

Draft review - to appear in the *Journal of Genocide Research*, 13, 3, 2011.

Edward S. Herman and David Peterson, *The Politics of Genocide*

New York: Monthly Review Press, 2010

128 pp, \$12.95 (pbk)

Genocide is an intensely political topic. This type of targeted anti-population violence arises from political and armed conflict and is justified by political ideology. Its discussion always reflects political interests, values and goals: even academic genocide studies are surrounded by critical political issues, and often informed by unstated political assumptions. So *The Politics of Genocide* is a good title; but for this book, it is a misnomer. Readers looking for a rounded treatment of the subject will be severely disappointed. What Edward Herman, long-time collaborator of Noam Chomsky (who writes the foreword), and his co-author offer us is *a* politics of genocide, based on the unremitting opposition to Western and especially US power that characterizes all the works of these authors.

This is a study, then, of the contradictions of official Western attitudes to genocide, with a superficial reference (but one significant for the book's method) to mass media, and brief references to “‘genocide’-oriented intellectuals.” The core case is that all major sectors of the Western establishment are fundamentally compromised by partial attitudes to political violence, according to which some is regarded as “constructive” (committed by Western states and necessary to their aims), some “nefarious” (committed by the West's enemies), some “benign” (committed by the West's allies) and some downright “mythical” (supposed actions of the West's

enemies, actually invented for propaganda purposes). This framework, which the authors explain was devised by Herman and Chomsky as long ago as 1973 during the US war in Indochina, defines the book's four main chapters, each devoted to proving the West's politically motivated partiality towards violence across a wide range of cases.

The relatively novel element in *The Politics of Genocide* is the claim that “genocide” language has become increasingly central to the process by which the West interprets events in these four categories: “During the past several decades, the word ‘genocide’ has increased in frequency of use and recklessness of application, so much so that the crime of the 20th century for which the term originally was coined often appears debased” (p 103). Ironically, therefore, Herman and Peterson join many official Western, and especially pro-Israeli, advocates in suggesting a very special (perhaps “unique”?) place for the Holocaust in the modern history of violence. But this reference serves a definite purpose in the authors’ own political framework: if it can be argued that “current [Western] usage” is (as Chomsky puts it, p 7) “an insult to the memory of victims of the Nazis,” then that usage is discredited. And Herman and Peterson’s target is not just this usage, but, as Chomsky summarises, “[t]he vulgar politicization of the concept of genocide, and the ‘emerging international norm’ of humanitarian intervention” (p 10), and especially “all the fine talk about the ‘responsibility to protect’ and the ‘end of impunity’” (p 11). The real problem with the latter, in their view, is that (as Chomsky says) this fine talk “has never once been extended to the victims of these same [Western] powers” that promote it, “no matter how egregious the crimes” (p 11). Thus Chomsky concludes: “As for the term ‘genocide,’ perhaps the most honourable course would be expunge it from the vocabulary until the day, it ever comes, when honesty and integrity can become an international norm” (p 12).

The methodology of this study can be summarized as follows: sweeping assertions about historical events, political attitudes and intellectual positions, buttressed by selective quotation and ignoring most contending sources and arguments, with cavalier use of statistics, all calibrated via a one-dimensional media survey and offered without any attempt to define key concepts. Let us take as a starting-point the following statement: “The leading mainstream experts on ‘genocide’ and mass atrocity crimes today still carefully exclude from consideration the US attacks on Indochina, as well as the 1965-1966 Indonesian massacres within that country – just as they exclude the deaths and destruction that have followed from the United States’ and NATO-bloc’s aggressive wars of the past decade” (p. 17). At this point, one might expect a careful discussion of the “mainstream experts”: but although they are supposed to be an important part of the compromised Western consensus, Herman and Peterson’s sole reference in academic genocide studies is Samantha Power’s *“A Problem from Hell”* (2002).¹ One would not guess that the crimes of pro-Western Indonesia (both the military killings referred to and the invasion and repression of East Timor) are increasingly standard topics in genocide research.² Otherwise, the text is singularly devoid of references to the academic field – even to texts like Adam Jones’ edited *Genocide, War Crimes and the West: History and Complicity* (2004),³ which might have provided partial support for the argument. The other “expert” works adduced are popular handbooks like Roy Gutman and David Rieff’s *Crimes of War* (1999)⁴ and Christiane

¹ Samantha Power, *“A Problem from Hell”: America and the Age of Genocide* (New York: Basic Books, 2002).

² See Ben Kiernan, *Blood and Soil: A World History of Extermination and Genocide* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), pp. 195-99; Christian Gerlach, *Extremely Violent Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

³ Adam Jones (ed.), *Genocide, War Crimes and the West: History and Complicity* (London: Zed Books, 2004).

⁴ Roy Gutman and David Rieff (eds), *Crimes of War* (New York: Norton, 1999).

Amanpour's TV documentary, *Scream Bloody Murder* (2008). It is clear that Herman and Peterson, having dismissed the utility of our field's main concept, are not interested in what genocide scholars have to say, either.

