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Book Review: *To Kill a People: Genocide in the Twentieth Century*

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To Kill a People: Genocide in the Twentieth Century
John Cox
New York and Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2017
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The twentieth century ended with over sixty million people killed by genocidal regimes, and millions more in the centuries before that.¹ It is fitting, then, that in trying to comprehend why some communities have tried to exterminate others, John Cox's book *To Kill a People* focuses on that century as a moment of extreme annihilation. Aimed as an introductory text for college/undergraduate students, this book provides a readable and comprehensive overview to help explore the practice of genocide—addressing in each case presented the circumstances leading to the killing, as well as the genocide itself, and thereby considering what circumstances drive groups to persecute, rape, murder, and massacre others.

John Cox is well situated to make this study. A Holocaust scholar who has previously published on genocide, imperialism, racial ideology, and resistance, he is also Director of the Center for Holocaust, Genocide, and Human Rights studies at the University of North Carolina in Charlotte. This background positions him well to engage with the two main aims of the book: firstly, a comparative analysis of genocide, which attempts “to comprehend the conditions and similarities that have produced genocide in the past and perhaps the future,”² and secondly, the de-centring of the Nazi Holocaust at the top of a hierarchy of horror and suffering to which nothing can be compared. Whilst not belittling the horrors of the Holocaust, throughout the book Cox shows that it proceeded from circumstances comparable to the other case studies presented, circumstances that he considers to be particular results of the technological advances and political ideologies of the twentieth century: social Darwinism and its resulting racism; careerism; and bureaucratization; as well as other details including economic depression, warfare, and insecurity. In this moment of global precarity, this intervention is important, as is the repeated reminder that genocide does not just occur ‘over there,’ but is a facet of human behaviour that, given certain circumstances, could (and does) happen anywhere.

Though short, the book offers a comprehensive overview. The introduction, which discusses both the definition and practice of genocide, is followed by four case studies: Armenia, the Nazi Holocaust, the Cambodian genocide under the Khmer Rouge, and the Rwandan genocide of 1994. The conclusion considers the implications of this shared analysis for future considerations. At the end of each chapter Cox provides primary sources and study questions, and the book ends with reading and documentary recommendations for further learning (a separate reference list of those included in the footnotes would be helpful as an additional guide). The breadth of literature covered is impressive, and allows Cox to consider key historical moments, and the wider geopolitical and social circumstances within which each set of atrocities happened.

In discussing the definition of genocide in the introduction, Cox shows how its original conception was narrowed legally and politically to that which we use today, a narrowing he finds problematic, instead proposing a definition in keeping with the spirit of Lemkin's original aims: “the attempt to destroy any *recognized, stable, and permanent group* as it is defined by the

¹ Alexander Laban Hinton, “Introduction: Genocide and Anthropology,” in *Genocide: An Anthropological Reader*, ed. Alexander Laban Hinton (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), 1.

² John Cox, *To Kill A People: Genocide in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 194.

perpetrator."³ This broad definition allows him to consider violence all the way back to the ancient world, highlighting that genocide is not a recent phenomenon as is so often posited. Of particular importance in this is the acknowledgment of the destruction of native peoples in the Americas.⁴ Chapter one discusses the Armenian genocide, considered to be "the century's 'first total domestic genocide'."⁵ It highlights how genocidal violence is often improvised and grows incrementally, particularly in the initial stages.⁶ As well as covering the genocide itself, Cox discusses its continued denial by the Turkish state, showing how the denial is "essential to the homogenous national identity fashioned by Ataturk's political descendants,"⁷ thus deftly illustrating the political use of genocide and violence in state building projects. Chapter one also draws attention to other, lesser known, atrocities such as the Assyrian genocide of 1914-23,⁸ and by doing so allows Cox to refute the narrative of Islam as the driving force, an important intervention in the post-9/11 world.⁹

Chapter two, *The Holocaust*, tracks anti-Jewish sentiment back to over two millennia ago, from the Roman crush of a Jewish rebellion in 66-70CE, through the Crusades, to the Dreyfus affair in France, to show that the Jewish Holocaust did not appear out of thin air. It shows how the policies of Nazi Germany were influenced by other movements around the globe, such as the United States sterilisation laws of the early twentieth century,¹⁰ and that

the Holocaust was not purely a German crime.... It was produced by prejudices and philosophies that flourished throughout the West; it found powerful precedents in the practices of Western imperialist powers; and it was aided and abetted by citizens of all countries occupied by Germany or governed by its allies.¹¹

