

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

DEAN NEU and RICHARD THERRIEN. *Accounting for Genocide. Canada's Bureaucratic Assault on Aboriginal People.* Black Point, NS: Fernwood Publishing. 2003, 193 p.

Genocide is one of those snarl words designed to disrupt, depress, or deceive. For many, the term conjures up grisly images of tribal groups impulsively annihilating each other in an orgy of random violence. Or genocide may be invoked to depict ruthlessly orchestrated campaign of systematic ethnic cleansing. Yet not all genocides are cut from the same cloth: A systemic genocide that "kills by kindness" not only reinforces the expression "the banality of evil," but also may prove every bit as destructive and demoralising as its systematic counterpart. A systemic genocide does not necessarily set out to annihilate; nevertheless, the logical consequences may well have a fatal effect on those in competition with the dominant group.

We can interpret colonialism as a kind of systemic genocide that has inflicted incalculable harm on indigenous peoples around the world. As others have noted, state formation is critical for society-building in settler governments. The challenge lies in expanding the state's infrastructural power to incorporate all of society. Control is enforced through surveillance and monitoring of indigenous peoples' activities to ensure containment by conformity on the mistaken and arrogant premise that "we," the settler state, know what is best for indigenous peoples, and that they can be saved by becoming more like "us." Not surprisingly, indigenous peoples are fighting to survive the "soft annihilation," involving government administrative techniques, bureaucratic regimentation, and economic-political rationalizations.

This line of reasoning applies to both Australia and New Zealand where the state routinely resorted to genocidal practices for colonial goals. Separating a peoples from their land for settlement or resource extraction proved difficult because of the inextricable fusion of ancestral land with indigenous culture. Such a verdict is no less true of Canada where the bureaucratic assault on the First Nations persists into the present. According to the authors—one an academic and the other a poet—successive Canadian governments have combined bureaucratic techniques of accounting and accountability with economic rationalisation to systemically exercise control over aboriginal lives and lifechances. The authors demonstrate chapter by chapter how accounting procedures (used in the broadest sense as a bureaucratic system of numerical techniques,

funding mechanism, and transparency audits) played a key role in the indirect governance of First Nations, culminating in their control and containment through assimilation ("cultural genocide"). Federal initiatives from residential schooling to micro-management of Indian reserves by the Indian Affairs bureaucracy was anchored in the notion of purging Canada of the "Indian problem" by absorbing every "single Indian...into the body politic.. Canada's indigenous peoples become the target of an eradication so calculatingly bureaucratic as to strip them of agency while centralizing control over their lives until the moment of enfranchisement. The end result?: An assimilation in "slow motion"—a kind of "death by a thousand cuts"—that harmonized with notions of civility and progress.

There is much to like about this book. The authors spare no expense in castigating governments for their complicity in hastening the cultural genocide of aboriginal peoples. Their focus on dull bureaucratic routine to remove the Indian menace should prove a corrective to those who think of genocide as something "over there" by "them." In that sense, the book covers some of the same ground as Anastasia Shkilnyk's *Poison Stronger Than Love* (1985) which, in my estimation, remains the most moving account of community destruction by well-intentioned bureaucratic bungling. Yet the authors' strength can prove a weakness when overstated. For example, the connection between the so-called "Jewish problem" and the "Indian problem" is fascinating but flawed. To be sure, there is a superficial resemblance between the Holocaust and assimilation of First Nations, at least in consequence if not necessarily in attitude and intent. Both require an efficient bureaucracy to render the task more palatable by fostering the dehumanization and demonization of the target population. Yet while the Final Solution was aimed at exterminating Jews as humans, Canada's solution to the Indian problem revolved around eliminating the "Indian in the Indian"—for their own good, of course.

There is yet another cliché that applies in linking genocide with accounting and accountability. *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*. We may be living in a wired and information world; nonetheless, resource extraction remains the basis of our wealth creation. As resources become scarcer, the ancestral territories of indigenous peoples look even better, in effect prompting a new colonialism by global transnational corporations. Predictably, both federal and provincial governments continue to rely on accounting, funding, and measures of accountability to advance the 'governmentality' and control of Canada's first peoples. Nowhere is this more evident than in debates over the First Nations Governance Act with its commitment to improve local governance through greater transparency of rules, ruling, and reward. True, more Aboriginal autonomy and fiscal control are promised but only upon acceptance of westernized models of governance, in effect perpetuating the colonialist arrogance that 'we know what's best for you, and what's best is to become more like us'. Indeed, in advancing the perverse slogan that the "only good Indian is a white Indian," it can be fairly said that the more things change, the more they stay the same.

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