But let us proceed further with the allegations in this quotation. Herman and Peterson charge genocide experts with ignoring the US attacks on Indochina and the deaths that have followed from the US's and NATO's recent wars. For them it is not good enough, moreover, that Power and many others note the role of the US attacks on Cambodia in producing the Khmer Rouge genocide – they also want the direct death toll from US bombing discussed in the genocide framework. But part of the problem is Herman and Peterson's resolute indifference to conceptual questions. Sure, calling "their" violence "genocide" and "ours" merely "collateral damage" could be not-very-subtle political labelling. But is there any difference at all between "war" and "genocide"? Does saying that the US invasion of Iraq, for example, was war rather than genocide necessarily legitimate the deaths and destruction produced? Or is there a sociological difference between war and genocide, even if they are both morally objectionable? Herman and Peterson are only interested in the numbers of people killed, not in the rationales behind the killings. From their point of view, the difference between Auschwitz and Hiroshima would be only the larger number of people killed in the former. But should we not take into account the different, even if both deeply immoral, aims and motives of the perpetrators in these two events?

The problems of the Herman-Peterson approach are clearly displayed in their treatment of the 2003 Iraq invasion and its aftermath. Quick to entertain an estimate of "more than one million" deaths, they claim that "the media and intellectuals rarely treated Iraqi deaths as a

consequence – direct or indirect – of the invasion-occupation, let alone as a deliberately imposed bloodbath, crime against humanity, or ‘genocide’” (p 34). Nowhere are the arguments for much lower death tolls (for example, in the careful estimates of Iraq Body Count, according to which currently about 100-125,000 Iraqi civilians may have died since 2003) addressed.⁵ Nor is there any discussion of who is directly responsible for what is (even on this more conservative estimate) still a very substantial toll, although the majority of deaths are almost certainly directly attributable to Iraqi factions rather than US-UK forces. In this way, an emotive label – “deliberately imposed bloodbath, crime against humanity, or ‘genocide’” – is simply left hanging, so that we are implicitly invited to believe that any or all of these could apply to Western intervention. Paradoxically, the result of this comic-opera treatment is that the authors never pin clearly on the USA and UK either their proper share of the direct responsibility for casualties or their general, indirect responsibility for the mayhem following the invasion.

Herman and Chomsky are the authors of a standard book about mass media, *Manufacturing Consent* (1994).⁶ Not surprisingly, then, Herman and Peterson’s chief empirical measure of the abuse of “genocide” language is the frequency with which certain key media apply the term to different historical and contemporary events, which is then cross-referenced to their death tolls to suggest the varying ratios of media mentions to deaths. Unfortunately, all the calculations developed from this crude yardstick and scattered throughout this book are undermined if we admit that genocide *could* actually be a different type of political violence

⁵ Iraq Body Count, “Exaggerated Claims, Substandard Research, and a Diservice to Truth: ORB’s ‘Million Iraqi Deaths’ Survey Seriously Flawed, New Study Shows,” <http://www.iraqbodycount.org/analysis/beyond/exaggerated-orb/>.

⁶ Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York: Pantheon, 1994).

from war. For example, Herman and Peterson make a good deal of the (estimated) 5.4 million victims of the wars in the Democratic Republic of Congo, and the low salience of media use of “genocide” language in this case, compared to Rwanda. But they never stop to consider the differences between the two cases. The complicated set of armed conflicts in the DRC involved multiple actors over the course of a decade, each fighting each other in changing alliances as well as variously targeting civilians, with most of the claimed death toll attributed to the disease, hunger, and dislocation which the fighting caused. In the relatively simpler case of Rwanda, a highly coordinated campaign of mass murder was developed during a two-sided war over a few weeks in 1994. There are certainly big “genocide” questions in the DRC wars, but there are good reasons (as well as the bad ones alleged here) to distinguish the application of “genocide” in the two cases.

If there may be good conceptual and analytical reasons for distinguishing between events with similar death tolls, a single quantitative measure cannot straddle the corresponding qualitative divides. Without exploring this question, all Herman and Peterson have done is to provide some evidence of the varying and growing use of the term “genocide.” Of course, related to this, in their haste to assert the significance of Western atrocities, the authors completely sidestep the question of whether, granted that Western democracies commit or are complicit in very serious mass crimes, there is any difference in type between their crimes and those of other regimes; or, indeed, whether there are any significant historical changes in the Western production of mass death, between – say – the eras of Vietnam and Iraq. But Herman and Peterson are not interested in such nuances. Their starting and end point is that “[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” (p 13).

This whole book is little more than an elaborate demonstration of this and a few (equally simple) related assertions. Naturally, since the USA and the wider West are certainly not innocent of war crimes and complicity in genocide, and since official discourse does indeed tend to assume that “our” actions are justified, our enemies’ nefarious, and our allies’ condonable, Herman and Peterson’s blunderbuss approach achieves some hits. If the mass death produced by the USA in Vietnam and Cambodia did not constitute genocide, we certainly need to ask why. If the Rwandan Hutu Power regime murdered hundreds of thousands of Tutsis, that does not mean we should ignore the death tolls attributable to the Rwandan Patriotic Front before and during 1994, or indeed afterwards in the DRC. If Serbian “ethnic cleansing” constituted genocide, there is no good reason not to examine Croatian expulsions of Serbs, during Operation Storm in 1995, within the same frame. If campaigning in the USA helped to establish Darfur as the prime early-21st-century genocide, it may also have simplified the political and military situation there. These and a number of similar issues, raised by Herman and Peterson, are certainly cogent – and indeed are recognized as such by critical genocide scholars.

