

**Daniel Chirot and Clark McCauley.**

**Why Not Kill Them All? The Logic and Prevention of Mass Political Murder.**

Princeton University Press, 2006, 288 pp.

\$US 24.95 hardcover (0-691-09296-6)

Recent escalation of ethnic conflicts in the Balkans, the Caucasus, and Sub-Saharan Africa has resulted in a growing public and scholarly interest in genocide studies. Daniel Chirot and Clark McCauley's timely new book *Why Not Kill Them All?* goes to the heart of the matter, focusing on the perpetrators' motivations and identifying barriers that could prevent such atrocities.

Arguing that an understanding of lesser episodes of mass political murder is a necessary step towards understanding large scale genocides, the authors move back and forth in time, discussing a variety of cases, including those in pre-state societies. They convincingly argue that in-group identification is usually a necessary condition for the successful organization of the perpetrators. Motivated by strong group identification, militants risk their lives and commit unspeakable acts "for the good of the Nation."

Chirot and McCauley's careful analysis of the reasons for mass murder notes that convenience is a recurring motivation for settlers and/or colonial powers, who attack the "troublesome," supposedly inferior, and certainly militarily weaker indigenous peoples who also happen to control significant economic resources or militarily important territory. As the authors put it, "When a weak population is deemed to stand in the way of economic gain, then massacres and brutal cleansings may well occur" (p. 130).

Certain ideologies demand the achievement of a perfect society by violent purification from the "Other," whose very presence supposedly has a polluting and degenerative influence. For the followers of such ideologies, "mass murder is only one crisis away" (p. 97). The Nazi obsession with destroying the "Jewish virus" is an example of this extreme form of ideological motivation.

Since opportunities for genocide have been numerous in history, we need to explain not only why they occur, but also why they do not occur more often. While they identify several conflict mitigation mechanisms, the authors remain cautious about their reliability. They argue that multi-ethnic civil society organizations can act as a barrier "at the social base" to the rise of ethnic intolerance. However, they note that even the most vital multi-ethnic civil society organizations cannot resist a large influx of well-armed ultra-nationalist militants. Chirot and McCauley emphasize that while a wide social commitment to Enlightenment ideals of individual rights can act as a buffer to ethnic intolerance, many Western nations have rejected Enlightenment political philosophy by committing a variety of genocidal acts.

Although timely and well-written, the book has some weaknesses. To begin, it uses evidence from selected historical cases to illustrate general concepts or arguments. This approach, which corresponds closely to what Skocpol calls applying a general model to explain historical instances, has inherent limitations. First, it is difficult to gauge the prevalence of the phenomenon under study. For example, we do not know whether the convenience motivation is more prevalent than the fear of pollution motivation. Second, the approach illustrates theoretical concepts without allowing any systematic testing of hypotheses regarding recurring causal links. We are unable to tell whether some forms of motivation (say, convenience) lead to more forced removal and less extermination than do other motivations (say, the fear of pollution). Third, we cannot analyze cases as dynamic and causally complex. What additional conditions, other than the dramatic power imbalance and the

genocidal psychological motivations, have to be met before genocide can occur?

Sociologists and political scientists will be surprised by the book's neglect of institutional analysis. In the explanatory section, the authors argue that gradual socialization into mass murder leads to desensitization of the killers. Yet they do not venture into an analysis of the institutional forms that have proved most conducive to the socialization of the direct perpetrators, such as the secret police or concentration camps.

In the prescriptive section of the book, the authors argue that "we need to turn to a more microscopic, local approach, and away from grand policies and state-sponsored commissions," because "fiddling with macro political structures is insufficient if the social base remains prone to intolerance and has no practice in local conflict resolution" (pp. 186, 198). We need to focus on "creating a sense of tolerance, so that whatever institutional arrangements are made, the tolerant rather than the intolerant are more likely" (p. 186).

Many sociologists will have deep reservations about this reasoning. It seems unrealistic to assume that macro political structures will simply reflect the level of tolerance of the "social base." History provides many examples, some very recent, of intolerant leaders manipulating more tolerant masses in the direction of violent confrontation. One should allow for the possibility that well-designed social institutions might inhibit the intolerant "base" from coming forward and igniting ethnic violence. Arguably, West Germany's institutions of "militant democracy" have acted as barriers to the organization of the intolerant in post-war German society.

By refusing to discuss institutional design and the macro political structures that might prevent conflict escalation, the authors avoid providing useful advice on a number of thorny issues. For example, should the international community shore up the countries experiencing violent and protracted self-determination conflicts, or should the central governments simply accept the partition of their countries into mono-ethnic statelets? How can the great powers protect minorities from predatory governments, while avoiding the temptation to liberate/invade countries with unfriendly and weak repressive regimes and valuable economic resources?

Finally, one has to wonder about the central importance the authors attach to the Enlightenment ideals of individual rights. They are right to argue that a wide social acceptance of the notion of individual rights can be an important ideological barrier to genocidal acts. However, such commitments all too often melt away in the heat of battle. Indeed, the military forces of societies characterized by wide acceptance of individual rights have committed massive human right violation, including torture of POWs, air attacks on civilians, and exterminations of indigenous populations. As Chirot and McCauley note, "When the United States, or Great Britain, or any other post-Enlightenment Western nation committed genocidal acts on populations, they did so by rejecting Enlightenment political philosophy" (p. 141). But if this is true, then ideological commitments are of limited use as inhibitors of political mass murder.

Widely and deeply cherished rights and freedoms have little chance of being effectively protected without strong, legitimate, and accountable institutions designed to enforce them. Just as citizens need welfare state institutions to advance towards their shared ideals of social justice and solidarity, so too they need human rights institutions — such as humanitarian law, international human rights organizations, free and critical media, and independent judiciaries — to prevent the most severe humanitarian disasters. One of the signs of the importance of these institutions is the bitter resistance of several major powers, including the current US administration, to the establishment of a permanent International Court of Justice which would be entitled to bring political and military

leaders to justice for war crimes.

In spite of its limitations, the book is well written, interesting, informative, and balanced. Students in an introductory course in ethnic conflict in sociology, political science, or social psychology will find it helpful.

Djordje (George) Stefanovic  
University of Toronto  
dstefano@chass.utoronto.ca

Djordje Stefanovic is a doctoral student in the Department of Sociology, University of Toronto. His current research is on the social basis of the far right parties and on the aftermath of ethnic cleansing. His work has been published in the *European History Quarterly*. For *CJS Online* he recently reviewed Michael Mann's *Fascists*.

<http://www.cjsonline.ca/reviews/whynot.html>

January 2007

© Canadian Journal of Sociology Online