of warlike activity. The conflicts of Neolithic man were definitely rule-governed group activities: they involved genuine weapons for warfare and were the focus of time and resources. Yet they were not "modern" because they had very limited objectives beyond the fighting itself. The warfare was often accompanied by ritualistic practices, with attention given to the rites of death and there was no interest in conquest of the opponent's territory. Neolithic warfare therefore did not function as a coercive of political imposition. It is only with the emergence of the city-state as a social entity that we see the ingredients of mass warfare of genocidal proportions. With the rise of the city-states and significant social differentiation, there emerged forces and institutions that made mass warfare an essential feature of intercity policies. In Mesopotamia
and Egypt around 4,000 to 3,000 B.C.E., we find the first real evidence of potentially genocidal war. In the "cradle of civilization," cities were walled in and fortified from the very beginning and a regular army emerged as a new social organization.

Ritually Uncontrolled Killing

To the extent that history can only be appropriated through records in one form or another, the aforementioned conclusion may be unwarranted. Nevertheless, since archeology or oral history have produced no evidence to the contrary, for all practical purposes we can accept it as a valid inference. Furthermore, modern anthropological records of hunting and gathering or horticultural societies seem to indicate that in minimally differentiated societies even warfare is ritually controlled to minimize human loss. Genocide, on the other hand, is an event that potentially knows no limit short of the total annihilation of the group and is, if anything, a ritually uncontrolled killing process. Lastly, the available records on agricultural societies lead us to suspect that genocide may for the first time have occurred in this social formation. Written language itself is to be found only in relatively differentiated societies where it primarily serves as a device to administer society and to integrate it politically and economically. Social formation with less differentiation, such as hunting and gathering and horticultural societies, had no need for such means. Therefore, the very sources that inform us of mass killing are the product of increased social differentiation, a condition also associated with events of genocide.

Genocide and Social Differentiation

To define genocide as the destruction of religious, ethnic, racial, or national groups is to presuppose a social organism sufficiently differentiated to include one or more of the above groups. While the history of social differentiation spans thousands of years, the notion that social life is subject to ever more pronounced differentiation primarily arose in the nineteenth century. To the extent that agricultural societies did perceive themselves to be differentiated, differentiation was seen as rather static. However, once the agricultural mode of production—based on local self-sufficiency—was penetrated by exchange and market relations transforming local into ever wider universal social interactions and dependencies, the stage was set for social differentiation to accelerate at a hitherto unknown speed and to reach an unforeseeable complexity.

Vertical and Horizontal Segmentation

The phenomenally increased—and still increasing—vertical and horizontal segmentation of society was particularly noticeable in the nineteenth century and numerous scholars of the period articulated it irrespective of their political persuasion. Vertical segmentation is characterized by hierarchies of status, class, power, and authority, whereas horizontal segmentation consists of the social and industrial division of labor. Suddenly, nation states appeared as major political power centers with administrative units that increasingly subsumed diverse ethnic, religious, and racial groups and incorporated previously independent administrative units under its rule. Bureaucracy and market systems were greatly expanded and elaborated to serve as primary means of co-ordination. As they operated to hold together what differentiation threatened to break apart, they themselves accelerated social differentiation.

Reification

The division of labor in a general societal and a narrower economic sense—linking the most varied human groups, social classes, political units, and continents often in antagonistic fashion—grew into an ever more elaborate, impenetrable web, one increasingly difficult to comprehend. Social organization, social interaction, production, and distribution have taken on lives of their own, have become reified. Human beings could no longer regulate, control, shape, and reshape these forces but rather were dominated by them. While individuals increasingly lost control and comprehension of the mechanisms and the world they created, the ever increasing division of labor—coerced by market forces—brought forth ever more powerful and efficient means of production and destruction, ever more anonymous, distant, and powerful centers of administration, decision making, and conflict management; for every increase in social differentiation in the division of labor is social change implying a conflict laden realignment of interest and power relations.

We need not be concerned here with the unproductive academic dispute whether social life is at all possible without reification or whether there could be a world in which human agency never produces unintended consequences. What demands our full attention, however, is the observation—and the insight—that reification has assumed intolerable, catastrophic proportions. Many developments, but particularly the life-destroying processes of which genocide is just one of the more important examples, make this evident.

Those who coined the terms "alienation" and "estrangement" were not inspired by the quest for a
world without any reification and unexpected consequences to human action. Rather, they had the vision of a world in which—although human action may produce unexpected consequences—humanity could free itself from the fateful position of the sorcerer’s apprentice, and would be capable of intervening, of correcting mistakes and of avoiding socially induced suffering and catastrophes. They rejected a world in which humanity is the plaything of processes run amuck, the victim of forces and power relations that annihilate. They knew that human history is for the most part characterized by the very absence of massive life destruction and the knowledge that humanity is capable of consciously shaping its history, of controlling the means and relations of production and destruction.

Modernity

Genocide is only one of many manifestations to show that a social formation and the associated social relations have gone berserk. So has modernity, world society with a differentiation so excessive as to prohibit a sufficient understanding of its web and processes, highly coercive to both individuals and groups and, thus, all too often defying intervention. If genocide is characterized by uncontrolled state power, so is modernity; if it is made possible because of segmented individuals who do their jobs as part of a coercive division of labor and who no longer see where and how they are connected to the social whole, so is modernity; if it requires technical and administrative thoroughness and efficiency, so does modernity; if it is massively destructive to life, so is modernity; if it is directed against certain national, religious, ethnic, or racial groups, modernity has brought them forth, has forcibly taken them into its confinement—and often pitted one against certain national, religious, ethnic, or racial groups.

