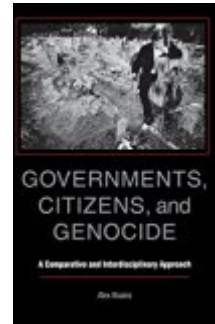


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Alex Alvarez. *Governments, Citizens, and Genocide: A Comparative and Interdisciplinary Approach*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001. 224 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-33849-5.

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Published on H-Genocide (April, 2002)



A Thoughtful Introduction

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Alex Alvarez appears to have two central goals in this book. His explicit purpose was to explain why social scientists have paid relatively little attention to the problem of genocide (p. 5). His implicit aim was to delineate the current state of the field in light of contemporary events in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia. Alvarez is highly successful in his implicit objective, but his explanations of why social scientists have not focused on genocide are less satisfying.

Alvarez indicts those academics who have neglected the Holocaust: "In some ways, the effect of this academic neglect may be comparable to the damage done by those who deny the Holocaust. While I am by no means suggesting a moral equivalency between those who, for various reasons, omit reference to genocide and those who actively work to mislead and repress truth, I am asserting that both behaviors have somewhat similar results. That is, the failure of social scientists to adequately address the study of genocide contributes to perceptions and attitudes that, through exclusion, minimize the importance and significance of genocide. That is essentially what Holocaust denial is all about" (pp. 3). He adds that "the failure to study genocide, to call attention to this form of crime, to make conscious and self-conscious choices about the objects of research attention, results in a diminished sense of coherency and urgency, thus facilitating its perpetration (p. 3) These sort of insights justify the lengthy citation from Alvarez because they suggest

how fruitful his interdisciplinary approach can be and how timely this type of analysis is in a post-post-modern world.

The introduction is full of stimulating interdisciplinary observations. For example, Alvarez explores why social scientists interested in crime and criminology have not studied genocide, claiming that U.S.-based academics prefer to see genocide as "a foreign phenomenon, exclusive to other societies and other times" (p. 4). Sadly, despite having a chapter entitled "A Crime by Any Other Name" (pp. 28-55), Alvarez never devotes his full attention to the subject of what criminologists and other social scientists interested in crime might be able to contribute to understandings of the perpetrators or origins of genocide.

Following the introduction are two chapters that set out the various definitions of genocide and the historical parameters of the phenomenon (pp. 10-55). Heavily dependent on existing work by historians and sociologists, this part of the book is relatively thorough, if a bit tedious for those familiar with the subject. Alvarez's treatment of the material is competent and generally uncontroversial, rather than critical and innovative.

The strength of this book is the section where Alvarez gets out of the past and the realm of definitions or theory and turns to more contemporary instances of genocide. Thematically, this part of the work is organized loosely around Raul Hilberg's evocation of "perpetrators, victims, bystanders." [1] The chapter "Deadly

Regimes" (pp. 56-85) focuses on the contemporary legal environment along with the emergence of genocide in the former Yugoslavia, Rwanda and Cambodia. In "Lethal Cogs" (pp. 86-108), Alvarez's most effective chapter, he explores organizations such as the military along with the manner of recruitment of those involved in committing genocidal activities. At the level of the individual, Alvarez usefully applies "neutralization theory" as developed by Sykes and Matza to understand how individuals could "accommodate" genocide (p. 114).[2] Finally, Alvarez concludes his book with a thoughtful, but not very in-depth chapter investigating various practical ways to prevent genocides from occurring in the future.

Alvarez is to be commended for keeping jargon to a minimum and writing clear, lucid prose, even when discussing complex definitions or theoretical problems. Reviewers frequently wish that authors had covered additional topics. That observation is particularly relevant here because Alvarez's text is only 152 pages long. The \$29.95 price seems to suggest that Indiana University Press could have afforded greater length for Alvarez to work with, particularly since he clearly had more to add to the debate. What would have been welcome was further analysis of contemporary genocides and the additional application of the concepts of criminology, psychology and other social sciences to problems of genocide that have generally been explored solely by historians or those offering an autobiographical or literary account of genocide.

Despite these quibbles, Alvarez has written a

thoughtful and, in a few places, provocative book. His book could be used to bring advanced students up to date on current interpretations or as an introduction to the problem of genocide for social scientists. By bringing the conclusions of historians and the perspective of more literary interpretations to the attention of social scientists, Alvarez has performed a useful service. Although Alvarez's recitation of social science approaches to genocide are potentially interesting to historians or other audiences outside the social sciences, this book does not devote sufficient attention to taking his conclusions back to the source of his insights. In short, this book is only interdisciplinary in one direction. Important work remains to be done in bridging the disciplinary gaps identified by Alvarez. With luck, Alvarez himself will take up the gauntlet he has dropped.

Notes

[1]. Raul Hilberg, *Perpetrators, Victims, Bystanders*, (New York: Harper Perennial, 1992).

[2]. Gresham M. Sykes and David Matza, "Techniques of Neutralization: A Theory of Delinquency," *American Sociological Review* 22 (1957): 664-670.

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Citation: Jeff Horn. Review of Alvarez, Alex, *Governments, Citizens, and Genocide: A Comparative and Interdisciplinary Approach*. H-Genocide, H-Net Reviews. April, 2002.

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