
Benjamin Meiches: *The Politics of Annihilation: A Genealogy of Genocide*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019. Pp. ix, 326.)

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The contingent, political, and mutational character of genocide—both as a discursive/analytical construct and as a real-world sociological phenomenon—has been acknowledged in critical genocide studies for quite some time. Rarely, however, has this general insight been pursued with the focus, ambition, and conceptual depth that Ben Meiches manages in this welcome new book. *The Politics of Annihilation* is a wide-ranging and insightful deep dive into the contested, often controversial, and complex discursive politics of genocide—the politics of genocide understood here as the “conditions of possibility for events to become intelligible as genocide” (9). At the book’s heart is a novel theorization of genocide as a historically contingent, shape shifting “porous discourse,” and in its analytical toolkit is a rich conceptual vocabulary with which to tease apart this discourse.

Both are wielded against the book’s main foil, namely, “hegemonic” genocide discourse. On Meiches’s description, this is the dominant way of thinking about genocide which is not a single concept as such, but rather a “discursive practice” which seeks to stabilize an objective definition. The notion of a hegemonic understanding of genocide, as used here, distills and affirms many critical insights from the existing critical scholarship about the unstated assumptions, hidden histories, blind spots, and dominant (politicized) associations that often lurk unnoticed beneath the idea of genocide. Yet it does so from an illuminating new vantage point; what is distinctive about Meiches’s account, and one of the most powerful ideas emerging from the book, is how it asks us to think about the discourse of genocide itself as a kind of political actor—as a multidimensional discursive/material entity with its own forms of agency and power. I will return below, however, to some questions about the issue of politics.

One of the major concerns of the book is to think through the consequences and effects of dominant genocide discourse. Underpinning the book, thus, is a deceptively simple, relatively neglected, but weighty question: What does the idea of genocide *do* in the world? One of the main answers Meiches gives us—supported elsewhere in the literature, especially in the scholarship on colonial genocide and work by Indigenous scholars—is that the (hegemonic) concept of genocide produces exclusions, silences and hierarchies of violence. In other words, as Meiches puts it, it acts as a form of discursive closure and therefore a powerful *depoliticizing* force in global politics.

Foucauldian genealogy structures the attempt to map the contingent play of forces that produce the concept of genocide, the different practices of invoking it, and the tracing of its historical emergence and transformations over time. Of particular importance here is how, from a plurality of different

claims and ways of thinking, certain claims about genocide became dominant and obtained the “status of truth,” while others became marginalized. The genealogical framework is synthesized with Deleuze and Guattari’s ontological theory of concepts. This involves an understanding of concepts as complex, mind-independent assemblages which, although primarily linguistic entities, nevertheless exert political influence through their multiple relationships and interactions in ways that “exceed human intentions” (22). Each chapter incorporates conceptual analysis with empirical examples. While this short review cannot do justice to the breadth of the discussion, its impressively diverse range of empirics opens up important new conversations and illustrates the pliability and potential of the book’s analytical lens. For example, there are fascinating and generative discussions of topics such as mental harm, narcotics, the brain, the Women’s Orchestra at Auschwitz, and the cholera outbreak in Haiti.

Moreover, despite the book’s dominant focus on discourse and linguistics, it is more than a detached deconstructive endeavor. Running alongside the simultaneously close and expansive analytical dissection there is also an important ethical strand of argumentation in which Meiches urges embrace of the open and contingent nature of genocide discourse. The book suggests that herein lies an overlooked benefit of the concept of genocide; namely, its ability to *politicize*. Rather than search for a final definition, we should welcome contestation and think creatively with “subterranean” articulations of genocide.

Processes of “politicization,” however, are complex and variable and not unambiguously benign—it was not always clear to me why politicization was valorized in a general sense as automatically emancipatory (particularly insofar as the discussion tended to remain at the level of discourse). Moreover, how might Indigenous scholars and activists who view the framework of the 1948 UN Genocide Convention as workable and politically valuable fit within this kind of argument (e.g., Starblanket, *Suffer the Little Children* [Clarity, 2018]; last year, Brazilian Indigenous groups and lawyers submitted a file to the ICC accusing the Bolsonaro government of genocide using the terms of the UN Convention)? Nevertheless, in making this claim, the book draws into focus how, at the same time as the hegemonic discourse functions to close down debates about genocide, marginal and sidelined discourses have potential to open up new forms of thought and politics.

