

Book Reviews

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Boekresensies

Collection of chapters at the cutting edge of genocide studies

Mohamed Adhikari (ed.), *Genocide on Settler Frontiers: When Hunter Gatherers and Commercial Stock Farmers Clash*

Cape Town, UCT Press, 2014

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Mohamed Adhikari's collection is at the cutting edge of genocide studies. It represents the efforts of a group of scholars from across the globe to revise an outdated, crude and phenomenologically useless model of genocide as simply an ideological crime, defined only by mass killing. This is an image largely based itself on a crude rendering of the Holocaust. In its place we have a complex reorienting of genocide as a process inextricably linked to colonialism. Or to put it another way, in our increasingly global age it forces us to think about the historic and indeed ongoing links between genocide and globalisation. As such, this is an urgent work that demands our attention.

The volume begins with Adhikari's own introductory survey on "the genocidal impetus behind commercial stock-farmer invasions of hunter gatherer territories" in southern Africa, Australia and beyond. Adhikari makes it clear that commercial stock-farmers had a devastating impact on indigenous peoples from southern Africa to the Queensland frontier. Central to this analysis is the observation that it was not simply access to the land that drove destruction, but the particular uses of the land (and the need for vast swathes of it) on the part of commercial stock-farmers and in particular, that they were driven "primarily by profit" (p 3). In doing so, Adhikari is crucially drawing links between the birth of modernity and the destruction of indigenous peoples. He writes that the "privatisation and commodification of natural resources, especially land, a defining characteristic of capitalist economies, undermined foraging societies fundamentally" (p 9). Scholars such as Damien Short would argue that such a destructive relationship continues to this day.¹

Adhikari also argues that stock farming societies were commonly particularly phobic towards indigenous peoples. These were often isolated societies on the colonial frontiers. They had little need of indigenous labour, just land, and were therefore often particularly threatened by indigenous resistance (or at least imagined

1. See for example D. Short, *Redefining Genocide: Settler Colonialism, Social Death and Ecocide* (Zed Books, London, forthcoming in 2016).

that they were). In drawing links between at least the fear of resistance and genocide, Adhikari follows scholars such as Dirk Moses and Tony Barta, who have pointed to the inherent genocidal potential of settler colonialism. Ultimately, both hunter-gatherer society and the colonial societies that threatened to displace them at times understood that they were literally engaged in an existential struggle for survival. Adhikari does not go as far as to label settler colonialism *necessarily* genocidal but “that in cases where commercial stock farmers invaded the lands of foraging societies it was generally so” (p 29).

Following Adhikari, many of the scholars grouped together here demonstrate settler colonialism was indeed not always immediately genocidal. When settlers required indigenous labour then destruction did not defy the logic of capital. However, over a longer period settler societies did tend towards the destruction of hunter-gatherer societies. Indeed, Ann Curthoys offers an analysis of Western Australia that considers the relationship between labour and genocide and finds that labour was not always the alternative to destruction. After all as Curthoys argues “economic exploitation may itself become a means of effecting genocide” (p 211). It could certainly be a means of breaking apart indigenous communities and cultures and therefore hastening their destruction. I was particularly struck by the quotation from a Western Australia newspaper that begins Curthoys’ chapter. In this extract it is claimed precisely that Western Australia would not be as destructive as other Australian colonies, because in WA they needed Aboriginal labour. It is striking therefore how far these narratives can endure and how far the destructive impact of settlement was a matter of public conversation.

In some ways there is a tension within the volume on what actually constitutes genocide. The book is arranged into a series of case studies (not all of which there is room to mention here) that concentrate on South Africa and Australia but also confront North American examples. Some contributors embrace a more wide-ranging idea of genocide that incorporates attritional cultural destruction and some do not. Adhikari himself would appear to be in the latter category. He gives us a neat précis of his work on the South African experience, which argues that the Cape San experienced genocide at Dutch hands, but that British rule was more benign and less destructive. This has always struck me as a problematic analysis because the British appeared to continue a destructive relationship with the Cape San, although with less intensity (however massacres did continue for example in the 1850s). Jared McDonald’s essay here appears to confirm that the genocidal destruction of Cape San identity continued after British occupation. Even without lethal violence, therefore, Dutch and British colonisation might both be argued to be aspects of a genocidal process. It seems to me that British settler colonialism, as much as Dutch, could be argued to be a part of what Adhikari describes as the “intentional, even consciously desire, outcome of a sustained eradictory drive rooted in Cape settler society’s vision of itself, its future and the nature of humanity” especially when one considers the litany of examples here (p 59). Of course, this disagreement might in the end come down to the extent to which scholars have not managed to agree upon a

definition of the slippery notion of cultural genocide. It is a strength of this volume that it allows discourse over such issues.

While not the focus of *Genocide on Settler Frontiers* per se, for this reader the central issue is the degree to which it might be possible to delineate and define the role of genocide in the construction of the British world – in which the definitional conundrum outlined above is crucial. As Nigel Penn outlines in his comparative essay, British policy was contradictory. The humanitarian impulses of an Empire that set itself against the slave trade appeared to militate against genocide – and it was not just in Tasmania that London wished to avoid racial destruction to protect its image. And yet in both South Africa and Australia, British settler society at the very least assumed (and anticipated) that hunter-gatherer communities would become extinct.

At the same time, both in the Cape and Australia, colonial communities dealt with indigenous resistance with similar ferocity and in ways that appeared to be more straight-forwardly genocidal (if using a definition that insists on mass killing as a defining feature). The commandos that Nigel Penn describes as pursuing the Cape San certainly appear to bear some resemblance to the mounted police forces that pursued indigenous peoples especially on the Queensland frontier in the later nineteenth century. In Penn's words, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that genocide was "structural to settler colonialism". What is more, despite the protestations of London, it appears it was something structural to British settler colonialism at that.

As such, if globalisation and genocide are linked, then the globalisation described here is a very British affair. Lyndall Ryan identifies the role of the globalisation of British wool production in genocide in both Tasmania and what was to become Victoria. As Tony Barta argues in his chapter on the American Plains frontier "everywhere in the world colonised by British settlers, land reserved for the indigenous owners was regarded as no better than an unproductive lair of wild beasts" (p 233). This was the case whether ruled from London or granted self-government. Sidney Harring describes a treaty process with First Nations on the Canadian prairies which had at its core "the removal of First Nations to reserves where they were supposed to adopt an agricultural way of life" and as such in which their cultural survival would be threatened (p 271). While not the same, evidently similar policies were adopted in Australian colonies. Such removals were part of a process of genocide.

Harring describes how such an analysis is vehemently rejected in Canadian public discourse today. And while the idea of genocide has more traction in Australian society, it still remains a marginal thesis that is rejected in the mainstream. This is hardly surprising; there is a gap between scholarly and public discourse around so many topics. However, what is striking for me is the degree to which the idea of genocide is so marginalised among scholars of the British Empire. To suggest that the British had a genocidal impact anywhere is controversial and often rejected outright. To suggest that the British had a generally genocidal impact in the construction of the

Anglo world would be regarded as crack-pot among some imperial historians. And yet, reading Mohamed Adhikari's ground breaking collection it is impossible to escape the reading that indeed, in a variety of ways, the British exported genocide across the globe.

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