

Patricia Marchak**Reigns of Terror**

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Reigns of Terror is an important contribution to the field of genocide studies and, more broadly, to a sociological understanding of the modern state and its proclivities towards violence against its own subjects. Adapting a terminology proposed by Dirk Moses [2002], we could say that scholarship on genocide and other crimes against humanity tends to fall into one of two general tendencies: liberal scholarship, which theorizes genocides in terms of the intentions and motives of agents, and privileges the state as the intending agent responsible for genocide; and post-liberal scholarship, which theorizes genocide in terms of determining structural processes and social forces, without recourse to claims about agency or motive. If liberal approaches tend to revert to a reductionist voluntarism that explains genocide tautologically as the product of genocidal intentions, and that naively celebrates Western liberal democracy as the solution to genocide, post-liberal approaches tend to lapse into a determinist structuralism that leaves no room for agency, moral accountability, or effective anti-genocidal action. *Reigns of Terror* attempts to move beyond this impasse. Marchak treats crimes against humanity as resulting from the interaction between structural factors inherent to the state institution, and contingent factors produced by broader social struggles that the state tries to manage but does not fully control. Marchak also avoids treating spectacular episodes of state violence as ruptures in the normally harmonious operation of social institutions, and instead firmly situates crimes against humanity within the context of the reproduction of sovereignty, inequality, and social identity as general features of modern social life.

The book is divided into two parts, followed by a brief epilogue. In Part One, Marchak presents her theoretical argument regarding the conditions under which states become inclined to commit genocide and other crimes against humanity. Core theoretical propositions are presented in italicized paragraphs that visually separate them from the flow of more detailed exposition. Her overall argument is summarized in several different ways, most succinctly at the opening of Chapter 6:

“The state is an organization with a monopoly of the legitimate use of armed force in a given territory and with the mandate to reproduce a system that always involves relationships of dominance and subordination. States that cannot reproduce the system have a high probability of committing human rights crimes.” (p. 131)

Marchak's approach to theorizing crimes against humanity is broadly Weberian. In her account, it is struggles for power, rather than racist ideologies or authoritarian cultures, that directly produce the conditions under which crimes against humanity take place. Struggles over control of state power are bound up with, but do not reduce to, class struggles in the Marxian sense; conflicts between elite groups and dominated populations are complicated by the power strategies of non-dominant elites within the state, by the semi-autonomous role of national militaries, and by powerful political and economic interests originating outside the state. Culture and ideology facilitate popular involvement in crimes against humanity by producing moral codes that authorize or even obligate individuals to

commit violence against other human beings; bureaucratic and scientific rationalities do the same by producing social distance between killers and victims. However, the primary impetus behind crimes against humanity is generated by something general to the modern state as such: the intimate involvement between state institutions and the power strategies of social elites. Accordingly, Marchak is pessimistic about the potential for armed humanitarian intervention organized by bystander states, under UN auspices or otherwise, to provide an effective solution to genocidal and politicidal violence. The solutions she recommends concentrate more on measures to reduce social inequalities within and between nations than on global policing.

Part Two of *Reigns of Terror* provides seven case studies of genocide or politicide throughout the twentieth century. One strength of these case histories is in Marchak's attention to the contribution of international or transnational actors to each case. Marchak discusses, without either evasion or polemic, such sensitive topics American support for the coup against Allende in Chile, or World Bank support for the dictatorial regimes in Argentina. For the most part, these case studies synthesize and summarize material already published elsewhere. Marchak does quote from personal testimonies obtained during field work in Chile, but not to any great effect: left- and right-wing perspectives on the Pinochet regime are simply left to speak for themselves, without any attempt at critical analysis (pp. 222-223). Her fieldwork appears to greater effect in the chapter on Argentina, which features moving personal testimonies of the experiences of students involved in the Montoneros movement (pp. 248-250). Some of the case studies would benefit from greater use of citations, especially in the chapter on the Nazi holocaust. There, Marchak repeats the standard claim that Gypsies were murdered as Asozialen (anti-socials), and ignores recent scholarship indicating that Gypsies, like Jews, were subjected to deliberate genocide based on racist principles (e.g. Hancock 2001).

Marchak succeeds in providing a clear and coherent argument regarding the conditions under which states have used mass violence against their own citizens in the twentieth century. She constructs a properly sociological account of state violence, avoiding the pitfalls of pro-Western partisanship and of metaphysical moral universalism. However, her work suffers from not being situated in relation to the source material from which its concepts are drawn, and hence from a conceptual imprecision. That is, Marchak attempts to construct a theoretical account of reigns of terror by drawing on concepts of power, class, territoriality, identity, culture, and ideology, to name the most prominent, without providing an account of what these concepts mean or how they can be brought into relation to each other. Instead, "power", "culture", "identity", and so on, are treated simply as external objects existing in the world and independently of one another, objects that combine to facilitate crimes against humanity in much the same way that rainfall and deforestation might combine to produce soil erosion. The effect is less one of syncretism than of eclecticism. The various processes described in each of the case studies come together as if by accident, and the conditions for effective struggle against genocide are never really theorized. Marchak's recommendations for action (pp. 150-155, 267-275) appear to demand the impossible: that states and other global institutions be made to behave as if they were not what Marchak has theorized them as being, namely tools for the maintenance of inequality.

Marchak's use of terminology is also somewhat imprecise; although she discusses the legal and conventional meanings of 'crimes against humanity', 'genocide', and related concepts in Chapter 1 (pp. 24-34), she does not adhere closely to either the legal definitions of these terms or to any

explicitly formulated definition of her own, and tends to use the terms 'genocide', 'politicide', 'human rights crimes', and 'crimes against humanity' interchangeably. By sidestepping a more rigorous engagement with the meanings of these terms, Marchak avoids being entangled in the furious and arguably irresolvable definitional debates endemic to genocide scholarship, but she also leaves her analysis open to further charges of conceptual imprecision.

In the opposite direction, *Reigns of Terror* neglects phenomena important to its own analysis. Gender is hardly discussed at all, except as a particular feature of the Yugoslavian genocide, where rape was used "as a war strategy" (pp. 263-265). Even more problematically, genocide and ethnocide against indigenous peoples are not addressed at all. This omission is not justified by Marchak's implicit use of the twentieth century as her frame of reference, for the survival of indigenous peoples continues to be threatened, not only by cultural pressures but by overt physical violence, to the present day. Violence against indigenous peoples has been an important component of the state's construction of both the territorial monopolies of force and the systems of social differentiation that are central to Marchak's account.

Despite these shortcomings, *Reigns of Terror* is a valuable contribution to its field. Its central thesis, that states unleash mass violence against their own subjects when they are no longer able to maintain prevailing systems of inequality and domination, is a highly useful contribution to the small body of research that attempts to move beyond case studies of particular events, towards a general theoretical examination of genocide and other crimes against humanity. Marchak treats genocides and other crimes against humanity as more than isolated phenomena in particular states, and situates them in the context of the global nation-state system, thereby raising difficult questions about the form that effective action to end genocide must take. In sum, *Reigns of Terror* is an important new point of reference to scholars and activists concerned with genocide and other gross human rights abuses.

References:

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Chris Powell

Department of Sociology, University of Manitoba
chris_powell@umanitoba.ca

A doctoral student at the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Carleton University, Chris Powell is currently putting the finishing touches on his dissertation. This dissertation, titled "Civilization and Genocide", builds on the sociology of Norbert Elias to examine the intertwined growth of the European civilizing process and genocidal violence.

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