

Benjamin Meiches, *The Politics of Annihilation: A Genealogy of Genocide*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2019, 328pp, USD28.00 (paperback).

Reviewed by Rimona Afana

As the established contours of genocide determine how we conceptualize mass violence, they (mis)shape our capacity for prevention, resistance and repair. To Meiches, the concept's narrowness has created and sustains laws and institutions which cannot adequately capture the complexity of mass violence. With genocide legally defined as acts intended to destroy an ethnic, national, racial or religious group, a range of victimized identities and forms of violence not aligned with this classification are left outside the realm of genocide. What Meiches calls the "hegemonic understanding of genocide" remains shaped by exclusions—whether strategic omissions, inconsistent standards or exploited ambiguities—which block redress for crimes such as past colonial extermination campaigns, contemporary atrocities or emerging forms of environmental violence. The book traces how "genocide" emerged to make certain forms of violence intelligible and illegal, and how in time the concept deviated from Raphaël Lemkin's understanding of genocide as a diffuse, multi-layered phenomenon.

Meiches examines genocide by drawing on Michel Foucault's insights on genealogy, on Gilles Deleuze's and Félix Guattari's assemblage theory, alongside Deleuze's work on sense. The first part of the book, "The Concept and its Powers", examines genocide as a product of four components—groups, mereology, destruction, desire—which, in interaction, render it intelligible and thus actionable. "The Politics of Genocide", the second part, explores how the hegemonic understanding of genocide has impacted genocide scholarship, international law, intergovernmental institutions and civil societies. A distinction is drawn between the *politics of genocide*: "the multiplicity of discourses, contestations, language games, ruminations, affective and rhetorical strategies, maneuvers, and dissimulations surrounding the concept of genocide", and *genocide as politics*: "a mode of political practice or activity that employs a variety of forms of mass violence to target and destroy groups" (9). An unresolved paradox emerges, in my reading, between the claim that the hegemonic angle depoliticizes violence and the instances where the book documents the political/politicized nature of violence within this very paradigm.

The hegemonic understanding presents particular dangers (14–15): it limits the discourse on genocide, creating exclusions and hierarchies surrounding the lives that matter and how resources are distributed; it has a productive relation with international fora like the International Criminal Court and doctrines like the

Responsibility to Protect, thus redefining global ethics, the limits of sovereignty and the legitimacy of intervention and remote governance; it impedes creative thinking and actions in response to mass violence, underestimating the capacity of destruction to mutate, so failing to render intelligible insidious, emergent forms of violence. Given the limited set of identities and destructive motives legally falling under the scope of genocide, the hegemonic angle also indirectly incentivizes groups to frame their identities and grievances along those very lines. The feedback loops created by the hegemonic understanding ultimately reproduce it, restricting recognition of and repair for unconventional modes of destruction. In challenging conventional conceptions of destruction, Meiches also interrogates the role of humanitarianism: genocide prevention increasingly rests on a technocratic logic which legitimates the unpredictable effects of intervention by invoking the unpredictability of violence itself. Within this logic, intervening is “safer” than not intervening. Paradoxically, war itself turns into a tool of humanitarianism and refashioning the whole fabric of “at risk” societies becomes necessary. The risk of escalating endogenous violence becomes an excuse for exogenous violence.

A variety of short case studies capture the intricacies of genocide, ranging from prominent cases like Nazi atrocities, the legacy of the residential school system in Canada or the multifaceted destructive processes targeting black people in the United States, to less known cases like the displacement and socio-cultural dissolution of the Basarwa people in Botswana, the discrepancies between how atrocities in Darfur and those in the Democratic Republic of Congo were met globally, the intersection between colonial legacies, humanitarianism and the cholera epidemic in Haiti, or the use of opium as tool of colonial domination during the Japanese occupation of China. Meiches navigates a range of alternative discourses (scholarly, civic, political) contesting the hegemonic discourse, one centred on mass killing and on a narrow set of identities deemed vulnerable to annihilation. The book does not delve into conceptions of vulnerability; here, Martha Fineman’s vulnerability theory could enrich analysis. Vulnerability stems from our embodied and embedded condition; as we all are susceptible to change (including destruction), vulnerability is universal not exceptional. This jurisprudence reorients analysis to the differential in resilience, not in vulnerability, conferred by law and institutions.

