Keynote adress

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"Perpetrator Research in International Context"

When the post-war trials took place in Germany the term perpetrator was scarcely used; those rounded up by the Allies in the first wave of arrests were known as war criminals, judged by the words themselves even before a subsequent trial and conviction. The concept of the perpetrator has emerged over the past quarter of a century as a way of accounting for the hundreds of thousands of other individuals involved, directly or indirectly, in committing or assisting atrocity during the Second World War. It is a term designed not for the chief culprits, whose responsibility and motives are assumed to be clear, but for what Christopher Browning famously called the 'Ordinary Men' (although a fraction of women were also involved). These were the myriad guards, officials, train drivers, policemen, medical staff, soldiers and party members who were directly linked in one way or another with committing atrocious crimes. Perpetrator research is centrally concerned with the question of what makes non-violent, psychologically normal individuals capable of transmuting their behaviour and norms sufficiently to commit or assist atrocity. The implication of this question is of enormous significance since it raises fundamental questions about what it means to be human and what it means to be civilised.

The concept of 'perpetration' is nonetheless problematic, not least the issue of definition. It has always been popularly identified with perpetration in the Holocaust, and by implication is assumed to be in some sense a German

problem (a view reinforced by the unintelligent assumptions underlying David Goldhagen's polemical study of 'Hitler's Willing Executioners'). Social and psychological theory about atrocity also focuses to a large extent on the Holocaust as a central example, partly because there is so much readily-available material on those who took part and those who were its victims. It is nevertheless essential to recognise that 'perpetration' has to be explained wherever atrocious behaviour is carried out by ordinary people, whether in the Yugoslav civil war or Stalin's Soviet Union. Second, the concept 'perpetrator' is all too often used reductively, as Goldhagen used it, ignoring different forms of perpetration or the differing circumstances in which it becomes possible. In its most reductive form we are asked to accept that all human beings contain within the capacity to commit atrocity, a view that leads almost nowhere in explaining either how or why it occurs. 'Are We All Nazis?' asked one psychologist in America in a book published in the 1970s, after he had read details of Stanley Milgram's famous experiment to get volunteers to administer higher and higher levels of pain in what they were told was a piece of controlled scientific research. The answer is obviously 'No, we are not'. Third, the study of perpetration is too often taken out of historical context as a study of the social dynamics of small groups, whose observed behaviour is then extrapolated to explain violence in situations which have quite different historical circumstances or trajectories.

Some of these ambiguities are the result of trying to answer two different, though related questions about the nature of perpetration. In setting a research agenda it seems to me essential to distinguish clearly between two distinct approaches to the study of the perpetrator. The first is to answer the

question of *how* individuals can commit atrocity, the second is to explain *why* particular atrocities happen. The first question is properly the province of the human sciences, and of social psychology in particular. These explanations are predominantly 'essential', looking at core issues of human behaviour. The second question is more properly the province of historians, who have to explain what contingent historical factors make particular atrocities possible. These forms of explanation we might call 'environmental', and they focus more on issues of ideology, policy, institutional dynamics and place. The 'How' and the 'Why' are not mutually exclusive; both are necessary in order to arrive at a proper understanding of what has made atrocity in the modern age possible. This is a subject that is genuinely inter-disciplinary: it asks social scientists to become part historian; it asks historians to embrace some social science.

I want to focus first of all on the social psychological explanations for how atrocity happens. This is a field where a great deal of innovative and experimental research is being done, much of it in ways quite distinct from the work of historians. There has been in the last decade or so a shift in the view first established in the 1960s of the so-called 'banality of evil'. This argument, deriving its name from Hannah Arendt's famous reaction to watching the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem, suggested that perpetrators were ordinary individuals doing a job, obeying orders, performing a function, but largely unable to make clear moral choices or to take initiatives – mere cogs in the machine. This argument was famously underpinned by two psychological experiments in the United States: the first was the Milgram experiment, which has already been mentioned; the second was Philip Zimbardo's Stanford

Prison Experiment, in which he demonstrated that students placed in the role of prison guards very quickly developed patterns of authoritarian, even violent behaviour which was neither required of them nor consistent with their 'normal' personality. Zimbardo and others helped to construct a paradigm of human behaviour which suggested that ordinary individuals passively reacted to circumstances, peer pressure, suggestions and orders and that committing atrocity was by implication simply an extreme example of a standard paradigm of situational inertia.

