

6-2018

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Carola Lingaas  
University of Oslo

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**Recommended Citation**

Lingaas, Carola (2018) "Book Review: *Constructing Genocide and Mass Violence: Society, Crisis, Identity*," *Genocide Studies and Prevention: An International Journal*: Vol. 12: Iss. 1: 109-112.

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.5038/1911-9933.12.1.1541>

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/gsp/vol12/iss1/13>

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# Book Review: *Constructing Genocide and Mass Violence: Society, Crisis, Identity*

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Carola Lingaas  
University of Oslo  
Oslo, Norway

*Constructing Genocide and Mass Violence: Society, Crisis, Identity*

Maureen S. Hiebert

London, Routledge, 2017

230 Pages; Price: \$145.00 Hardcover

Reviewed by Carola Lingaas

University of Oslo

In her book *Constructing Genocide and Mass Violence*, Maureen S. Hiebert sets an ambitious goal to uncover the logic of genocide by means of a comparative analysis of two historical cases of genocide: the Holocaust 'final solution' and the Khmer Rouge killing fields. For her examination of these two cases, Hiebert chooses a constructivist approach, combining theoretical approaches of political science, comparative politics, and constructivist international relations and social theory. At the heart of her analysis lies the question of victim identity construction and why certain processes take the form of genocide, while others do not exceed the level of oppression, or conflict. Hiebert identifies a research gap in the lack of a systematic account of how victim group identities are constructed and what the exact relationship between collective identity construction and the initiation and acceptance of genocidal policies is. Genocide is, according to Hiebert, more likely to occur when it is grounded in an identity construction process, in which the victims are identified and presented as foreigners, sub-humans, and as 'enemies within.' The victims' sheer continued existence is understood to present a mortal threat to the perpetrators' group. This conclusion is supported by earlier research on the processes leading up to genocide.

Rather than relying on the Genocide Convention's definition of the crime of genocide, Hiebert defines genocide as "the intentional, systematic physical, biological, and/or cultural destruction of the members of a group in which the group is defined by the perpetrator."<sup>1</sup> In doing so, Hiebert acknowledges the centrality of intent and the perpetrator's subjective understanding of his victims, irrespective of their objective 'primordial' existence. This definition also allows the inclusion of groups other than the national, racial, ethnic, and religious groups that are granted exclusive protection by the Genocide Convention.

The book is structured into three major parts, in addition to an introductory chapter. Part I theorizes the socio-political environments in Germany and Cambodia. Part II discusses the crises that functioned as catalyst for later destructions in these two countries. Finally, Part III reconceptualizes the victim group and identifies three switches that have to be 'turned on' in order for genocide to occur. Part III also contains a brief analysis of the conflict in Vietnam, where abuses did not lead to genocide because not all three switches were activated. Each part ends with its own conclusion, resulting in the lack of a final conclusion that wraps up all chapters.

In Part I, Hiebert contends that a permissive socio-political environment, in which elite actors perceive intra-state and societal conflicts as zero-sum struggles, is a key genocidal dynamic. Rather than linking genocidal violence to a particular political regime, Hiebert focuses on social relationships, practices, and beliefs. In her analysis, she outlines three dimensions of the socio-political environment, which she applies to the cases of Germany and Cambodia. The first dimension concerns exclusionary and unequal patterns of group interaction. The second dimension identifies exclusionary conceptions of the community, characterized by a lack of solidarity, trust, and tolerance towards the 'others.' Finally, the third-dimension deals with authoritarian responses to conflicts, in which the state, rather than mediating, plays an active, direct, and hostile role in suppressing challenges.

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<sup>1</sup> Maureen S. Heibert, *Constructing Genocide and Mass Violence: Society, Crisis, Identity* (London: Routledge, 2017), 4.

In applying these three dimensions to the case of Germany, Hiebert reviews the historical environment of anti-Jewish political, economic, societal and communal restrictions from the Middle Ages until the Holocaust. She meticulously singles out relevant historical occurrences that shaped anti-Semitism in Germany, which ultimately resulted in a collective image of the Jews as the 'enemy within.' Hiebert's discussion is detailed and accurate, but could be shorter as it largely reproduces established politico-historical scholarship. She chose a topical approach rather than a possibly more reader-friendly discussion of all relevant developments of each different era.