The misleading civilization/barbarism dichotomy appears central to situating genocide (84). Because of the insistence on liberalism, democracy and pluralism as supposedly incompatible with genocide, the Global North performs both standard-setting and policing. Thus, the hegemonic genocide discourse often insulates liberal democracies from accountability for their own past and present violence, highlights Meiches. This indeed is echoed in my field, transitional justice, as well as in indigenous criminology: recent studies deal with forms of criminality

traditionally neglected, perpetrated by and within mature liberal democracies like the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, settler societies marked by enduring structural violence rooted in their colonial past. I would extrapolate the politics of genocide to Richard Falk's significant theorization of geopolitical crimes: here, the definition of criminality and (in)actions towards prevention/repair can themselves turn into crimes, what he calls "crimes of diplomacy"; Falk parallels the jurisprudential innovations required by introducing geopolitical crimes in international law to Lemkin's work on criminalizing genocide.

Particularly thought-provoking (and unsettling) are Meiches' insights on the plasticity of destruction and the horror of plasticity, drawing on Catherine Malabou's work on plasticity and Eugene Thacker's on horror. We are shown how violence mutates (in causes, the victim/perpetrator dialectic, means of destruction, space and time), how genocide is driven by identity while itself re/constituting identities, how the politics of genocide can at times conserve and reorient (not prevent or stop) genocide as politics, how the divide between life and death is blurred as new modes of destruction can conserve life while still subjecting it to relentless violence. The battles within the politics of genocide not only concern the concept's core components, "but the capacity for creativity in the face of a plastic destruction, which is itself mutagenic and innovative, nonlinear and global, local and transhistorical, incipient, insipid, familiar, rapid, measured, casual, and virulent" (237). Genocide serves as a focal point, yet at stake is the chameleonic, intersectional nature of destructive processes broadly, some falling under other legal categories, others not yet legally recognized. I would like to add two examples to Meiches' discussion of contemporary phenomena attesting the plasticity of violence, at odds with the hegemonic angle. One form of vast yet undertheorized violence is that tied to the food, cosmetics and pharmaceutical industries, which wield bio- and necro-power through the substances we all place on and inside our bodies. Another atypical example is Gaza: the overlapping layers of violence, external and internal over the past decade, have placed most Gazans outside life but not quite relieved by death. Gaza reveals the fluidity and horrors of both genocide as politics (albeit not entirely intentional) and of the politics of genocide.

While Meiches touches briefly on how factory farming and climate change could alter our understanding of genocide, more space could have been devoted to environmental harms, given their urgency, scale, multiplicity of both victims and victimizers, and often irreversibility. Research in green criminology, conservation criminology, climate change criminology, climate and environmental psychology, critical animal studies and environmental ethics can all inform novel interpretations of genocide. Meiches' examination of genocide can also be expanded by drawing on the work of Achille Mbembe (and others) on necropolitics, which itself connects to the emerging field of extinction studies. My current

work on the ecocide–speciesism nexus shows that the unprecedented scale of anthropogenic violence turns non-humans into the primary victims of contemporary forms of annihilation; genocide and ecocide become a continuum. Largely absent from the book are the economic and psychological components shaping the politics of genocide and genocide as politics; both components are in my view significant, especially when examining the mechanisms and structures driving both genocide and ecocide.

Meiches’ project can feel disorienting: by dislocating meaning, it relocates sensemaking on quicksand: terrain engulfing the very observed entity/phenomenon. Zooming in on genocide can dissolve it. The intellectually and emotionally taxing encounter with the incomprehensibility of genocide is compounded by Meiches’ conceptually sophisticated, dense writing. Criminality, victimhood and accountability are evolving categories within and across different disciplines. While concepts remain dynamic/complex, the ones with adjacent legal regimes can appear frozen/flattened due to the very function of law: reducing complexity. The way phenomena, genocide included, occur and how people experience and conceptualize them will exhibit more variation than the manner in which law distills them. The hegemonic understanding of genocide thus seems to me not exceptional or avoidable, though I embrace Meiches’ ideal of treating the concept as “radically open”. Post-identity and even post-humanist angles could advance critical discussions of genocide; however, identities remain political and politicized (identity politics dominates civic battles and the political process) and anthropocentrism still guides most contemporary research. Just like the hegemonic understanding of genocide often depoliticizes violence, non-hegemonic angles to genocide might equally depoliticize and dehistoricize it.

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