BOOK REVIEWS

Joachim J. Savelsberg, Knowing About Genocide: Armenian Suffering and Epistemic Struggles, University of California Press, 2021, 244 pp US $34.95

Reviewed by Lois Presser

The grounds for genocidal action are epistemological. Agents of genocide develop and disseminate notions of who they are, who their targets are, what is happening now, and what has happened before. Their accounts do not go uncontested. The victims and survivors of genocide also develop and disseminate knowledge about harm agents, victims, and events. Knowledge, set out in discourses and especially narratives, instigates and legitimates action. Truth-telling is believed to be necessary for healing after genocide and other trauma. In short, knowing is crucial to executing and preventing genocide, and to responding in the aftermath of genocide.

These various epistemological projects are not of the once-and-for-all variety. They are ongoing and mutually responsive. Joachim Savelsberg’s book Knowing About Genocide: Armenian Suffering and Epistemic Struggles helps readers make sense of this complexity. Savelsberg asks how knowledge about genocide is produced. Savelsberg takes as his case the Armenian genocide at the hands of Turkey in 1915–1916. The Armenian genocide has been called the first genocide of the 20th century. It is estimated that anywhere between 44 and 80 per cent of the minority population of Armenian Christian residents of the Ottoman Empire died through direct killing as well as exhaustion and starvation in and on the way to concentration camps (USHMM 2022).

Savelsberg diagrams the “epistemic circle” of genocide knowledge (p. 5), integrating stalwart social theories from Mead (inner conversations), Berger and Luckman (everyday interactions, knowledge repertoires), Bourdieu (conflicts within social fields), and others. He draws on a diverse set of materials including legal decisions and reports, diaries, newspaper editorials, notes on commemorative rituals, and interviews. By my reckoning he extends social constructionism in at least eight ways.
1. Knowledge is consolidated as repertoires. Repertoires of knowledge are “clusters of such certainties that pertain to a particular set of phenomena” (p. 2). I know I did not do harm but I know who did. I know I suffered and I know who caused it. And so on. Such clusters include the synchronic (e.g., codes) and the diachronic (e.g., stories). Genocide-legitimating knowledge goes beyond mere denial of aggression or vilification of victims.

2. Knowledge is tied to identity. We know what we know in part because it aligns with our sense of self and especially the preferred self. “Contradictions are likely to erupt in conflict and struggle when collectivities face others with very different knowledge repertoires, especially if that knowledge is central to their identity” (p. 109).

3. Knowledge construction is the object of struggle. As Savelsberg states, “social interaction, communication, and negotiation over an appropriate understanding of troubling experiences are rarely harmonious” (p. 32). It follows that knowledge construction is subject to power moves.

4. Knowledge is transmitted across time by “carrier groups” (p. 53), who emerge not just by virtue of position (as Weber and Mannheim theorized) but also experience, such as experience of violence. “Knowledge entrepreneurs” have greater power and capacity to spread their version of reality and thus define it; they “introduce new elements into repertoires of knowledge” (p. 108).

5. Knowledge can get sedimented and thus difficult to change (p. 53). Yet, knowledge is also always “subject to modifications” (p. 56) based on exigencies of the present and new or newly perceived contradictions.

6. Knowledge is produced through public as well as private communication. Savelsberg updates early interactionists’ emphasis on conversation as the primary medium of knowledge construction, emphasizing rituals, memoirs, archives, laws, and news reports.

7. Silence—what is not said—no less than speech is constitutive of knowledge. Thus, for example, Armenian survivors in the Soviet Union commemorated the genocide “without mentioning Turkey’s role” for the sake of protecting the Soviet relationship with Turkey (p. 70).

8. The fate of some knowledge depends on its reception. For example: “Receptivity to simplifying narratives is high in times of uncertainty” (p. 61). Discourse analysts therefore should study issues of uptake, including the legibility, resonance, and conferred credibility of discourse.

Knowing About Genocide is enormously relevant for these times. Savelsberg “wrote this book for those who are desperate to understand the coexistence of, and interaction between, radically opposed repertoires of knowledge; their emergence,
their solidification, and their confrontations; and closely related, the denial of well-established facts, especially by populist leaders and their followers” (p. 7). The climate crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, racism, reproductive injustice, political repression and political violence all turn on knowledge contests. The harms mount when influential actors assign uncertainty to truth, to use Savelsberg’s stunning formulation (p. 88), as well as certainty to untruth.

What are truth and untruth? Savelsberg is a self-described philosophical realist who affirms that “there is most certainly a real referent to the phenomena the term genocide covers” (p. 6). Whereas “the history of violence is very real” (p. 32), from a constructionist perspective, “true” ideas are those that have been radically stabilized such that the discursive designation of “idea” has been effectively discarded. Like any other idea, truth is shaped and reshaped through communicative actions. Selves are invested. Silences are involved. Crucial as it is to pin down truths and untruths for holding actors to account and absolving victims, it is not necessary for illuminating the mechanics of truth/untruth construction. In this regard the lessons of Knowing About Genocide are compatible with insight from political fact-checkers on the cynicism cultivated by today’s authoritarian regimes, described by Anne Applebaum (2022) in The Atlantic, to the effect that “shouting about the objective truth will never work and that what is needed instead is the construction of trust.” The book’s lessons are compatible, too, with the findings of narratologists as well as narrative sociologists and criminologists on the credibility and enticement of some stories over others (e.g., Polletta 2006; Presser 2018). Desperate times require insights on the mechanics of knowledge creation and recreation for the sake of designing effective strategies of resistance.

References


