Fratricide

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Etymologically derived from the Latin noun *fratricida*, which means killer of brother, the term *fratricide* is used in two contexts: as an individual action, if someone commits fratricide, they kill their brother, or as a social phenomenon a fratricidal war or conflict is one in which people kill members of their own society or social group (Collins, 1995: 673). In military language, it is also used to describe incidents of friendly fire, i.e. cases in which units are hit by other units from the same side. The common element between all of these meanings is that there is always a close relationship, an intimate familiarity between the perpetrator and the victim. Within the field of genocide research, however, the use of the term remains relatively rare, and there is no common definition or even discussion concerning its analytical content.

The killing of a person by his brother or sister has been fascinating to many throughout history. In different civilizations and religions, fratricide marks the actual beginning of history: in Egyptian mythology, Osiris, one of the main gods of the Egyptian pantheon, is murdered by his brother Set; in the Christian book of genesis, Cain, the first-born child of Adam, kills his brother Abel just as according to Roman myth, Romulus kills his twin brother Remus, after the founding of the city of Rome. Therefore, the tragedy of conflict between family members seems to represent a central theme in human myth and drama: before there can be the civilizing force of law, before mankind can reach humanity, there has to occur an action which will stimulate reflection about right and wrong (Isnard-Davezac, 2005). Historically, fratricide between individuals has even been used as a method to avoid fratricide between political factions: in the Ottoman Empire, once the son of a deceased Sultan came to power, he had to kill all his brothers to avoid any struggle over the legitimacy of his succession.

In the area of genocide research, the distinct features which distinguish fratricide from other categories of mass violence are not very clear. In general, the heuristic value of the term seems to consist in providing descriptive rather than analytical insight. Because of the importance of familial bonds, it seems logical that fratricide occurs above all in contexts of civil wars in which factions belonging to the same nation and / or the same society fight against each other. For example, the war(s) in the former Yugoslavia have been called fratricides (Morin, 1996) as well as the civil conflict in Sri Lanka (Tambiah, 1986).

However, Michael Mann is perhaps the author who most refers to the expression fratricide in order to describe empirical cases of mass violence within a given political movement (Mann, 2005: 320, 340). He categorizes fratricide as an example of the ideal-type category of unpremeditated mass deaths which do not imply the cleansing of a whole group (Mann, 2004: 24). Thus, according to this conception, fratricide does not represent a sub-category of genocides defined in international law.

Finally, Julie Noss warns us that the careless use of attributes such as fratricide to qualify a given conflict can lead to simplistic conclusions: relations between groups or individuals can be problematic even if they live in a common geographical space. This difficulty however can tempt analysts to reduce complexity by proposing general terms with little concrete meaning.

**Bibliography:**


**ISNARD-DAVEZAC, N., 2005,** *Caïn et Abel. La haine du frère*, *Topique*, 92: 45-57.


