

## BOOK REVIEW

**Purify and Destroy:  
The Political Uses of Massacre and Genocide**  
[Jacques Semelin, 2007, New York: Columbia University Press,  
400 pp., \$29.50 Hardcover]

Steven K. Baum

There is a popular movement in genocide research to portray genocide as arising from anything other than hate (e.g. Moshman, 2005). From a top-down perspective, this makes sense. After all, the case has been made that there are instrumental (e.g. land grabs) and social psychological considerations—careerism, social bonding—as well as ideological and contextual considerations that all contribute to the genocide recipe and have little to do with hate per se. Yet the current trend makes it seem as if hate crimes and old ethnic enmities do not exist.

There is another approach—one which gets short shrift and may be equally important. Part of the reason for the less-recognized approach may be that it is psychological in nature and not well understood, even though it has been hinted at time and again since Helen Fein (1979) found a statistical relationship between public opinion and the number of Jews killed in the Holocaust.

Enter political scientist Jacques Semelin of the Centre d'Etudes et de Recherches Internationales and his views of genocide from the bottom up—the latest contribution to furthering an understanding of the relationship between social fantasy and genocide.

Semelin's tenet is simple. Genocide has to do with identity fostered through fantasy, and the maintenance of a sense of identity via a sense of purity and security. The idea that political conflict has its basis in shared beliefs is not new. The notion that we kill en masse in order to maintain our collective unconscious fantasy *is* new—at least in genocide studies.

If Semelin sounds somewhat psychoanalytic, that is because he is. The book offers additional background in psychology, though the author seems to spend a little too much time reviewing key aspects of Freudian literature, invariably settling on the wrong analyst. He would have been better off focusing directly on the writings of British pediatrician Donald W. Winnicott (1971), whose ideas of transition experience lend themselves to a better concept of the unconscious-fantasy-to-social-reality bridge. As well, too little time is spent addressing Tajfel's social identity theory, and one

wonders why the decision was made not to explore it more thoroughly, given that Tajfel's theory is the most widely accepted in the field.

On the other hand, nobody but Semelin is addressing genocide psychology with this depth. To wit,

When a person has experienced severe shock or stress a post-traumatic state can often be diagnosed. By extension we can speak of a "collective trauma" for a nation or a community whose identity seems profoundly altered by the crisis or crises assailing it. This community's basic point of reference, which causes its members to say "we Germans" or "we Hutus" seems destabilized. It is these imaginary foundations of their institutions, to use Cornelius Castoriais' terminology, that is in crisis. These imaginary constructs, which give meaning to those who share them and to what brings them together, are situated far out of reach from technical regulations. But suddenly they no longer seem to operate. That which allowed people to say "us" is not there. The "us" becomes a grievance, a wound, an affliction. (p. 15)

There are other noteworthy aspects to Semelin's theory. He is at present the only one to address the social transmission of hate beliefs, how susceptible we are to the cultural or social narrative, and how a good demagogue then can sway the collective imagination. Hatred is viewed as a socially "constructed passion" and the product of its promoters, traveling by the circumstances which encourage it to spread. Semelin doesn't address exactly those circumstances since they vary from culture to culture, but social network analysts know what they are—the same mechanisms that make rumors flow and foster beliefs in the boogey man also make us hate (Baum, 2008).

Semelin doesn't broach that subject. He is more concerned about the bigger picture and implicating the pathology of the collective unconscious, as well as how we kill en masse and why. He has chosen to focus on purification and is bang on in terms of the conclusions he draws. He says that there is no real hope of changing humankind's psyche. We are neither killer apes nor easily influenced peaceful hippies, so we have to create the social mechanisms to forestall, minimize, and effectively handcuff ourselves to forestall our tendency to kill others. That there is no happy ending makes Semelin's case all the more poignant. In the end, *Purify and Destroy* is simply the most comprehensive book available on the psychology of genocide and is well worth the read.

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