

Book Review

## The Politics of Genocide

by Edward S. Herman and David Peterson. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2010. \$12.95; paper. ISBN: 978-1-58367-212-9. Pages: 159.

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While genocide commonly refers to the killing or attempted killing of an entire ethnic group or people, its definition is highly controversial and the subject of extensive debate. The term is often used to describe diverse forms of direct or indirect killing, which has resulted in its “frequency of use and recklessness of application” over the past several decades (103). In *The Politics of Genocide*, Herman and Peterson argue that while members of the Western establishment and news media have rushed to denounce bloodbaths in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Rwanda, Kosovo, and Darfur, they have largely remained silent over war crimes and mass atrocities committed by allied regimes in Southeast Asia, Central America, the Middle East, and Sub-Saharan Africa. As Noam Chomsky suggests in the foreword to the book, since the end of the Cold War, we have witnessed the emergence of an era of virtual “Holocaust denial” or “genocide denial with a vengeance” (7-9).

In substantiating their argument, Herman and Peterson draw on years of meticulous research, careful documentation and in-depth, empirical analysis of atrocities and bloodbaths around the world. The authors have done an excellent job at exposing the double standards of the US news media and its hypocritical system of propaganda. In this sense, *The Politics of Genocide* offers a needed corrective to those who manipulate and abuse the genocide label for the purposes of promoting the expansion of imperial power interests around the globe. Similar to Herman’s past work, however, the book offers less in the way of a theoretical addition to debates surrounding the nature of genocide and imperialism, instead providing a series of well-documented case studies. Like the five ‘filters’ in Herman and Chomsky’s *Manufacturing Consent*, the phenomenon of genocide is simply classified through four categories—in this case, of bloodbaths. Moreover, while Herman and

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Peterson, like Chomsky, do perceive imperialism fundamentally in race and class terms, their use of terms such as 'elite' and Western 'establishment' rather than class or ruling class tends to obscure the real material links between genocide, capitalism and Western imperialism.

For Herman and Peterson, "a remarkable degree of continuity stretches across the many decades of bribes and threats, economic sanctions, subversion, terrorism, aggression, and occupation ordered-up by the policy-making elite of the United States" (13). After the US emerged from the Second World War in a dominant economic, political and military position, it had to confront numerous nationalist upheavals in former colonial areas by peoples seeking "independence, self-determination and better lives" (14). To counter these increasingly popular demands for improvement in living standards, the US supported a series of dictatorships in countries like Indonesia, South Vietnam and Chile. Although these "national security" states were "torture-prone" and "deeply undemocratic," they helped improve the overall climate of capitalist investment by keeping their majorities fearful and atomized (14). When local dictators failed, direct US military intervention often followed, as illustrated in the cases of Vietnam, and more recently, in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The authors draw on the framework for analyzing mass killings provided by Chomsky, and Herman himself in their *Counter-Revolutionary Violence: Bloodbaths in Fact and Propaganda* (CRV), first published in 1973. In this work, Herman and Chomsky conclude that it is obvious and demonstrable that US officials, with the help of the established media, would engage in "atrocities management," by producing incessant propaganda to deflect attention away from US-approved violence, and onto its enemies. In its framework of analysis, CRV provided four categories of bloodbaths: "Constructive," "Benign," "Nefarious," and "Mythical" (a sub-category under Nefarious). As Herman and Peterson explain, "[t]hose bloodbaths carried out by the United States itself or that serve immediate and major US interests are Constructive; those carried out by allies or clients are Benign; and those carried out by US target states are Nefarious and (sometimes) Mythical" (16). In essence, instances of mass violence are evaluated differently by the US political establishment and media depending on who is responsible for carrying them out. The authors apply this analytical framework in their current work by subsuming more recent bloodbaths under the four categories, which they argue are "eerily applicable to the present", and "apply now with the same political bias and rigor" (17-19). Using empirical measures such as the coverage of key events in the media, what the authors offer the

reader is more or less a classificatory schema or conceptual model for understanding bloodbaths rather than a specific interjection into theoretical debates surrounding critical accounts of genocide, imperialism and international law.

Today's leading 'experts' on genocide and mass atrocities, including many journalists, academics, legal scholars and policymakers, are often careful to exclude from consideration the Vietnam War, the 1965-1966 Indonesian massacres, and the invasion and occupation of East Timor by Indonesia in 1975, the latter of which resulted in the deaths of somewhere between 100,000 and 200,000 civilians (although this is a hugely debatable claim) (18). The Vietnam War, and the massive "sanctions of mass destruction" directed at Iraq during the 1990s, are examples of *Constructive* atrocities, where the victims of war crimes are deemed *unworthy* of our attention. However, when the perpetrators of genocide are considered enemies of the West, the atrocities are *Nefarious* and their victims are seen to be *worthy* of our focus and sympathy. Examples of *Nefarious* atrocities include: Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, Iraq under Saddam Hussein, Halabja, Bosnia, Rwanda, Kosovo and Darfur. When systematic violence is carried out by US clients—such as Indonesia in East Timor from 1975-1999, Israel in the Gaza Strip and West Bank from 1967 to the present, or Rwanda and Uganda in Congo—they are viewed by the US political establishment as *Benign* and not worthy of condemnation. The final category, *Mythical*, results from the inflation of numbers or invention of incidents by the US government, media sources and NGOs to implement pre-planned interventions such as sanctions, embargoes and the funding of various 'color revolutions.'

*The Politics of Genocide* has done much to emphasize the biases and contradictions of US foreign policy, but it should be read in conjunction with other theoretical contributions to themes related to genocide, imperialism and international law. First, while Herman and Peterson recognize that the history of ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity demonstrates "the centrality of racism to the imperial project" (22), there is little discussion of why advanced capitalist powers and oppressed nations are, in the first place, not equal partners in shaping the world. Due in part to their use of terms such as 'elite' and Western 'establishment' rather than class, their analysis should be complimented by recent work that is more explicit in highlighting the centrality of racism to issues of class, capitalism and imperialism in the international system.

While not directly touching on the topic of genocide, Marxist theorists writing on current modes of imperialism such as Leo Panitch and

Sam Gindin (*Global Capitalism and American Empire*, 2004) and David Harvey (*The New Imperialism*, 2003) emphasize the extent to which current modes of imperialism continue to exacerbate racial as well as global class inequalities. Identifying the class basis of the new imperialism would help identify some of the underlying reasons for why media coverage of genocides in the West is often silent with respect to crimes committed by the various client regimes of advanced capitalist states. Second, Herman and Peterson are highly critical of the “selective investigation” and “selective impunity” of the International Criminal Court (ICC) in prosecuting alleged perpetrators of genocide, especially, in the contemporary age of ‘responsibility to protect,’ the exclusion from its jurisdiction of the international crime of aggression, judged at Nuremberg to be the “*supreme international crime*” (21).

However, on this theme, the authors seem to imply that the responsibility to protect doctrine and the very notion of human rights are to be located outside of contemporary imperialism. In this sense, they are often ambiguous on whether they seek to defend a position of legal neutrality, holding out hope for the reformed international law and institutions, which Marxist theorist of international law China Miéville has recently argued in *Between Equal Rights* (2006), are completely incapable of adequately resisting imperialism. Not only does legal equality, in this sense, mask actually existing inequality, the appeal to international law tends to undermine the most effective avenue for advancing necessary political resistance against the new imperialism—building solidarity as widely as possible through social movements centered not only on anti-racism, but also on class struggle.

