



BOOK REVIEW

Martin Shaw, *What is Genocide?* (Polity Press, 2007)

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Professor Martin Shaw contributes greatly to the sociological study of genocide. *What is Genocide?* addresses how we should understand the idea of genocide from a contemporary and historical perspective. Since the adoption of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide on December 9, 1948, by the United Nations General Assembly, the definition of genocide has not changed. Professor Shaw analyzes reasons why the definition has not changed for over sixty years as well as why the definition should change to include unprotected groups in contemporary conflicts.

Shaw brings to light on page 10 that during the era of the Genocide Convention, no attention was paid to sociological or criminological perspectives of the crime of genocide. The legalists in 1948 only defined what genocide was, by definition; they were not concerned with reasons contributing to genocide. This is because reasons, legally referred to as motives, are not an element of a crime. However, social scientists are more concerned with limiting acts of genocide, and to accomplish this task, we must study the “extenuating circumstances” of genocide behavior.

An analysis of the reasons why unprotected groups were left out of the genocide definition is covered in the second chapter. Since 1948, political and social scientists, including, Steven Katz, Helen Fein, Frank Chalk and Kurt Jonassohn, and Israel W. Charney, have attempted to offer their own definitions of genocide to include other minority groups, such as those based on political affiliation and gender. However, rather than expanding the definition of genocide, the term “crimes against humanity” has expanded rapidly over recent years and usually includes widespread and systematic crimes against all civilians. The definition of genocide as defined by the Convention has remained untouched since 1948.

Professor Shaw eloquently describes the “Maximal Standard” and “Minimal Euphemism” concerning genocide. According to Shaw, the “maximal standard” is the Holocaust, since it is the most notorious genocide ever committed. The average layperson more likely will think of the Holocaust when considering genocide. It has been the most studied, written about, and taught genocide over the last half-century. Acts during the Holocaust contributing to the “Final Solution” were so inhumanly shocking that they are the immediate cause of the Genocide Convention. All genocides since have been compared to the Holocaust establishing it as the “maximal standard” when measuring genocides.

The “minimal euphemism” refers to the concept “ethnic cleansing” that recently became popular after the Balkan wars in 1990s. There are ongoing debates as to whether ethnic cleansing should fall under the crime of genocide. More commonly social scientists take the position that it should. Genocide requires the special intent to destroy one of the protected groups. As

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William Schabas has noted, forcibly transferring a group from a territory through ethnic cleansing may prove that the perpetrators only wished for the group to be moved rather than destroyed.

Professor Shaw writes that there are “many ‘-cides’ to genocide” and there may be room for cultural destruction in addition to physical destruction of a protected group. As the debate continues whether ethnic cleansing is or is not genocide, it will remain the “minimal euphemism” of the crime of genocide. Ethnic cleansing can also be genocide if it includes the intent to destroy, in whole or in part. Yet, without the special intent to destroy, ethnic cleansing is covered under crimes against humanity until there is universal acceptance that there are “many ‘-cides’ to genocide.”

One critique of *What is Genocide?* emerges regarding Professor Shaw’s attempt to validate that the definition of genocide from the Convention does not include the category of “civilian.” It is true that the protected groups will usually consist of civilians; however, it would be a mistake to attempt to differentiate between individuals during wartime and peacetime as victims of genocide. The current definition recognizes that genocide can occur during war and peace and victims can be civilian or military. For example, killing 10,000 prisoners of war (POWs), which is a military war status, during wartime, can arguably be genocide if the prisoners were killed specifically as a result of their ethnicity or nationality. Therefore, the definition of genocide includes all individuals, including civilian and military status, during times of peace and war.

In chapter 8, Professor Shaw excellently attempts to reconcile the sociological element that is often included in the mind of *genocidaires*. *Genocidaires* rarely acknowledge they are killing civilians, as they refer to their victims in inhuman terms such as “cockroaches.” This enables or even motivates perpetrators to carry out genocides. Prior to killing, dehumanization has usually taken place. Shaw also points out that, on the other hand, *genocidaires* often acknowledge through methods of killing that they are killing civilians. For example, during the Holocaust, often the killings were not conducted through warfare, but through mass executions, including women and children, and crematories.

Overall, this book is an excellent read for any student learning about genocide. Throughout *What is Genocide?* Martin Shaw intellectually stimulates the reader with descriptive sociological perspectives and arguments concerning genocide. Too often has the study of genocide been limited to law. Genocide is a crime and needs to be studied more in the fields of sociology and criminology. *What is Genocide?* is a perfect book to teach genocide at both the undergraduate and graduate level, as well as for anyone with a specific interest in the topic.