

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Abram De Swaan. *Killing Compartments: The Mentality of Mass Murder*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015. 344 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-20872-6.

Reviewed by David Simon (Yale University)

Published on H-Diplo (October, 2015)

Commissioned by Seth Offenbach



Killing Compartments: The Mentality of Mass Murder is an ambitious book. The Dutch sociologist Abram de Swaan takes on a core puzzle—if not the core puzzle—of the political mass murder of civilians: why do such calamitous events happen so frequently even though norms against killing exist between nations, within nations, and among individuals? De Swaan focuses on “mass annihilation—that is, massive, asymmetric violence at close range, where killers and victims are in direct confrontation” (p. 5). He excludes combat between military forces that might otherwise fit that description, as well as remote targeting of noncombatants, as in the detonation of nuclear weapons over Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The short version of de Swaan’s answer is that there is a process taking place at each of the levels by which perpetrators and bystanders cordon off the victims from the protection of ordinary and prevailing norms. Once placed in a separate compartment from the rest of society, victims are vulnerable. Even otherwise “ordinary” members of society can engage in deadly violence against them; equally, even “ordinary” members of society can ignore the destruction of those who have been compartmentalized.

At aggregate levels of analysis, de Swaan’s thesis, elegantly established and convincingly supported, reflects an established tradition in genocide studies. In particular, when de Swaan considers episodes of mass annihilation at what he calls the “macrosociological,” “mesosociological,” and “microsociological” levels, his theoretical work and case studies comport with the conventional wisdom. At the “macrosociological” level, which refers to “shared memories, collective mentalities, and similar dispositions,” de Swaan takes an evolutionary view (p. 203). As technology from agriculture to state con-

trol improved, any individual’s circle of concern—that is those with whom one shares a common destiny versus with those with whom one does not—widened. But even with the gradual incorporation of new communities within the circle, those falling outside—in particular indigenous populations vis-à-vis the metropolitan state—gain no normative protection. Here de Swaan echoes theories of the nation and state, such as those attributed to Benedict Anderson (in *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* [1991]) and Charles Tilly (for example, with Gabriel Ardant in *The Formation of Nation-States in Western Europe* [1975]). De Swaan also acknowledges Michael Mann’s *The Dark Side of Democracy: Explaining Ethnic Cleansing* (2005), both to illustrate compartmentalization at the macrosociological level (in democracies in particular) and to identify its insufficiency as an endpoint of analysis.

De Swaan insists that one must also consider the “mesosociological” level, where state or sub-state regimes develop institutions that serve to compartmentalize society, “creating an ever sharper separation between the regime’s people and the target people” (p. 211). The institutions (in a sociological sense) in question include propaganda and legal measures, all in the service of segregation. Although de Swaan does not refer to Barbara Harff’s publications “Early Warning of Humanitarian Crises: Sequential Models and the Role of Accelerators” and “No Lessons Learned from the Holocaust? Assessing Risks of Genocide and Political Mass Murder since 1955” and Gregory H. Stanton’s short essay “The Eight Stages of Genocide,” there is a clear resonance.[1] De Swaan essentially describes several of Stanton’s eight stages—“dehumanization,” “organization,” “polarization,” and “preparation”—in various shapes and forms. De

Swaan does cite Daniel Goldhagen's book *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (1996), which also operates at this level of analysis. Indeed, the subtitle implies that "Germans," as a nation and having been primed by macrosociological forces like culture and history, engaged in compartmentalization when they accepted the Nazi regime's framing of social problems in terms of "the Jewish question."

But, argues de Swaan, that level of analysis is not complete either. "Microsociological" processes, referring to how "people function within the context of these institutions," including how perpetrators and bystanders sort themselves out, appreciate their responsibilities, and respond to incentives to perform accordingly, must also be understood (p. 204). At this level, the "compartments" exist, and people begin to behave with reference to the different statuses those within them are accorded. De Swaan explicitly connects this line of reasoning with the situationalist school of mass violence studies. He discusses the Milgram experiments, as described by social psychologist Stanley Milgram in his article "Behavioral Study of Obedience" and by historian Christopher Browning in *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (1992), at length, noting how both show that some people act monstrously when they feel the situation permits—indeed, warrants—that they do so.[2]

Yet, for de Swaan, even microsociological situationism falls short of an explanation. De Swaan is at his most innovative when he probes Milgram and Browning for questions left unanswered—or, indeed, unasked. De Swaan cites the common finding that between roughly two-thirds of actual subjects in Milgram experiments comply with the (fake) experimenters' instructions to deliver (fake) pain-inflicting shocks to (fake) subjects. For de Swaan, the behavior of the other third, the "naysayers," is just as interesting (p. 244). That some subjects did not follow orders suggests that despite the power of the situation, agency is not altogether obviated. Concludes de Swaan, "the hidden side of the Milgram's findings (is that) personal dispositions are essential in determining what people do when a person in authority presses them to badly hurt (and possibly kill) another person" (p. 25). Likewise, of Browning's subjects, de Swaan notes, "the men of Battalion 101 coped in quite different ways with the situation they found themselves in" (p. 223). While the final and aggregate result did not subvert Police Battalion 101's annihilationist ambitions, Browning's own study shows that different individuals do appear to internalize and rationalize their task differently, and at dif-

ferent speeds. All too few opted out entirely, but some indeed did.