Hiebert then applies the three dimensions to the case of Cambodia, demonstrating a long-standing socio-economic hierarchy, consisting of an elite, a middle-ranking group not engaged in manual labor, and a lower group of poorly uneducated rural peasantry. The urban-rural split in terms of education and wealth ultimately enabled the Khmer Rouge to mobilize a large segment of the population. At the same time, the lack of social cohesion resulted in the absence of inter-group solidarity and prevented a unity in defense against the impending genocide. On a note of criticism, Chapter 3 reveals a somewhat one-sided reliance on (elderly) publications by a rather limited number of scholars.

Part II analyses the crises that function as the catalysts for destruction, exacerbating latent inter-group tensions, societal fragmentation, and conflict. Although these crises were triggers for the genocides in Germany and Cambodia, they were, in the opinion of Hiebert, not their direct cause. These conditions combined set the stage for the reconceptualization of the victim group to being perceived and presented as mortal threats, enemies, and sub-humans. As in Part I, Hiebert divides Part II into one chapter on Germany and another chapter on Cambodia, analyzing the inter-war crises, and the Sihanoukist and Lon Nol years, respectively. This structure inevitably leads to a certain degree of repetition of the earlier Part I. Structurally, such repetition could have been avoided in discussing all relevant developments, namely the permissive socio-political environment and the crises, collectively and chronologically for each country.

In sum, the most important economic crises leading to the Holocaust were, according to Hiebert's analysis, the Treaty of Versailles and imposed war reparations, the following hyperinflation, and the Great Depression. As such, her research confirms earlier findings. Conversely, Cambodia's crises were triggered by an underdeveloped and mismanaged agricultural economy, and corruption. Interlinked to this development were a parliamentary crisis and the overthrow of Sihanouk. Moreover, the Cambodian civil war and, later, the Vietnamese's war spillover severely affected Cambodia. Hiebert's analysis on the pre-genocidal crises in Cambodia is researched very thoroughly and detailed. She elegantly leads the reader through multifarious complex developments. Hiebert shows how and why, influenced by the Chinese Cultural Revolution, an irreconcilable difference between revolutionary workers and peasants on the one hand and the urban exploiters on the other hand arose.<sup>2</sup>

Lastly, Part III asks the important question of when the final step of reconceptualization of the victim's collective identity and engineering their genocidal destruction is taken. Hiebert suggests examining how the political elite reconceptualizes the victim group's identity beyond blaming them for the crises and depicting them as a threat. In line with other genocide researchers, Hiebert recognizes that the perpetrators of genocide must believe that the victim group's mere existence imperils the dominant community. As a result, the physical extermination of the victim group seems the only viable way by which to protect the society from this 'enemy within.' Yet, unlike other genocide researchers, Hiebert argues that the rationality that the perpetrators see in the extermination of the 'others,' lies not in underlying perceptions, but rather in the elite's decision-making processes leading up to genocide. What follows here is an impressive tour de force and the core of Hiebert's analysis: she draws on social constructivist theory to explain the process of collective identity construction. A permissive socio-political environment enables a distribution of ideas, which shape the conception of the victim group as different and as a mortal threat. This perspective may not be coherent with an objective reality. Instead, it is a socially constructed reality based on perceptions. In other words: the elites reconstruct the victim group's identity as a

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., Chapter II would have benefitted from stricter editing, avoiding verbatim duplications such as the ones on pages 112 and 117 ("the life-and-death enemies of the people's war," a war aimed at 'exterminate[ing] the exploiting class').

threat that needs to be eliminated before it destroys the collective 'self.' This reconceptualization is precisely what distinguishes crises that result in genocide from crises that stop short of destroying the victims.

Hiebert briefly outlines the three switches that need to be turned on in order for the genocidal reconceptualization to occur: switch one defines the victims as foreigners and draws a strict boundary between 'us' and 'them,' often based on unevenly distributed political, economic, or social rights and obligations. Switch two then presents the now-foreign victims as a mortal threat. The threat is constructed as an innate characteristic, requiring the group members' physical extermination. Finally, by means of the third switch, the victim group is dehumanized. As earlier research by, for example, David Livingstone Smith<sup>3</sup> or Gregory Stanton<sup>4</sup> has shown, in denying the 'others' their humanity, the normal revulsion against killing is overcome.