This view of a banal evil, something that every individual is capable of doing if required to do so, has been challenged recently in a number of ways. Harald Welzer, one of the organisers of this conference, has argued that atrocity is not committed passively but relies on a relationship between situational dynamics and the procedural elements of the act of atrocity itself, enabling those who commit violence to feel comfortable with what they do by normalising and legitimising their acts. This dynamic relies, Welzer argues, on the prior construction of some distinct moral universe which encourages an anxious desire to be included. This sense of 'social belonging' implies, as the legal theorist Carl Schmitt argued in the 1920s, a division between 'Friend and Foe' [Freund und Feind]. The included must define themselves in terms of those they exclude, who do not share that moral universe. This prior process is the pre-condition for the act of legitimising and normalising atrocity, and it can be seen not just in Hitler's Germany, but in the warped morality of Stalin's Soviet Union or the 'us and them' mentality at work in Cambodia or Rwanda. The process has been ably described in historical terms by Claudia Koonz in her book on *The Nazi Conscience* and David Hoffmann in his book on

Stalinist Values. It explains, Welzer claims, why so few perpetrators seem capable of expressing remorse.

A second approach to the 'banality of evil' thesis has been suggested by two British scholars, Alex Haslam and Stephen Reicher, who worked on a BBC Prison Study. They used the study to question the basis of Zimbardo's argument that people act simply in ways that a given situation calls for. They also argue that the critical factor is the changed moral universe of an in-group which develops a need for a powerful shared identity and approval, perhaps from some leader figure, or 'entrepreneur of violence'. They argue that anxieties about inclusion were much more significant in explaining racial violence than any form of hatred (which explains why German reserve policemen could kill Jews without apparently being rabidly anti-Semitic). Perpetrators are then capable, in the words of Haslam and Reicher, of 'celebrating what is right' when they commit oppressive or violent acts; not only that, but they also act 'thoughtfully, creatively and with conviction', and are not merely responding to orders. On this account evil can quickly become normalised but it is not therefore made banal, since the dynamic process of moral transformation and the necessity for taking initiative – Eichmann is their key example – are capable together of generating a positive commitment to perpetrating acts with monstrous consequences.

The principal argument in this new material is the idea that the 'banality of evil', which has dominated so much discussion of perpetration in the human sciences, has given a distorted view of how people commit atrocity. Instead it is possible to argue that people make choices (joining a political movement, becoming a policeman or a militiaman, volunteering to take part in an

experiment, or taking a lead in showing others how to behave); those choices are centrally concerned with being part of an exclusive community, which is capable of generating its own norms and making what appeared to be 'evil' into something deemed to be right. This seems to be true both for large units – the desire to be considered Aryan, for example – or for small ones, such as the Reserve Police Battalions in the Soviet Union which have supplied the core evidence for much of the debate on perpetration. It is certainly true for Adolf Eichmann, whose behaviour was anything but banal. Getty and Naumov's recent biography of Nikolai Yezhov, head of the Soviet NKVD during the terror of 1937/8, sets out to demonstrate that there was nothing banal about Yezhov's actions either, which were consciously shaped by his hatred of 'alien elements' and his creative exploitation of a system where mass-killing was not yet the norm but quickly became so under his leadership.