However, *The Politics of Genocide* does not stop at raising these kinds of counter-examples to the Western mainstream. Instead, it engages in what can only be described as extensive genocide denial. Consider two cases. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, our authors claim, the West “demonized” the Serbs, engaged in “remarkable inflation of claims of Serb evil and violence ... with fabricated ‘concentration camps,’ ‘rape camps’ and similar Nazi- and Auschwitz-like analogies” (p 46). They criticize the International Criminal Tribunal for the

Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) for agreeing that “genocide could occur in one ‘small geographical area’ (the town of Srebrenica), even where the villainous party had taken the trouble to bus all the women, children and elderly men to safety – that is, incontestably had not killed any but ‘Bosnian Muslim men of military age’” (p 47). “The case for eight thousand ‘men and boys’ being executed,” they say, “is extremely thin, resting in good part on the difficulty of separating executions from battle killings” (p 48). (So, suddenly, they want to distinguish genocide from war, after all.) They point to the eventual acceptance of lower overall Bosnian death tolls (c. 50-100,000 rather than the 200-250,000 initially argued) as evidence of Western “gullibility” in the face of Bosnian Muslim propaganda – ignoring the fact that initial estimates are frequently revised downwards in such situations, and notwithstanding their own eagerness to accept without discussion problematically large counts (like the “over one million” excess deaths in Iraq since 2003, or 5.4 million in the DRC) when it suits their claims. They claim that “the word ‘genocide’ was used lavishly for the Bosnian Serbs’ conduct” (p 49), ignoring the emergence of “ethnic cleansing” as an alternative concept precisely in this period, partly because Western officialdom wanted to *avoid* recognizing genocide in Bosnia. (Herman and Peterson want to insist on the norm of Western interventionism despite all the evidence produced by Power and many others that often Western governments do their utmost *not* to intervene.)

If anyone is offering “an insult to the memory of victims,” it is clearly Herman and Peterson, who give credence to Serbian nationalist denialism which has been widely discredited. Yet, if anything, their position on Rwanda is even more outrageous. The Western establishment has “swallowed a propaganda line on Rwanda that turned perpetrator and victim upside-down” (p 51). The RPF not only killed Hutus, but were the “prime *genocidaires*” (p 54), their

“large-scale killing and ethnic cleansing of Hutus by the RPF long before the April-July 1994 period” (p 53) contributing to a result in which “the majority of victims were likely Hutu and not Tutsi” (quoted with approval, p 58). Indeed, “a number of observers as well as participants in the events of 1994 claim that the great majority of deaths were Hutu, with some estimates as high as two million” (p 58). When we check the reference for this shocking statement, it turns on no more than a letter from a former RPF military officer and personal communications from a former defence counsel before the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda – both participants (n 127, p 132). It does not seem to have occurred to the authors that if “theaters where the killing was greatest correlated with spikes in RPF activity” (p 58), killing could just as easily have been committed by the threatened Rwandan regime (as Scott Straus argues in *The Order of Genocide*)⁷ as by the RPF themselves. But Herman and Peterson do not engage with Straus, or with much at all of the now very considerable literature on Rwanda. Certainly the “established narrative” needs to be questioned, the RPF’s own violence acknowledged, and the ICTR’s inability to deal with the latter (in contrast to the ICTY’s prosecution of perpetrators from many sides, which of course our authors could never credit) criticized. But this is hardly a licence to dismiss the idea of “800,000 or more largely Tutsi deaths” as RPF and Western propaganda, and the authors’ keenness to do so does as much as anything to utterly discredit this study.

This book therefore shows inadvertently that the politics of genocide are multi-directional. Certainly, official Western propagandists may sometimes minimize “our” crimes and represent those of “our” enemies in oversimplified ways. But it seems that

⁷ Scott Straus, *The Order of Genocide: Race, Power and War in Rwanda* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006).

anti-Western propagandists, among whom we must count Herman, Peterson, and Chomsky, are guilty of the same tendency from the other side of the fence. They suggest that in official Western narratives, “our victims are *unworthy* of our attention and indignation, and never suffer ‘genocide’ at our hands” (p 104, italics in original). In anti-Western, Chomskyan narratives, a similar process occurs: the West’s enemies, whether Serbian nationalist or Rwandan Hutu Power, have never committed “genocide.” For the journalist John Pilger, hyping this volume on its cover, Herman and Peterson “defend the right of all of us to a truthful historical memory.” Evidently this does not include the Srebrenica men, the massacred and expelled Kosovo Albanians, or the slaughtered Rwandan Tutsis, who are “unworthy victims” for these left-contrarians. For scholars of genocide studies, this is rich source material. It is not a serious contribution to analysis.

Martin Shaw

University of Sussex

Notes