



Book Review

Redefining Genocide: Settler Colonialism, Social Death and Ecocide

Short, Damien. (2016). London: Zed Books. ISBN 9781842779316 (paper)
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In his 2016 book, *Redefining Genocide*, Damien Short aims to bridge what he calls the “genocide-ecocide nexus” in order to offer a more robust conception of genocide in our current moment of global climate change. Short further seeks to broaden the category of genocide to include “cultural genocide” (p. 3), which he asserts cannot be separated from the destruction of a social group, especially in relation to the ongoing genocidal effects of settler colonialism. Drawing heavily on the work of Raphael Lemkin, often referred to as the founder of the United Nations Genocide Convention, Short structures his book around highlighting “genocide’s inherently colonial character” (p. 3), and the ways in which genocide is often enacted through environmental destruction, by which vulnerable, disadvantaged, and colonized social groups are most affected. He positions his work in relation to the fields of genocide studies, Indigenous rights, environmental justice, and green criminology.

Redefining Genocide is organized around a series of case studies, which explore a broad range of settings from Palestine, Sri Lanka, and Australia, to the Tar Sands and First Nations peoples in northern Alberta. The text opens with two chapters dealing with what Short refers to as “definitional conundrums.” The first of these chapters offers substantial context on the field of genocide studies, including the legal scholarly history around the *United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide 1948*, and subsequent contributions to the field of genocide studies by sociologists. Where legal scholars tend to focus on the UN

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Convention's rigid emphasis on the "intentional mass killing of certain groups under the direction of the state," sociologists are more involved in debates over whether to broaden "the *meaning of genocide*" (p. 13). According to Short, however, even much of the sociological work on genocide has downplayed or ignored the relationship between colonialism and its genocidal structures, which target the eradication of culture as a way to enact social death. The second of the introductory chapters introduces the concept of ecocide as a key element in both settler colonialism and its genocidal processes.

Drawing on settler colonial studies theorist Patrick Wolfe and Lemkin's more encompassing conception of genocide, Short's project is thus two-pronged. First, he asserts "we should view *cultural genocide* as *central* to our understanding of genocide itself" given "that the concept is an appropriate term to describe *the current experiences* of many Indigenous peoples living under settler colonial rule" (p. 17, emphasis in original). Second, and relatedly, Short mobilizes the concept of ecocide to expand genocide's legal definition, which tends only to be attributed to environmental destruction during wartime activities, rather than the ongoing processes of settler colonialism. Short attempts to include broader definitions of ecocide within international law, ultimately asserting that "ecocide should be incorporated into the Rome Statute as an international Crime against Peace under the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court" (p. 64).

In order to make his case for this more encompassing definition of genocide, Short offers several wide reaching, and sometimes collaborative case studies (see contributions by Haifa Rashed, Vinay Prakash, and Jennifer Huseman). Short's writing is exceptionally accessible and so each case study, while fairly broad in scope, offers a pithy introduction to several distinct complex global settings, from the struggles of Palestinians within and around Israel, and the violent conflicts between Sinhalese and Tamil populations in Sri Lanka, to the quite general setting of settler colonialism writ large in Australia. His final case study, and perhaps the most convincing for the relationship between settler colonialism, environmental destruction, and genocide, examines the effects of the Tar Sands on the First Nations of Treaty 8 territory in northern Alberta. Each case study is well-researched and mobilizes what Short calls a "Lemkin-inspired lens" on genocide, in conjunction with environmental theory, to draw important links between ongoing genocide in settler colonial contexts and corresponding environmental destruction, leading to cultural and social death, or complete attempted eradication of a culture's *genos* (p. 92).

Although it is difficult to disagree with Short that the sites he examines are important examples of genocide and ecocide, or at least salient examples of the destructive nature of settler colonialism, it remains equally difficult to imagine where this broadened definition might take us. To be sure, Short's project of redefinition is a controversial rhetorical move; that is, it is his aim to describe everyday processes of settler colonialism using a word that has

come to represent something very specific and exceptionally powerful on the international stage and within our common imaginaries. In a discursive context in which genocide tends to conjure images of the Holocaust or atrocities in Rwanda, for example, calling out as genocidal the entire settlement and social organization of Australia or Israel, or what are now commonplace neoliberal approaches to energy extraction, is contentious. And yet, Short draws from a long and well-researched history of the legal genesis of the meaning of genocide, illustrating that his examples are relatively commensurate with its definition in international law.

This conundrum, where settler colonialism may indeed represent genocide by another name, begs a larger question not adequately addressed in *Redefining Genocide*: who gets to define the meaning of genocide? Put another way, what registers as social death in the international, and more importantly, largely Western lexicon? If, as Short states toward the end of his text, “a global economy is extractive, it gives nothing back, but follows the ecocidal pattern of a genocidal machine converting raw materials into power at the expense of living things and living systems”(p. 193), and if this is the global economy that structures modern life as we know it, then where does genocide begin and end? If the tar sands in Alberta are genocidal and ecocidal, then who do we identify as the perpetrator of this atrocity on the First Nations peoples of Treaty 8? Is it the oil and gas companies on the ground? The government bodies that embolden them and enmesh this kind of energy extraction within the national economy? The shareholders? All settlers, who benefit from the comforts and conveniences of access to an abundance of energy without directly experiencing its destructive qualities? For Short, the answer to all of these questions seems to be “yes.” And so, although such a rhetorical assertion might have some effect on how we understand these processes intellectually, and perhaps even on a larger subjective level, its possibilities within international law, which is largely influenced by the very nations that Short draws our attention to, is decidedly limited.

Short himself recognizes the limitations of his position in the final chapters of the book. He writes, “a genuine process of decolonization would offer . . . peoples far more hope than international legal protections because, as we have seen, colonization, dispossession, exploitation, cultural assimilation and control are the greatest threats to the survival of such social groups as have been considered in the case studies of this book” (p. 190). Despite my scepticism – that which is also echoed in moments by Short – that his expanded definitions of genocide will make its way into international legal orders, a nuanced understanding of the many forms that genocide might take is surely one means toward the decolonization of settler colonial societies.

Short’s argument is perhaps strongest in relation to Indigenous peoples, largely because Indigenous peoples themselves have for decades been calling colonial imposition on their lands and cultures to be recognized as genocide. Within the Canadian context, Indigenous peoples are consistently at the front

lines of settler colonial genocidal policies whether through the effects of the Indian Residential Schools system, the Sixties Scoop, the Indian Act, countless land grabs through failed treaties or official land claims policy, and the ongoing environmental and cultural destruction of Indigenous territories. These issues were brought to the fore on the Canadian national stage several years ago when the recently-constructed Canadian Museum for Human Rights determined it did not have the authority to declare colonialism against Indigenous peoples in Canada an act of genocide. Indeed, there remains a long way to go in terms of shifting who gets to define the meaning of genocide, and what these definitions might offer in terms of social justice. Through its diverse and wide-reaching case studies, *Redefining Genocide* offers a substantial contribution to this endeavour, perhaps illustrating that we ought not seek recourse in the international orders that benefit from ongoing processes of settler colonialism, but instead turn to the affected communities themselves, fostering decolonization from the ground up.

Redefining Genocide will benefit anyone interested in environmental justice, Indigenous rights, or settler colonialism. Its substantial research on the development and history of genocide within international law makes it an important contribution to the field of genocide studies. Its useful case studies serve as well-organized primers for anyone interested in the complex global conflicts they address. Most importantly, I think that *Redefining Genocide* makes an important, if implicit, assertion for the increasing limitations of international law under neoliberal global capitalism, and the necessity of grounding decolonial politics in community action and support.