The attempt to move beyond the 'banality' argument is to be welcomed, but it does seem to me to bring with it other problems of interpretation. I am not, of course, a social psychologist and I hope my remarks do not appear entirely ill-informed to those who understand the science better. It is of course true that perpetrators benefit from a shift in their normative world so that the moral universe they inhabit, even temporarily, makes it possible to 'celebrate what is right'. These arguments are used by historians too to demonstrate how it was possible for dictatorship to require of people forms of behaviour that were contrary to the normative morality that predated dictatorship. Yet this shift in the moral universe permits a great deal of activity which does not result in the perpetration of crimes. It is, in other words, permissive but not necessarily prescriptive. Actual acts of oppression,

violence and discrimination require more than positive endorsement, either psychological or historical, of the new morality. I share the view, argued, for example, by Dorothee Frank in her book on *Killing People* [Menschen Töten] that there has also to be an 'absence of restraint' to make atrocity possible. Approval of the new moral universe may well be part of that process, but atrocity can still happen in contexts where the perpetrator knows that killing is against what might be called 'natural morality' but persists in perpetration regardless. There are many examples from the Holocaust of individuals caught up in barbarous actions who knew that what they did failed to conform with their conventional view of right or wrong but acted in the absence of restraint. The criminal orders from Hitler's headquarters in May and June 1941 were a classic example of how this worked; the orders did not say commit this or that crime, but indicated that no-one would be punished if they carried out acts that under existing law, military or civil, would have been regarded as crimes. As Götz Aly has recently argued, soldiers looted all the time because no-one stopped them from doing so.

If there is a psychological pedigree to this argument it is to be found in the work of the psycho-analysts Sigmund Freud and Melanie Klein on the civilising process. Though Freudian interpretation is no longer widely accepted (and I hesitate to use it in front of experts from modern science), the idea that all humans exhibit 'primal impulses' which are subject from infancy onwards to a process of repression was used as an analogue by Freud for the evolution of mankind from states of primitive existence to mature Western civilisation. It is worth quoting at length Freud's own response to the paradox of civilised Europe engaged in the bloodbath of the Great War:

Psychoanalysis – he wrote in 1914 – has concluded from a study of the dreams and mental slips of normal people, as well as from the symptoms of neurotics, that the primitive, savage and evil impulses of mankind have not vanished in any individual, but continue their existence, although in a repressed state – in the unconscious, as we call it in our language – and that they wait for opportunities to display their activity.

Freud argued that what prevents these impulses from manifesting themselves in the civilised adult were the ego-controls, above all the 'censor', which limit or restrain what humans usually do through a powerful sense of guilt and fear of punishment. In his view the instruments of psychological restraint were paramount in explaining why individuals generally preferred civilised behaviour. But the removal of the censor controls for any reason unleashes behaviour that returns man back to a savage. In *Civilisation and its Discontents*, published in Vienna in 1929, Freud famously suggested that contemporary civilisation was exceptionally fragile because it relied on a weak cultural 'super-ego' to restrain a tendency to aggression that is, in his words, 'innate, independent and instinctual'.

It is worth reflecting here that in Freudian analysis there is pleasure derived from perpetrating acts of violence that the absence of psychological restraint permits. Studies of sadism in the 1930s linked the willingness of individuals to engage in violence with the failure of the control mechanisms developed to control erotic drives. The link between eroticism and violence, established through study of the Oedipus complex, is one area in the study of perpetration that has been under-researched, perhaps because of the unfashionable character of many Freudian conclusions. But it is evident in so

many of the examples of violent behaviour where the perpetrators realise that the normal restraints, both social and individual, are absent. The torturers in Abu Ghraib prison indulged in and enjoyed explicit acts of sexual sadism; the images of naked women in the Holocaust being forced to march or run to the pits where they are to be murdered exposes the same psychological link in the perpetrators; the regular exposure of the human genitals to torture is not accidental. The demoralising conclusion is that people (usually, but not always, men) can derive erotic gratification from acts of violence. Atrocity can also be exciting and satisfying. This view has been reinforced recently by the work of Joanna Bourke who demonstrated, against much hostile criticism from men with experience of fighting, that ordinary soldiers could take satisfaction in the act of killing.