It is this evidence of agency that leads de Swaan to call for greater focus on the "psychosociological" level, which addresses the "differences in behavior by people in the same situation ... in terms of differences in their personal disposition" (p. 214). Here, too, there are precedents: one example is James Waller's *Becoming Evil: How Ordinary People Commit Genocide and Mass Killing* (2002), even if, per de Swaan, it derives a significant portion of its assessment of the disposition to commit atrocities from sociological and situational factors. De Swaan contends that there is a process (and a corresponding state) of "dysmentalization" that reaches beyond the simple psychological categories of psychopathy and antisocial absence of empathy (which, at any rate, would appear to occur far less frequently in societies than the rate of perpetrators in mass violence episodes). The term refers to the reversal of "mentalization," which is essentially the process of acquiring the capacity to become compassionate. De Swaan identifies this process as one that occurs at both the macrosocial level (chapter 3) and the psychological one (chapter 8).

Dysmentalization describes what happens when super-psychological processes place segments of the population into compartments and beyond the reach of empathy. De Swaan writes that "Genocidaires at work in their killing compartments may often look like psychopaths, but before and after their genocidal episode, or outside the genocidal setting, they are usually quite capable of empathy and even compassion to those they consider close to them" (p. 232). Later he notes, "Like a vibrating sieve that in a sequence of slight tremors in the end separates the smaller from the larger pebbles, a succession of minor chance events may sort out the less compassionate for careers in the killing compartments while discarding those whose disposition makes them less suitable for the job. It appears as if personal choice plays no role in the process, and yet, at every turn there was a choice, at least with hindsight" (p. 235). Thus, per de Swaan, the capacity to dysmentalize varies across the population, and perhaps across populations. Differences in child-rearing, and in penetrative capacity of institutions like church, state, and school may provide some basis for those differences.

De Swaan admits that there is little direct empirical support for the microsociological component of this hypothesis. However, that fact stems not from the existence of countervailing evidence, but from the absence of re-

search on microsociological factors in general. Writes de Swaan, “what is overdue is an assessment of the importance of personal biography, of the individual dispositions that may lead to genocidal actions” (p. 265). Whether one is inclined to agree with de Swaan at the theoretical level, his assessment of the state of research is spot on. The implied research agenda is an important one for genocide studies.

Overall, the attempt to build a unifying theory of mass annihilation is laudable. Despite a couple of omissions, as noted above, de Swaan is well versed in the genocide studies literature, while he refreshingly draws in insights from other fields, including psychology and the evolutionary sociobiology. De Swaan is transparent about what can and cannot be inferred from the available evidence; indeed, he makes important inferences from precisely that.

The organization of the book is a little curious, in that two empirical chapters—chapter 5 on Rwanda and chapter 7 on other “case histories” (p. vii)—sit somewhat unmoored amid the theoretical work of the others. Both chapters do reveal elements of compartmentalization at work, although the Rwanda chapter comes before much of the theorization (laid out in chapters 6 and 8) has taken place, which weakens the potential of the case—which is well developed on its own terms—to illustrate the theory. Chapter 7 features twenty cases (by my count), categorized into four different modes: “Conqueror’s Frenzy,” “Rule by Terror,” “Loser’s Triumph,” and “Megapogroms.” The categorization scheme is interesting but not necessarily connected to the broader theories of compartmentalization that are the focus of the book. The chapter does illustrate how compartmentalization operated, and served mass violence, in each of the cases. The inclusion of cases outside of the United Nations’ definition of “genocide,” such as Joseph Stalin’s Soviet Union and Mao Zedong’s China, is both enlightening and unproblematic (as it is not the author’s intention to hew to that definition). Other cases seem ill-fit to their category; for example, the episodes of mass annihilation in Eastern Bosnia,

including the genocide at Srebrenica, do not strike me as an instance of “loser’s triumph,” as the Bosnian Serb militias believed in mid-1995 that they could complete their mission to overrun Bihac, Gorazde, Srebrenica, Sarajevo, Tuzla, and Zepa by the end of the year.[3] Still, the scope of these examples, taken collectively, is impressive. I only wonder if their placement elsewhere in the organization of the book might have served de Swaan’s purposes more effectively.

Overall, *The Killing Compartments* is an excellent contribution to the field of genocide studies. By proposing a difficult, yet viable, realm of inquiry into perpetrator psychology, it offers a break to the logjam of situationalist thinking that has left this main current of genocide studies somewhat stagnant in recent years. I hope it will encourage scholars to take on the difficult task of understanding participant motivations through original research with perpetrators.

Notes

[1]. Barbara Harff, “Early Warning of Humanitarian Crises: Sequential Models and the Role of Accelerators,” in *Preventive Measures: Building Risk Assessment and Crisis Early Warning Systems*, ed. John L. Davies and Ted Robert Gurr (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1998), 70-78; Barbara Harff, “No Lessons Learned from the Holocaust? Assessing Risks of Genocide and Political Mass Murder since 1955,” *American Political Science Review* 97, no. 1 (2003): 57-73; and Gregory H. Stanton, “The Eight Stages of Genocide,” *Genocide Watch* (1998), <http://www.genocidewatch.org/genocide/8stagesofgenocide.html>.

[2]. Stanley Milgram, “Behavioral Study of Obedience,” *The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 67, no. 4 (1963): 371-378; and Christopher Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992).

[3]. Ivo Daalder describes this in his article “Decision to Intervene: How the War in Bosnia Ended,” *Foreign Service Journal* 75, no. 12 (December 1998): 24-31.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-diplo>

Citation: David Simon. Review of De Swaan, Abram, *Killing Compartments: The Mentality of Mass Murder*. H-Diplo, H-Net Reviews. October, 2015.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=44308>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.