In showing how the Holocaust progressed primarily in an *ad hoc* manner, only becoming industrialised in the final years, Cox provides a counterpoint to the notion of a genocide of ruthless, industrialised efficiency matched by none; as he goes on to show in Chapter four, the first two weeks of the Rwandan genocide equalled the final months of the Holocaust in numbers killed per day.¹²

Chapter three begins with a statement on politics: while the Armenian genocide and the Holocaust were driven by extreme right-wing politics, the Cambodian genocide was affected by communism. This point adds weight to Cox's assertion that genocide is not the domain of certain types of people, but of particular circumstances. This chapter, like the others, gives critical insight into these circumstances, and problematises some of the conversations around the events, such as the assertion that the atrocities committed by the Khmer Rouge were auto-genocide.¹³ He argues against this by detailing the different groups targeted for execution and persecution as well as the hundreds of thousands who died by disease, starvation, and exhaustion, groups such as the Vietnamese, the Cham, monks, and other Buddhist practitioners.¹⁴ The conversation of the continued terror wrought by the Khmer Rouge for nearly two decades after their deposition is somewhat limited, however the chapter covers the majority of the information needed to situate

³ Ibid., 11.

⁴ Ibid., 14-17.

⁵ Ibid., 41.

⁶ Ibid., 53.

⁷ Ibid., 63.

⁸ Ibid., 58.

⁹ Ibid., 66.

¹⁰ Ibid., 97.

¹¹ Ibid., 108.

¹² Ibid., 191.

¹³ Ibid., 141.

¹⁴ Ibid., 137.

the genocide in conversation with the others in the book.

The final case study, the Rwandan genocide, tells the chilling story of the 1994 violence, when more than 800,000 people were killed in a matter of days.¹⁵ As with the previous chapters, Cox is careful to discuss and debunk simplistic narratives that have entered the public imagination, for example by following the racialisation of Tutsi and Hutu back to colonialism.¹⁶ He shows how these were initially class distinctions, thus highlighting the social construction of markers of difference that are taken as natural, and subsequently used to form rhetoric of otherness that, in times of insecurity, can be manipulated towards violent ends. This chapter also discusses the use of sexual violence during conflict, and rape as a weapon of war,¹⁷ and considers the problematic denial of difference in the post-genocide years; the supposedly “non-ethnic” Rwanda, which, rather than dealing with the history, reproduces and reinforces the divisions which were so influential.¹⁸

To end the book, the conclusion puts these four case studies into conversation with one another, allowing a consideration of the findings as a whole, as well as the particularities of each. Cox argues that genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes exist on a “spectrum of extreme violence”¹⁹ and although each genocide has particularities, there are shared circumstances between those he discusses which enable a deeper understanding of how ordinary people commit such horrendous acts.

To Kill a People is an excellent introductory text for those studying genocide and history, particularly at the undergraduate level, or for non-academic readers who want to learn more about genocide as a whole, or any of the events considered. Its concise and thorough coverage make it an ideal starter text for thinking about what genocide is and does. If I had a criticism it would be the exclusion of social science considerations of genocide and/or extreme violence as a practice – theorists such as Nancy Scheper-Hughes²⁰ and Philippe Bourgois²¹ have much to add to Cox’s approach to how violence becomes enacted at the individual, as well as the state, level. I would also like to see an additional chapter or two that consider other, less well-known, genocides. The four presented are, of course, important. But in choosing these as the only case studies, Cox replicates the solidification of them in the wider imagination as the ones worth considering. An additional chapter that discussed incidences of genocide in, for example, West Papua, or against Aboriginal peoples, would decentre the Euro-American influence, as well as the imagination of genocide as one of scale rather than ambition, something Cox himself asserts in the introduction.

Overall, Cox has written a thoughtful and, at times, moving distilment of the history of genocide in the twentieth century. His final words are one of warning: that the world cannot afford another century like the last.²² If Cox’s analysis of socio-political insecurity in the face of decline is right, then we should be very wary of contemporary geopolitics and its contested nature or there will be many more case studies to add to his file.

¹⁵ Ibid., 165.

¹⁶ Ibid., 154.

¹⁷ Ibid., 166-7.

¹⁸ Ibid., 177.

¹⁹ Ibid., 189.

²⁰ Nancy Scheper-Hughes, “The Gray Zone: Small Wars, Peacetime Crimes, and Invisible Genocides,” in *The Shadow Side of Fieldwork: Exploring the Blurred Borders Between Ethnography and Life*, ed. Athena McLean and Anette Leibling (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 159-184.

²¹ Philippe Bourgois, “The Power of Violence in War and Peace: Post-Cold War Lessons from El Salvador,” *Ethnography*, 2, no. 1 (2001): 5-34.

²² Ibid., 215.