The Freudian view of perpetration as absence of restraint has been reinforced more recently by the work of neuro-science in trying to explain atrocity. The research of the Oxford scientist Kathleen Taylor has sought to demonstrate how atrocity occurs in terms of brain function. Here again it is absence of restraint that plays a critical role. Taylor argues that the manifestation of an 'in-group' and 'out-group' social reality is in fact the product of an acquired evolutionary trait in which a process of what she calls 'otherisation' came to be essential to the survival and security of the 'in-group'. Violence between them was in this sense natural, not exceptional. Nevertheless extreme manifestations of violence as atrocity (she uses the Armenian genocide as an example) requires a particular mechanism which can overcome the strong inhibitions which most of the time prevent anything more than prejudice or hostility. Atrocity has, she argues, to be seen as

rewarding to compensate for the intense stress, high energy consumption and risks involved in perpetration. This can occur when the neural signals to the brain cancel the 'normal' moral concepts because the novel situation of violence biases the brain towards current perception and temporarily erodes the inhibitory mechanisms. The activation of stress hormones, most obviously adrenaline, shuts downs those parts of the brain that would restrain action and strengthens the brain's capacity to sanction acts of violence. Taylor claims that this explains why perpetrators have a strong sense of 'living in the now' at the moment they commit atrocity. Above all the perpetrator has a strongly reduced 'fear of punishment' which is essential to the act of perpetration; the release of stress hormones in expectation of punishment produces pleasurable, even euphoric states when no punishment materialises. Taylor concludes that the rush of positive or pleasurable sensations 'can be an addictive incentive to commit more otherising acts', particularly where there is strong group identity and a sense of well-being from perpetrating group violence. In other words, the absence of restraining mechanisms in the brain maximises the chance that a perpetrator will be capable of further, perhaps unlimited acts of atrocity, while any sense of disgust is projected onto the victims, not those who victimise them.

This science takes us a long way towards understanding how perpetrators can commit horrific acts they would not normally be capable of. The brain triggers 'permission', the conventional suppressants are set aside, and something like Freud's 'primal urges' comes into operation. Neuro-science helps to explain not just one individual act of murder, but how an individual can continue to murder over and over again. What was so

remarkable about Christopher Browning's 'Ordinary Men' of reserve police battalion 101 was not the first, rather reluctant atrocity, but the fact that the unit was capable of murdering 85,000 people in cold blood over a period of months. It may be facile to assume that once you have killed your first, the rest will become progressively easier, but we know from memoirs and diaries from the Eastern Front that this was often the case. Psychologically the failure to act, to share in the atrocity, became more difficult to rationalise and less rewarding the more often it occurred. It helps to explain the inverted morality of the reserve policemen who, under interrogation in the 1960s, felt remorse about letting down their fellow perpetrators but no remorse for those they killed.

The absence or suppression of restraint has of course to be signalled in some clear way. It does not happen automatically. In the case of training soldiers the explanation is obvious: the function of the military is to project force against an enemy and as long as the enemy is armed, it is legitimate to kill him. Without this sanction it would be impossible to persuade ordinary conscripts, who will never have killed anyone before, that it is necessary and right to kill another person. (It is worth observing here that there has been too little research on the way 'ordinary men' in an army can become killers overnight; they are not murderers but the physical act of killing has still to be carried out as a form of 'licensed violence'.) In other situations the absence of restraint may be signalled less directly. The torturers in Abu Ghraib almost certainly acted under the assumption that their acts would go unpunished, since it was believed that torture had been sanctioned at the highest level (as indeed it was). This does not deny the element of agency and choice and

creativity but they are choices made only in the absence of forms of restraint which normally operate socially, organisationally or psychologically to inhibit extreme acts. This suggests that we should not so easily set aside the situational dynamics exposed by Milgram and Zimbardo where permission or absence of restraint evidently plays a critical part. Nor should we reject out-of-hand the broader situational social theory of Zygmunt Bauman whose book on *Modernity and the Holocaust* explored the idea that in the modern age collective institutions and collective mentalities have the capacity to produce barbaric outcomes as well as progressive ones.

