

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

MARCHAK, PATRICIA. *Reigns of Terror*. Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press. 2003, 306 p.

In the past decade, numerous academic works have been devoted to analyzing genocide and state terror. Genocide studies now constitute a fledgling academic specialization often linked to its loosely defined sibling, peace and conflict studies. The majority of works produced on state violence have focused on its victims rather than its perpetrators and on its effects rather than its causes. Genocide is addressed in its aftermath, either through the lens of human rights accountability or the victims' experience of trauma. In this context, witnessing and testimony are the key concerns. Patricia Marchak's *Reigns of Terror* is an effort to redress the balance by addressing the causes of genocide rather than its consequences.

She chooses nine disparate episodes of 20th century atrocities (Ottoman Empire in Armenia, the USSR in the Ukraine, Nazi Germany, Cambodia under Pol Pot, Burundi and Rwanda, Argentina, Chile, and Yugoslavia) in attempting to draw out their resemblances, thus arguing for a common underlying factor to each which she finds in the political economy of genocide. Her view of genocide is that it is always instrumental. She holds that all states function to maintain and perpetuate inequality. When a state can no longer do so and the system can no longer reproduce itself, all attempts will be made to sustain it, including the elimination of its citizens.

In setting out her claims, she argues against other explanations of genocide that prioritize ethnic and racial differences or authoritarian cultures as root causes. She convincingly argues that these explanations mistake the cause of genocide for the form of its expression. She also argues against a large literature that considers acts of genocide as a by-product of modernity, although she confines herself only to Zygmunt Bauman's *Modernity and the Holocaust*. Other influential figures such as Giorgio Agamben are not addressed. I found these criticisms to be less persuasive. For example, she cites the Old Testament as evidence that mass murder has always been with us. Those that subscribe to the "modernity thesis" do not disregard this; in fact, that mass murder is nothing new is obvious. What they insist upon is that the logic and structure of genocide with its bureaucratic rationales and its industrialized dehumanization arises out of the specific conditions of modernity. Also, if she wanted to persuasively argue against the "modernity thesis," it would have been more convincing if she had not confined her examples to the twentieth century.

Marchak claims to be able to identify the preconditions under which there is a “high probability” that states will commit crimes against humanity. But what can this possibly mean? This type of imprecision makes her work frustrating. She also concedes that her model cannot account for the extent of the violations, whether a thousand people will be murdered or a million. In an effort to explain acts of genocide, it would have been more useful if, instead of starting with an *ex post facto* explanation, she considered cases in which mass atrocities did not occur when faced with similar conditions. For example, Argentina was arguably closer to genocide in 2001 than in 1976. The mass protests of December 2001 that toppled the government led to a government response that led to two dozen dead rather than 30,000. The question is why. A weakened military is certainly part of the explanation – perhaps along with a weakened centralized state power resulting from neo-liberal reform – but this does not seem sufficient despite Marchak calling it “the one hopeful ingredient” (pg. 268). I would argue that she has not given sufficient credit to human rights organizations inside of Argentina working to make “never again” more than a slogan.

If Marchak neglects the efforts of local human rights organizations working within “at risk” countries, this may be because she sees the international community as the primary actor in prevention. In her introduction and conclusion, she makes the ill-advised choice of speaking in/for an undefined third person – the “we” in question is never clear. Is it left-leaning academics, international organizations, developed states, or simply concerned citizens? Nevertheless, it forms part of her underlying assumptions. Despite her intrinsically negative view of the state, she maintains that human rights abuses at the hands of a state can be prevented by the international community. But if states function to perpetuate inequality, why would that argument not apply to international organizations as well? Why maintain an intrinsically negative view of the function of the state with an essentially positive view of the function of a nebulous international community? This can be seen as part of a shift in human rights discourse in which the state, previously seen as the granter and guarantee of human rights, is now seen as the primary source of violations against its own citizens. At the same time, to see international humanitarianism as the antidote to this raises equally perplexing issues.

These questions aside, one of the explicit goals of the work is to help identify states “at risk” for committing human rights crimes against its own citizens. In that case, the book’s success can be measured by how well it is able to do this. The first example that Marchak gives of a state where “the stage seems to be set now for a long-drawn-out civil war” (pg. 267) is Venezuela. Although Hugo Chavez’s government may not be the most stable in the world, he emerged from a 2004 referendum with democratic institutions strengthened not weakened. Perhaps Marchak would argue that the escalating costs of oil have helped the petroleum rich country financially to the point in which the state could reproduce itself. But even if she was correct in that case, it still raises questions about the book’s diagnostic utility.

The problem with generalities is that they often result in banalities. To predict which states are “at risk” for committing human rights offenses would generally lead one to state the obvious – why mass human atrocities would be more likely to occur in the next decade in Swaziland rather than Switzerland.

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