Seen against the background of modernity, of modern processes and forces of production and destruction, events of genocide may no longer be construed as unique occurrences only. Because they also manifest a pattern deeply embedded in modernity, we must conceptualize them as integral parts of modernity. Granted, we are horrified by them and are still unable to comprehend the genocidal events in the twentieth century, particularly the Holocaust. Why are we not equally dazzled by the even larger potential of destruction already in place? Why not by the military machinery ready to administer the looming nuclear omnicide? Why not at the millions who anonymously perish of hunger right before our eyes due to our universally anonymous market forces and power relations? Can all this be comprehended at all? Can modernity be comprehended? Should we not be dazzled by modernity, instead of by some selective phenomena produced by it? Should we not go to the root cause both in our cognition and action, in praxis? By seeing genocide embedded in modernity, we do not mean to take a purely determinisitic point of view. Even with modernity as a given, genocide only occurs under specific circumstances. History, place, ideology remain important. The historicity of particular genocides remains important. However, modernity is still a necessary, if not a sufficient, condition for genocide to occur. Furthermore, by placing the emphasis on anonymous life destruction processes in modernity, we also imply an expansion of the United Nations convention of genocide—that no explicit human agency may be required. For instance, the structural violence exercised by market forces determining production and distribution alone is generally known to kill millions and could also assume genocidal qualities.

Clearly, from our perspective, genocide is a part, and must be studied in the context, of modernity. As a phenomenon, it is but one element among, or a subset of, other life annihilation processes. Processes killing millions by starvation may also be genocidally directed at specific national, ethnic, racial, or religious groups. In imperialism’s thrust for ever greater market penetration and brutal conquest of other at least minimally exchange-oriented and differentiated societies, it causes many groups to suffer ethnocide while it exposes others to genocide. In war’s massive destruction of lives, some national, ethnic, racial, or religious groups may suffer total or near total extinction. Omnicide alone would blur all differentiation in modernity’s human-induced destruction of life.

The Study of Genocide

What is it, then, that specifically characterizes the study of genocide? First, it is the acquisition of knowledge not for its own sake but to prevent modernity’s tremendous destruction of life. Second, it is the effort to improve our understanding of all life-annihilation processes inherent in modernity. Third, it is the effort to learn more about the circumstances under which modernity’s life destruction processes tend to focus on specific groups in events known to us as genocide. For instance, what are the circumstances under which wars or life-annihilating economic or political conflicts genocidally turn against ethnic, racial, religious, or national groups, or when do conflicts involving such groups tend to escalate into genocides? Fourth, it is the effort to develop means to prevent genocide. Such means must simultaneously be developed on two levels. On the structural level, means and strategies must be found for the increased social control over spheres that have become reified and taken on lives of their own. On another level, intervention techniques must be
developed for situations that threaten to escalate into genocide.

The Present Volume

While they touch on many of the issues discussed above, the contributors to this volume elaborate on them and cover additional terrain. The typology and history of mass killing and genocide in themselves are unable to convey the emotional hurt and suffering that victims must have endured. The perspective of survivors alone can convey to us, aside from other insights they can give based on their direct observations, what this horrible experience has meant for them and how they were psychologically and physiologically affected during and after the event. Bolkosky confronts us with one Holocaust survivor’s account and supplements it with the relevant historical background. The immediacy of the survivor’s account gives us some entry into the emotional and psychological realm of survivorship and helps us to experience it in ways that objective historical scholarship cannot.

The work of Markusen, Legters, and Palmer focuses on phenomena that are not classically defined as genocide but, since they show many points of intersection, are highly important to the study of genocide. Thus Palmer explores numerous policies towards ethnic minorities worldwide and shows their overt and covert ethnocidal dimensions, while, in the Ukrainian case chosen by Legters, the issue is one of demarkation. Should the Ukrainian famine be viewed as a case involving an economic catastrophe, as a political conflict, as ethnocide, as mass killing, or as genocide? How were these dimensions connected or could they have been? Linkages are also the theme of Markusen’s investigation, which looks at the possible connections between modern war and genocide, particularly as it concerns the nature of modern war and its social, psychological, and organizational foundations in modernity. Aspects of the latter are also used by Dobkowski and by Rosenberg and Silverman in their analyses of the Holocaust. Dobkowski views the Holocaust as the paradigmatic genocide. It introduced an unprecedented technological mass killing. It represents a kind of ultimate confrontation with death, faceless and unmediated. Rosenberg and Silverman further demonstrate the criteria under which the Holocaust can be viewed as a unique event.

Adalian describes in detail the methods by which the Turkish genocide against the Armenians has been covered up, excused, and denied. Simultaneously, we obtain a good account of the event itself, including some of its causes and consequences. Finally, the manner and dynamic in which the Armenian genocide has been articulated, relativized, and denied can serve in the development of intervention strategies and early warning systems such as those that Charny proposes in his essay.