The importance of situation in provoking perpetration brings us back to the second question: not how is atrocity possible, but why does it occur. This is a question that can only be answered historically because every act of perpetration is an element in a particular set of historical circumstances - political, ideological, social and cultural. These are not neutral factors but are the essential building-blocks for any explanation of why perpetration occurs where it does, when it does and against which particular set of victims. Historicising perpetration in this sense brings with it special problems for the historian. No experiments are possible with the past. Explaining perpetration often relies on a narrow range of evidence which is itself ambiguous or incomplete. The heavy emphasis in the literature on perpetration both in the Holocaust and the Rwandan genocide reflects the fact that there is a richer archive of contemporary documents, memoirs and interrogations to help construct these particular narratives. The problem of evidence clearly limits what historians are able to say about why perpetration happens.

On one argument history and social science are in agreement: both emphasise the importance of the inclusion/exclusion dichotomy as a means of legitimising persecution of the 'out group' and justifying the transformation of the moral universe necessary for acts of violent discrimination. This process is evident not only in the Third Reich but in the Soviet Union under Stalin, where Communists distinguished between 'our people' and the 'alien elements' that allegedly threatened the whole Communist experiment; it is evident in explaining the Armenian genocide, or the mass murders in Cambodia. Historians, of course, have an obligation to disaggregate these different historical examples in order to understand the particular explanations about what gives rise to atrocity. No two sets of circumstances can be the same; there are even different forms of perpetration to be explained within each historical situation, since we cannot assume that a single explanation is sufficient for the thousands of cases involved in any major act of genocide or terror. People arrive at acts of perpetration along a variety of different paths. This process of historicising perpetration has also to take account of widely differing milieus, cultures and moral outlooks. While it is clearly the case that murder is murder, or torture is torture, the reasons why they occur in sixteenth-century Spain or twentieth-century Russia or twenty-first century Iraq are historically distinct and can only be understood fully in their particular context.

That does not mean that historians have nothing to say about what perpetration has in common. In the first place large acts of extreme violence almost always take place under the impact of exceptional circumstances of war, civil conflict or revolution when the insecurity or fearfulness of the 'in

group' may sharpen its prejudice or hostility towards any clear 'out group'. The role of ideology, whether religious or secular, is also clearly instrumental in so many cases of extreme violence; indeed ideas are central to understanding how a closed moral universe is constructed, often at great speed, and how that changed moral outlook is mobilised to justify atrocity and to enhance the security of the 'in group'. Otherwise it is difficult to understand how Christian could murder Christian in the early-modern age, or how communist could kill communist in the Stalinist terror or how neighbour can turn against neighbour. Inter-racial or inter-tribal antipathy is also common to many campaigns of violence, where for special reasons the security of one party seems capable of protection only by enhancing the insecurity of the other. But in all these cases of ideological, racial or tribal violence it is necessary to recall that extreme violence is exceptional. Hostile groups can co-exist for long periods of time at lower levels of confrontation or competition. The difficult thing to explain historically is that point where co-existence breaks down in favour of a spasmodic period of escalated violence. The shift from persecution to genocide in Hitler's Germany in the early 1940s, or the change from limited terror to mass murder in the Soviet Union in the mid-1930s are both examples where historians have failed to reach a consensus on the historical trigger mechanism necessary to explain both escalation and the willingness of ordinary members of the 'in-group' to endorse or participate in the violence (though enhanced irrational fear either of a 'Jewish world conspiracy' or of 'anti-Soviet wrecking' is perhaps a central answer). Although similar in appearance, each one of those moments of escalation needs its own

historical explanation; each one has attracted, and continues to attract a large body of historical research.