It is on these notions of politics and politicization—central to the book’s overarching narrative—that I would like to offer some further critical comments. An initial point relates to how the book itself participates, or does not participate, in a more radical discursive politics on genocide. For example, although this is not necessarily pivotal to the book’s broader arguments, in chapter 3, Meiches discusses what he describes as a “minor tradition” in genocide studies which problematizes the dominant focus on mass killings. He collectively labels those moving beyond this dominant focus as theorists of “social genocide.” Yet, one of the major fault lines of critical

debates in the field has emerged in relation to what Martin Shaw has described as the confusing “proliferation of -cides,” the consequence of which is a narrow redefinition of the concept of “genocide” (as mass killing) (Shaw, *What Is Genocide?* [Polity, 2007], 191–222). Thus, terms like “cultural genocide,” “ethnocide,” “politicide,” and so forth emerged in the context of the political and legal suppression of broader formulations of the genocide concept and function precisely to uphold exclusionary and hierarchical classifications. What is to prevent the idea of “social genocide” from functioning in this way? One can imagine a claim such as “It is not *real* genocide, it is merely ‘social’ genocide.” But why not describe these scholars as many would no doubt see themselves: as analysts not of “social genocide” but simply of “genocide”?

Further, despite the book’s stated normative commitment to politicization, there were occasions where it seemed to avoid more substantive confrontation with the political jugular. For example, the communism of the We Charge Genocide petitioners is dismissed in one sentence as a “limitation” without probing how their politics related to their thinking about genocide (249). Ecocide and its connection to genocide is discussed without mention of the fact that prominent contemporary work in this area is explicitly Marxist. Similarly, Naomi Klein is approvingly drawn into the discussion of ecological issues without mention of her trenchant anticapitalist activism. A deeper question all this raised for me was: What are the book’s implications for how we imagine the relationship(s) between the discursive politics of genocide, political economy, radical political activism, and scholarship?

Further, and perhaps more substantively, is a question about how the book side-steps aspects of the *specificity* of the politics of hegemonic discourse. To be sure, a real contribution of the book is how it simultaneously draws into focus certain delimiting, depoliticizing tendencies of dominant genocide discourse at the same time as it highlights how it functions in relation to particular “paradigm[s] of governance” and as an actionable “term of political rationality” (174) in international institutions and global governance. However, the diagnosis of the latter—that is, how the hegemonic discourse is constitutive of a politics in a more productive sense—remained, at times, evasive. In short, I would suggest there is a surreptitious political figure lurking between the lines of the book, but never fully pulled into the analytical foreground: namely, a primarily North American— and Western European—based conception of (neo)liberal global(ized) order (and a related “muscular” liberal internationalism). In other words, hegemonic genocide discourse is in important respects a liberal discourse. This liberal political/ideological formation is gestured towards throughout the book (for example, in the book’s discussion of a “progressive history” forming an important part of the hegemonic discourse, which could easily be read as a kind of liberal Whig history), but it is never explicitly named.

These points do not detract from the book’s overall achievements. One of the things I most appreciated about the book, and the reason I will be

returning to it, is the assurance with which it refuses to bend to conventional assumptions and how it creatively resists the pull of more comfortable discursive undertows. In doing so, its overall effect is a sense of intellectual opening.

–Louise Wise
University of Sussex



Phillip W. Gray: *Vanguardism: Ideology and Organization in Totalitarian Politics*. (New York: Routledge, 2020. Pp. viii, 218.)

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Hardly anyone would dispute the fact that the course of modern politics has been decisively shaped by the resolute pursuit of radical revolutionary projects whose leaders claimed to have understood the Truth about History and to have acted on behalf of emancipatory majorities destined to fulfill a two-pronged historical mission: destroy our rotten world and then usher in a salvationist New Era. It has also been widely acknowledged—at least since the publication of Hannah Arendt’s *The Origins of Totalitarianism*—that these projects, disparate though they appear to be, share important characteristics. But what exactly are these characteristics? What is the proper way to conceptualize, classify, and analyze them?

It is to the literature devoted to this question that Phillip W. Gray has made a major contribution. The book consists of nine chapters. In the introduction (chap. 1), he announces his intellectual ambition, namely, to bring into sharp relief “the strong and uncanny similarities” evinced by “some of the worst regimes and movements of the 20th century” (1), and he presents an outline of “vanguardism,” the interpretative framework within which he situates his comparative account. In chapter 2, the “vanguardism framework” is forcefully and compellingly articulated, and chapter 3 traces its “prehistory”: the factors that made possible the transition from an era in which “vanguardism was not” to a world where it became “a reality in the political realm” (34). Chapters 4–8 offer innovative analyses of different types of vanguardist movements: those based on class (e.g., Russian Bolsheviks and the Chinese communists inspired by Marx, Lenin, and Mao), nation (e.g., the Italian fascists), race (e.g., the German Nazis), “subalterns,” or various populations “operating under systemic oppression by social institutions” (thinkers such as Gramsci and Fanon and movements such as the Palestinian Liberation