



Book Review

Emotions and Mass Atrocity: Philosophical and Theoretical Explanations.

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In introducing their edited collection, Thomas Brudholm and Johannes Lang begin with powerful quotes:

“The energy that actually shapes the world,” George Orwell wrote as German bombs rained down on London in 1941, “springs from emotions – racial pride, leader-worship, religious belief, love of war.” That same year, across the British Channel, the influential French historian Lucien Febvre urged fellow historians to pay closer attention to emotions. Emotions, he warned, “will tomorrow have finally made our universe into a stinking pit of corpses.” Febvre was convinced that those who wished to understand political upheavals like Nazism or mass atrocities like the Holocaust would have to think carefully about the emotions involved. That is what this book sets out to do (1).

Here, one is reminded not only of the important heritage of the *Annales* School, of Febvre, Marc Bloch, Fernand Braudel and Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie (the latter the subject of a



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forthcoming book by Mike Davis), but of the challenge posed by the ‘bringing the state back in’ school scholars, such as Michael Mann. Almost thirty years ago, Michael Mann (1990), noting Wallerstein’s emphasis on violence and coercion in Volume III of his *Modern World-System*, called upon him to incorporate questions of violence theoretically into world-systems analysis. At a time when debate rages about the possible resurgence of neo-fascism, xenophobic nationalist racism and white supremacy, and fundamentalisms of all sorts across the time and space of the global system, this work, and these quotes provide important food for thought for scholars and activists.

Budholm and Lang note that, “Mass atrocity is an umbrella term,” involving “war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide” (1). We now have powerful accounts of a whole range of mass atrocities, from the island of Melos during the Peloponnesian War to the My Lai massacre by U.S. forces in Vietnam, to the very different accounts of the Holocaust in the work of scholars such as Raul Hilberg, Zygmunt Bauman and Michael Mann. Yet until recently, the study of emotions formed only a small part of this analysis. Here, as Bundhold and Lang note, one can overestimate the role of emotions as causal factors – as Stanley Milgram’s obedience experiments demonstrated – yet also underestimate them, by portraying the Nazi genocide as simply machine-like, bereft of emotions. The perspective forwarded here instead is that “emotions are not only involved in the face-to face and more spontaneous forms of killing; emotions also help shape the very structures and ideologies of genocide and other gross human rights violations” (3). Here, the voices of Febvre and Orwell call to scholars today.

Despite the long neglect of the subject, the study of emotions has gained ground over the past few decades; one thinks for example of the brilliant work of philosopher and classicist polymath Martha Nussbaum, often discussed in this work, notably her *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (2001). As analyzed in Part 1: Causes and Dynamics, these questions intersect with others also increasingly discussed today: the question of whether and to what extent emotions and rationality or irrationality, however defined, govern human behavior in general, and the behavior of those perpetrating mass atrocities in particular. Budholm and Lang note one narrative as told in the work of theorists from Weber, Freud, Elias and Foucault, the sublimation of emotions through the civilizing process, contrasting this with work on human decision-making by Jonathan Haidt and Daniel Kahneman.

David Konstan, in “Mass Exterminations and the History of Emotions: The View from Classical Antiquity,” shows the combination of emotions and purposive or instrumentally rational and irrational motives that animated Greco-Roman imperialism, including Julius Caesar’s delight in his decade-long campaign against Gaul, in which over a million were slain, perhaps a quarter of the population, not to mention those enslaved. As Konstan notes, one is inevitably reminded of Thucydides’ famous Melian Dialogue. Yet, here Konstan (26) highlights the distinctiveness of antiquity from that of modernity, underscoring that “...Benjamin H. Isaac, in his monumental study, *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity*, remarks that, despite ‘a good deal of bloodshed, mass murder, and cruelty,’ in the ancient world there was ‘no racist society as such, nor any systematic racist policy leading to mass murder as seen in the twentieth century.’” This,

of course, is consonant with world-system arguments, about the modernity of racism, and the related pioneering work on older phenomena of sexism and women's oppression. Certainly, the role and range of emotions, including rage, love, hate, pity, come full force into the literature of classical antiquity, from the work of Seneca and the Stoics to Homer's *Odyssey* and *Iliad*, to the plays of Sophocles and Aeschylus, to Virgil's *Aeneid*. The patriarchal aspects of this age have been explored too in landmark works such as Eva C. Keuls (1985) *The Reign of the Phallus: Sexual Politics in Ancient Athens*.

In Neta C. Crawford's excellent contribution, she forwards the thesis that there are some basic ingredients for genocide, including the presence of specific emotions towards the other, including the belief in the other as a threat, and ideas about the use of force to deal with the problem, although her thesis about this being accompanied by crises involving regime legitimacy seems doubtful. One thinks of Christopher Browning's classic *Ordinary Men*, republished with a new introduction in 2017, which emphasizes the central role of group solidarity, rather than simply hatred towards the other, as a motivating factor of those who participated in the killings, something Johannes Lang highlights here. Crawford also draws in interesting ways on the landmark work on the neuroscience of body and mind, to use layperson's terms, of Bessel A. van der Kolk's (2014) *The Body Keeps the Score*, whose utility for the study of mass atrocity, to my knowledge, has not been heretofore explored. Crawford goes onto survey genocides in Rwanda, the Holocaust, and settler genocide in South West Africa and the Americas. Yet Crawford (63) ends by raising the issue of the impact of climate change on possible future catastrophes, implicitly questioning the importance of her own necessary ingredients for committing mass atrocities in the future:

Is the fact that Americans, who emit the most greenhouse gases per capita...are willing to allow the destruction of the planet's species and the immiseration and deaths of millions who will be displaced and literally drowned by climate change, a crime on the order of genocide? There is no hate here; there is ignorance and indifference...Are we...the equivalent of the bystanders, or worse, the "ordinary Germans" of the Nazi era?