History is also important for another reason. Perpetrators are not born but made. They are shaped by the historical circumstances they confront and are not entirely free agents. If a particular conjuncture of circumstances had not occurred, they would not have engaged in perpetration. Obvious though this sounds, it is an important point because it shifts the balance of explanation away from social-psychology to history. It may or may not be true that every individual is capable of acts of violent perpetration (I happen to think that not everyone is), but it is not a choice that they are generally required to make. During periods of escalating violence most individuals neither blindly comply nor enthusiastically participate. In many cases they are forced into a process of 'negotiation' between the private sphere and the public sphere in order to explain or rationalise or justify their individual response. This process of negotiation, I would suggest, is dynamic, subject to change as internal or external circumstances change. It is necessary as historians to recognise that the capacity of ordinary people to end that negotiation by outright acts of denial or dissent is unlikely and difficult. Negotiating some kind of agreement with the prevailing circumstances is easier and in many cases defined or rationalised as advantageous. In the current film *Der Vorleser* [The Reader] there is a dramatic moment of courtroom confrontation between the judge and one of the female SS guards on trial for mass murder. Cross-examined about her failure to open the doors of a burning church to release Jewish prisoners, she blurts out: 'What would you have done?' The presiding judge has no answer. For most of a modern

audience the answer seems simple: we would have unlocked the doors and freed the prisoners. Such a view is essentially ahistorical. It underestimates the real power of a system to enforce compliant behaviour. In most cases the power of ordinary people to confront or withdraw from the imperatives to comply, whether these are intellectual or institutional or social or psychological, is evidently much more limited than the black/white division between perpetration and dissent would suggest. If the power of ordinary people to say no were so great, they would say no more often.

Understanding perpetration as a consequence of individual negotiation with a given historical situation makes it possible to avoid historical reductionism because each act of negotiation will differ. Some will result in enthusiastic participation, some in a very limited compliance. This does not mean that the end results of negotiation will differ too, since negotiation is a way of coming to terms with complicity in and endorsement of the current situation. But it does leave the path open for negotiating a different position if or when the historical situation abruptly changes. Being a perpetrator is not a career choice. This helps to explain the curious phenomenon, explored interestingly in Neil Gregor's new book on post-war Nuremberg, that German perpetrators could also see themselves as victims after 1945, first as prisoners of the dictatorial system under Hitler and then as victims of Allied justice later. This phenomenon also helps to explain why few perpetrators really see themselves afterwards as criminals on the run (though they are often defined as such by the international community). The historical evidence suggest that they see themselves much more as players in a historical situation over which they had little or no control, which was itself only

temporary, and in which they did something endorsed at the time as historically necessary and morally acceptable. This view does not negate the idea that they could also be willing and enthusiastic participants; the inertia of the historical situation does not determine how a choice to participate is made, but it does create imperatives, narrows choices and empowers people to act in ways they would never otherwise have acted. 'How might I have acted differently?' does not seem to have been a question perpetrators often asked themselves.

So much has been written about the history of German perpetration that I want to add something this evening on the future direction of historical research on perpetration in other contexts. I have deliberately chosen two areas where there is considerable intellectual resistance to the idea that perpetration is an appropriate way to describe the behaviour of the historical actors involved. The first is the history of atrocity in the Soviet Union under Stalin. There has been a good deal of recent research on victims of the Stalin terror and on the evolution of the concentration camp system (although there are still historians unwilling to call them concentration camps from fear that the Soviet and German systems will be seen as varieties of the same form of authoritarianism). But there has been no equivalent of Browning's 'Ordinary Men' in Soviet historiography, trying to identify a small cohort or unit of perpetrators and exploring their readiness to participate. It is interesting to observe that there is no paper on Soviet perpetration at this conference. There are evident difficulties in trying to define perpetration in the Soviet context although knowledge of what happened in the years 1936-8, when almost 700,000 innocent people were subject to judicial murder is now well-

developed. First, the archive record is deficient or closed for many areas of police or security action. Second, there were no post-terror trials to provide detailed interrogation material – and indeed no sense that trials might be necessary. Perpetrators were not made to understand that their actions were criminal, and could continue to see themselves, as former Soviet premier Molotov saw himself in recorded conversations in the 1960s and 1970s, as defenders of the revolutionary state. Finally, many of those who acted as perpetrators became the victims of the system themselves when hundreds of policemen and interrogators and party officials were denounced and executed during the second wave of the Great Terror. Yet tens of thousands of ordinary Soviet citizens practised denunciation, became prison guards, sat on the notorious *troika*, drove lorries filled with bodies, or killed prisoners and buried them in huge mass graves. Although there is a widespread willingness to condemn Stalin in post-Communist Russia and among former European Marxists (the *Black Book of Communism* is perhaps the best-known example), there has been much less emphasis on the widespread perpetration of extreme violence and on the self-perception and motivation of the perpetrators. This is a lapse that historical research needs to address; there is a rich field of example from the Soviet case which can help to broaden the social-psychological and historical approaches to perpetration.

