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Genocide as Social Practice

Daniel Feierstein, Douglas Andrew Town, Alexander Laban Hinton

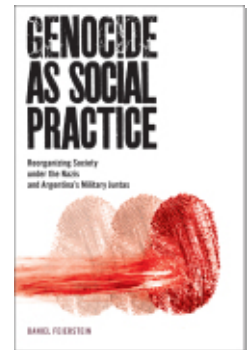
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FOREWORD

In recent years, the field of genocide studies has begun a critical reassessment. As this process has taken place, concepts and cases, old and new, have come into dialogue and important conversations and debates have begun. Several of these discussions emerge in Daniel Feierstein's *Genocide as Social Practice: Reorganizing Society under the Nazis and Argentina's Military Juntas*, which constitutes a key contribution to this turn in our understanding of genocide.

The title highlights the book's challenge. Genocide, it tells us, may centrally involve not just the mass destruction of a group of marginalized "others," as conventional understandings hold, but a profound internal reorganization of society amidst fear and terror. Viewing genocide as a social practice opens up an entirely different way of understanding such violence, one initially suggested by Raphael Lemkin, the person who coined the term. Not surprisingly, Professor Feierstein discusses Lemkin's work at length, even as he develops his own arguments about the nexus of genocide, power, and social life.

Professor Feierstein's book offers yet another provocation as it juxtaposes the Argentinian and Nazi cases. For many people, the destruction of European Jewry stands as the exemplar of genocide, a notion epitomized, through metonymy, by industrial mass murder at Auschwitz. *Genocide as Social Practice* argues that the 1976–1983 violence in Argentina, during which perhaps 20,000 people perished and many more suffered in fear and terror, was a case of genocide comparable—not in the numbers killed but in the social effects of the violence—to the Nazi reorganization of Germany and occupied Europe.

Professor Feierstein makes this argument through a detailed comparison of both cases. In doing so, he suggests that, like Auschwitz and other Nazi death camps, concentration camps in Argentina may also shed light on the genocidal process in general, and genocide as a social practice in particular.

His challenge to our understanding of genocide emerges in other ways as well. Written as a series of trials in Argentina were underway, *Genocide as Social Practice* asks us to take a closer look not just at our commonsense understandings of genocide, but also at the definition given in the 1948 United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.

This widely used legal definition specifies that genocide only takes place when a racial, ethnic, national, or religious group has been targeted for destruction. Political, economic, social, and other groups were excluded after much debate at the United Nations because they were said to be “mutable” categories. As a consequence, the events in Argentina—and other countries in Latin America and elsewhere—have often been described as political violence or, sometimes, “politicide.”

Professor Feierstein’s book asks us to reconsider such assumptions. Drawing inspiration, in part, from Lemkin, he argues in *Genocide as Social Practice* that the notion of “national groups” is much broader than conventionally understood and may encompass the destruction of political and other social groups heretofore excluded from the genocide studies canon. This claim significantly broadens the purview of genocide and is sure to generate debate.

First published in Spanish in 2007, *Genocide as Social Practice* has already had a major impact in parts of Latin America, particularly in Argentina, where Professor Feierstein is based. His ideas and arguments have informed legal debates there as lawyers, jurists, and members of civil society have debated whether or not the events that took place under the military junta can be considered genocide.

In a landmark decision in 2006 Judge Carlos Rozanski ruled that this violence constituted genocide—a decision that subsequently found support in other domestic courts before Judge Rozanski ruled in a second case in 2012 that the violence “unequivocally” qualified as genocide. The debate continues in Argentina. Now, with the publication of this translation of *Genocide as Social Practice*, it will commence in the English-speaking world as well.

While not everyone will agree with all of Professor Feierstein’s arguments, readers will need to consider them seriously and, in so doing, reexamine their own preconceptions about genocide. Like the best of books, *Genocide as Social Practice* challenges its readers to engage in such critical thinking.

—Alexander Hinton, Center for the Study of Genocide
and Human Rights, Rutgers University