Preface

I write this a few hours after visiting the memorial centre at Srebrenica, a small town in Bosnia. In July 1995, this supposed safe haven was the site of the worst atrocity perpetrated in Europe since the defeat of Nazi Germany. More than 8,000 Muslim men and boys were held captive and slaughtered by Bosnian Serb paramilitaries, while US satellites passed overhead recording the information and Dutch soldiers acting merely titularly as UN peacekeepers exchanged pleasantries with the executioners.

It was, as the International Court of Justice at The Hague later determined, an act of genocide. It bore direct comparison with the Holocaust in its deranged xenophobic impulse, the fraudulent attempts of denialists to cast doubt on the facts of the case, and in the insouciance of those who might have intervened yet chose to look away. It is that last point, and the thinness that it implies of the veneer of civilization, that I think of when considering the thought of Norman Geras.

In *The Contract of Mutual Indifference*, published more than twenty years ago and which Manchester University Press has commendably reissued, Norman raised the moral issue of the bystander in international affairs. His particular focus was on the Shoah, the Holocaust of six million Jews in

savagery without parallel in modern history. And he asked why, in such recent sufferings as the Ethiopian famine of the 1980s or the genocidal persecution of Bosnian Muslims in the 1990s, the phenomenon of the bystander persisted. The bystander knows that evils beyond the imagination are being perpetrated yet is locked into a response of indifference.

It happens again and again. As Norman noted in the first chapter of this book: ‘Students and survivors of the Jewish tragedy draw the parallels, in this respect, with other such extremities: with genocide and mass hunger. We have touched in passing on one or two of the subsequent tragedies that have mocked the postwar rhetoric of “Never again”. The list of them goes on being extended: from East Timor and Cambodia to Bosnia and Rwanda. As one writer [Ronnie S. Landau] has observed, it is doubtful whether the most important lessons of the Nazi period have been grasped even theoretically, but “certainly they have not been applied, as attested by the alarming frequency of postwar instances of genocide [and] by the consistent failure of the United Nations to invoke its own Genocide Convention of 1948”’.

I’ve referred to the experience of Bosnia, and the tragedy visited upon that constitutional multi-ethnic polity in the 1990s. The contemporaneous Rwandan genocide was if anything the “purest” case of genocide to have happened in the postwar era. The true number of Tutsi victims will never be known, but Gérard Prunier, in *The Rwanda Crisis: History of a Genocide* (1995), was able to draw inferences from census data and from estimates of survivors passing through refugee camps. He concluded that around 930,000 Tutsis were living in Rwanda on 6 April 1994; and that between 800,000 and 850,000 of them were killed in the following three months.

How could the world have looked away? Why does it keep doing so? As I write, the international community awaits the final triumph of the depraved Assad regime in Syria, as it approaches the Idlib province, where some three million

people live. In eight years of civil war, the regime has slaughtered hundreds of thousands of people, laid waste to the economy and created a massive refugee crisis. Again, we are bystanders to a horror.

Norman was a political philosopher of the first rank, who reflected deeply on this conundrum. He concluded that, rather than the social contract posited in traditional political thought, a 'contract of mutual indifference' holds in modern societies. This contract explained not only the lack of popular and governmental response to the horrors I've mentioned, but also the absence of discussion of this phenomenon in political thinking. To Norman, there was a 'duty to bring aid', and his own political odyssey can be seen as an attempt to formulate that duty.

Norman spent all of his academic career at the University of Manchester, and drew his philosophical inspiration from Marxism. Though he abandoned his affiliations with the far left as the years passed, he never ceased to regard himself as a Marxist, and his writings greatly illuminated that tradition. In *Marx and Human Nature: Refutation of a Legend* (1983), he sought to establish a humanistic type of Marxism, which took seriously human nature and its capacity to develop, as against the abstruse and mechanistic theories of continental Marxism exemplified in the work of Louis Althusser.

I got to know Norman well in the last decade of his life and discussed many of the themes of this book with him. We started from different premises on the left: mine were liberal and his were socialist. The impetus of his thinking was the ethic of mutual solidarity. He wrote in this book:

It used to be said that socialism was a historical necessity. It is not that. However, it stood and it stands, in its own way, for a moral necessity. That moral necessity is mutual human support and aid, the universal responsibility for the safety and well-being of others. Without this commitment we are vulnerable individually to anything that may happen or be done to us, and we sit collectively on the

edge of a moral abyss. For we are, by way of the contract of mutual indifference, morally entitled to nothing at all. Today, after the unparalleled calamity of the Holocaust, political theories which do not pay the most direct regard to the primary human duty to bring aid are wanting.

It is a moral challenge to all of us. I found, in talking to Norman and reading his philosophical observations, that the insights of liberalism that I hold to – that values are incommensurable, that trade-offs are inevitable, and that the capacity to achieve good by political action is more constrained than the tendency to commit evil – are inadequate in the face of the questions he posed. The Iraq intervention, which both of us supported on humanitarian grounds, was an instance of the limitations of political action, even though I continue to hold that the humanitarian costs and security nightmares posed by the regime of Saddam Hussein could only have intensified if left to themselves.

Norman Geras was a wise and good man, whom I was privileged to count a friend. And he was an outstanding thinker. I learnt much from his cerebrations, in person and on the page. I'm deeply thankful that, two decades on, his finest political work is available once more and can inform a new generation of students, activists and the interested public.

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