  The second example is more polemical. It stems from my own research on bombing in the Second World War and the difficulty of trying to explain why the major air forces were willing to accept exceptionally high levels of civilian casualty. It is well known that some historians have tried to look at the bombing of German and Japanese cities during the Second World War as a

war crime (or rather a series of war crimes) which must raise the same questions about perpetration that are applied in other cases of mass killing of civilians. As in the Soviet case there are evident difficulties in approaching the bombing campaign from this perspective. Killing German or Japanese civilians from the air was not the same as the mass murder of the European Jews and the circumstantial differences scarcely need to be explored. But as Markusen and Lifton argued almost twenty years ago in *The Genocidal Mentality*, there are clear analogies to be drawn between the situational dynamics that permitted Allied airmen to kill an estimated 800,000 unarmed civilians and the situational dynamics of other examples of mass killing. In this case, as in the Soviet case, the airmen were not treated as criminals or perpetrators (although the failure to reward RAF personnel in 1945 can be seen as a consequence of official uncertainty about the legitimacy of what had been done). The initial decision to enter bombing into the indictment of the major German war criminals in 1945 was dropped because the British officials realised that a case might be made for putting British airmen on trial as well. Field Marshal Montgomery would never have ordered his armies in 1945 to enter Hamburg and kill 40,000 of its civilian population, yet that is precisely what the two Allied air forces did when they attacked Hamburg in Operation Gomorrah in July and early August 1943. The concern here is not just in the ethics or otherwise of city-bombing, but what bombing might tell us about an unusual form of perpetration. This seems to me a legitimate form of historical enquiry, and one which historians have a responsibility to answer.

In drawing these remarks to a conclusion I would like to repeat again the important and complementary role that social science and history have to

play in understanding the nature and limits of the concept 'perpetrator' and 'perpetration'. This complementarity will become evident perhaps in the discussions over the next two days. There is no simple or reductive explanation for the capacity of ordinary people to commit atrocious crimes. People are self-evidently capable of perpetrating atrocity and current research has gone a long way to explaining how that is possible both as a social phenomenon and in terms of the psychological and physiological dynamics at work during acts of perpetration. But perpetrators act only under very specific historical circumstances which are shaped by historical dynamics whose origin they may scarcely understand and over which they can have little influence. From this perspective it is perhaps more important to explore how the historical circumstances arise that make mass violence possible rather than to explain how violence occurs at the moment of perpetration. There is no simple cure to prevent extreme acts of perpetration, but understanding the different historical circumstances in which it becomes possible, about how an established normative morality can be subverted or overturned, about why restraints are lifted, is a first step to the defence of civilised norms of human behaviour.

As educators there is a great responsibility. If any common circumstance can be detected in the history of modern perpetration it is the definition of friend or foe, in-group and out-group. Civic education must concern itself with breaking down barriers and guarding against exclusion. This is not a matter of history. In Italy today under Silvio Berlusconi's new government there is a concerted attempt to define the Gypsy population in terms of exclusion. Violence has already broken out; other groups are

targeted as 'aliens'. The normal restraints on this kind of persecution have been lifted. This process of exclusion can happen in remarkably short periods of time, playing on inherited prejudices or cumulative anxieties. In Europe the scars of the mentality of 'us or them' mark the whole history of the past century. Prejudice and fear cannot be legislated away; a vigilant defence of tolerance and civic decency is needed now as it was needed in Europe 70 years ago.