In Chapter 6, Hiebert then examines these three switches in Nazi Germany. Hiebert goes into great detail quoting and analyzing statements by the Nazi leadership, revealing their genocidal prophecy. She concludes that the Jews were perceived as an alien race, defined by a hereditary blood line, and conceptualized also by law as 'others.' Nazi ideology presented the Jews as a degenerate race, and the struggle between Jews and Aryans as an eternal struggle for survival. This race war, in which the Jews allegedly were a dangerous enemy whose goal was the destruction of the Aryan people, paved the way to the *Endlösung*. Another aspect of this second switch was the depiction of Jews as masters of Bolshevism and the international capitalist order, a threat motif that the Nazis merged with the racial epic struggle motif. Additionally, Nazi propaganda portrayed Jews as bearers of infectious lethal diseases that threatened Aryan racial purity. The combination of these motifs enabled the last switch of dehumanization. Dehumanization removes the victim's humanity and often includes a discourse on the victim's toxicity, an overlap that Chapter 6 does not fully address.

In Chapter 7, Hiebert applies the theory of the three switches to the Khmer Rouge killing fields. She concludes that the first and second switch occurred simultaneously, reconceptualizing the 'new people,' characterized by a static and innate essence, as non-members of the revolution. Unlike the Nazis, Pol Pot continuously defined and redefined his enemies, thereby blurring the lines between victims, perpetrators, and bystanders. Similar to the Nazis, the Khmer Rouge believed the counter-revolutionary essence to be contagious and thus a mortal threat. According to Hiebert, the second motif was a threat of foreign control by Vietnam, which had to be neutralized to save the "Cambodian race." As in Nazi Germany, the victims were treated as a collective unity and dehumanized by means of devaluating speech, enhancing the differences between 'us' and 'them.' Yet, she considers the dehumanization of Cambodia distinct from the German case in that it not only dehumanized the victims, but also the (low-level) perpetrators.

Lastly, Hiebert tests her theory on the case of Vietnam that did not result in genocide. She concludes that the Communist Party's leadership did not reconceptualize the southerners as foreigners or mortal threat. Rather, they could be reeducated, rehabilitated and integrated. The Vietnamese form of nationalism was, unlike in Cambodia or Germany, inclusive and trumped other forms of identity conceptions prevalent in mass violence genocides.

Hiebert deserves praise for addressing a complex topic and for suggesting a new theoretical approach to it. Her research is of great relevance not only to political scientists, but equally to sociologists, historians, psychologists, and lawyers, among others. I believe the book's core contribution is the creation of a theory of three conceptual switches of genocide, which Hiebert introduced in a publication of 2008. Yet, unlike her article *The Three "Switches" of Identity Construction in Genocide: The Nazi Final Solution and the Cambodian Killing Fields*,<sup>5</sup> her book loses focus of her innovative suggestion, and the 'switches' are unfortunately overshadowed by often repetitive

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<sup>3</sup> David Livingstone Smith, *Less Than Human* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2011), 71.

<sup>4</sup> Gregory Stanton, "Countries at Risk Report 2012" (Washington: Genocide Watch, 2012), 4; Gregory Stanton, "Could the Rwandan Genocide Have Been Prevented?," *Journal of Genocide Research* 6, no. 2 (2004), 214.

<sup>5</sup> Maureen Hiebert, "The Three 'Switches' of Identity Construction in Genocide: The Nazi Final Solution and the Cambodian Killing Fields," *Genocide Studies and Prevention: An International Journal* 3, no. 1 (April 1, 2008), <http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/gsp/vol3/iss1/3>.

earlier discussions. In my opinion, the book would have profited from stricter editing in Parts I and II and, conversely, from broadening the discussions in Part III. Hiebert's important contribution to genocide studies lies precisely in this latter part.

With her book *Constructing Genocide and Mass Violence*, Hiebert has published a fascinating piece of work, which upholds the reader's attention throughout and which is, without a doubt, an important addition to the ongoing research on genocide and mass violence.