Johannes Lang (67-68) brilliantly continues the focus on emotions, underscoring the role of pride and 'hardness,' so essential in Nazi ideology, in its wars of aggression and the European Holocaust, citing the famous quote: "Most of you," SS leader Heinrich Himmler told his men, "know what it means to see a hundred corpses lie side by side, or five hundred, or a thousand. To have stuck this out, and – excepting cases of human weakness – to have kept our integrity, that is what has made us hard." Lang underscores the cult of militaristic action in Nazi Germany, the importance of ideological commitment to the goals of the Fuhrer and Nazi and German community, the pride in violence, and the humiliation of Germany's defeat in World War I, and the fertile grounds it gave for the rise of anti-Semitism and German fascism. These are themes underscored too, as Lang notes, in Norbert Elias's (1996) brilliant study, *The Germans*, in which the idea of a writing a biography of Germany as a state-society in the global system is forwarded.

The obverse side of this violence and pride, as Lang notes, was emphasized by Theodor Adorno and others, namely the inability of the Nazis and the German people to identify and emphasize with Others, their victims. As Lang intimates, the recent revelations of the photograph albums of Auschwitz, depicting smiling members of the Nazi community, having a grand old time, represents even more troubling images confronting humanity in the 21st century.

Arne Johan Vetlesen (105) returns to the following part of Himmler's infamous speech, where he goes onto say: "We had the moral right, we had the duty towards our people, to destroy this people that wanted to destroy us...All in all, we can say that we have carried out this most difficult of tasks in a spirit of love for our people. And we have suffered no harm in our inner being, our soul, our character." Vetlesen critiques the recent tendency to obscure the evil being done by a focus on how perpetrators saw their violence as virtuous, noting here the evasion of emotions such as aggression and the omitting of the lack of empathy in their analysis.

Vetlesen (110-111) goes on to underscore that the central mechanism of cruelty and denial is the preclusion of the pain and "the perspective of the other," going onto note that the heart of "immorality is the exclusion of the Other". This is a theme emphasized by Jewish survivors of the Holocaust, and related theorists and philosophers, such as Primo Levi, Theodor Adorno and Emmanuel Levinas. More recently these questions have been explored in powerful ways by Gloria Anzaldúa (2012) in *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*; Drucilla Cornell (1992) in her "The Ethical Message of Negative Dialectics" in *The Philosophy of the Limit*; Seyla Benhabib (2004) in *The Rights of Others: Alien, Residents and Citizens*; Mae Ngai (2014) in *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America*, and by other authors of many related studies of coloniality.

In Part II, focusing on emotional responses, Adriana Cabarero brings out further the enormous insights of Primo Levi, as well as Jean Amery, and Hannah Arendt in trying to grapple with the magnitude of modern genocide and totalitarianism. Cabarero discusses the experience of victims and survivors in the camps, chronicled in classic works such as Levi's (1988) *The Drowned the Saved* and *Survival in Auschwitz* (1993), as well as 9/11, the U.S. invasion of Iraq and descent into murderous violence and torture there, as seen in the images of Abu Ghraib.

Ditte Marie Munch-Juriscic goes on to offer a contextual analysis of the many forms of disgust, both as facilitating mass killing, and in expressions of revulsion in response in to it, trying to offer a complex multi-faceted analysis of its role in the context of analyzing some of the leading works on violence and atrocity, notably Jonathan Glover's (2012) *Humanity: A Moral History of the Twentieth Century*. Other chapters explore the role of survivor shame, embarrassment, hope, trauma and humanitarian intervention.

This is a powerful collection, and ought to be an intellectual call to arms as the politics of the global system raises the spectre of the return of hatreds, xenophobic nationalism and othering, white supremacy and cruel fundamentalisms in many different varieties, reminiscent in some ways of the period that saw the rise of fascism, despite important differences. The book does not, as a whole, try to analyze these phenomena from the global vantage point, the privileged point of analysis for many world-system studies, which leads to a burning question—the relative lack of

analysis of the resurgence of the right and the spectre of fascism in global terms. Here one thinks especially of the work of Karl Polanyi. As Walter Goldfrank (1978) pointed out long ago, “despite the criticism, *The Great Transformation* remains the fundamental starting point for a world-systems analysis of fascism, as remarkable for its insights as it is for the neglect which others have shown it.”

Today, world-system analysts have an obligation to try to develop the enormously insightful work of its own forerunners and leading thinkers, especially in our analyses of racism, sexism, misogyny, homophobia, Islamaphobia, Orientalism, Occidentalism, anti-Semitism, and other hatreds and emotions, in the context of world-system trends and trajectories. The 21st century world-system seems to be hurtling towards ever-greater hatreds and poisonous emotions and catastrophes; the challenge for us remains to look at the face of Medusa without turning into stone and try to gleam future ways forward.

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