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Book Review: *Disposable Futures: The Seduction of Violence in the Age of Spectacle*

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Disposable Futures: The Seduction of Violence in the Age of Spectacle

Brad Evans & Henry Giroux

San Francisco, CA: City Lights Books, 2015

304 pp., US\$17.95 (pbk)

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In 2011, Brad Evans, a political theorist now based at the University of Bristol in the UK, launched a web project called *Histories of Violence*.¹ It was designed to commemorate the attacks of September 11th, 2001 and to assess the development and legacy of the decade-long so called War on Terror that ensued. In the years since its launch, Evans has collaborated with intellectuals and artists from all over the world to produce an excellent resource for interpreting violence in the contemporary age. Most recently, the contributors to the web project have focussed on the phenomenon of what they call *disposable lives*. In Evans' words: "Mass violence is poorly understood if it simply refers to casualties on battlefields or continues to be framed through conventional notions of warfare. We need to interrogate the multiple ways in which entire populations are rendered disposable on a daily basis if we are to take seriously the meaning of global citizenship in the 21st Century."² It is in this spirit of interrogation that *Disposable Futures* is situated. Evans is here joined by the American-Canadian cultural critic Henry Giroux, who is well-known for his critical writings on education. It is no surprise, then, that the book, drawing on the writings of the Brazilian educator and philosopher Paulo Freire, should be so focussed on the transformative powers of critical pedagogy.

The book is prefaced with a consideration of the concept of disposability and the seductive power of violence as they appear in the writings of Primo Levi. Levi's testimonies, however, concern the 20th century experience of mass violence. The authors argue that the character of violence in our young century differs from that of its precursor. What Levi would not have anticipated, they argue, is the extent to which disposability has been "recast by the very regimes that claimed to defeat ideological fascism" (xii). Subsequently, for Evans and Giroux "there is no greater task today than to develop a critique of violence adequate to our deeply unjust, inequitable, and violent times" (3). These provocative statements are interesting for genocide studies scholars because they explicitly set out to decentre the 20th century in the history of violence. This century, which many have called the "century of genocide,"³ constitutes the large bulk of genocide studies' empirical object. The book thus provokes a consideration of whether genocide, as a specific form of violence, might have changed in character too, and what that might mean for the practice of prevention. Steps have been made in this direction already—as shown by the special issue of the *International Journal of Human Rights* edited by Jürgen Zimmerer, dedicated to thinking about the possibilities for genocide in the context of rapid climate change and rising "environmental violence"⁴—but Evans and Giroux point to a number of different paths in which these steps might be made.

The authors present something of a whirlwind tour of the contemporary analysis of violence, drawing on a wide array of thinkers from Giorgio Agamben to Howard Zinn, and suffused with

¹ www.historiesofviolence.com

² <http://www.historiesofviolence.com/#!project-overview/c184d>

³ Mario Baccianini, "A Century of Genocide," *Telos* 70 (1986): 154-161; Samuel Totten, William Parsons and Israel Charny, eds., *Century of Genocide: Critical Essays and Eyewitness Accounts*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2004); Eric Weitz, *A Century of Genocide: Utopias of Race and Nation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

⁴ See Jürgen Zimmerer, "Climate Change, Environmental Violence and Genocide," *International Journal of Human Rights* 18, no. 3 (2011): 265-280.

cultural references from the novels of Dostoyevsky to David Simon's TV drama *The Wire*. It is a book brimming with ideas which are navigated restlessly and rapidly, in a style evocative of writers like Gilles Deleuze and Slavoj Žižek, both of which are cited as influences. It does, however, lack substantive empirical content, which is generally sacrificed for polemic and rhetoric. It is in equal measure brilliant and frustrating. I will return to these critiques at a later stage in this review.

The book is not intended as a contribution to genocide studies and it would be unfair to read it as such. Indeed, it is quite obvious that the authors would reject the disciplinisation inherent in something like genocide studies, and the association of violence with its most extreme manifestation, thereby detaching it from more everyday incarnations. However, there are a number of points raised in the book that can be used for the study of genocide, two of which I will now briefly discuss. These include 1) the relationship between aesthetics, representation and ethics as they pertain to genocide and 2) how some lives come to be rendered "disposable," and specifically how "disposability" increasingly constitutes the mode of structural violence in neoliberal societies.

Evans and Giroux identify culture as a site of simultaneously the *seduction* of violence, and of the *resistance* of violence. Drawing on figures like Guy Debord, Judith Butler and Susan Sontag, they point to how violence has been commoditized in our "consumer societies." Far from acting as a spur to preventative action, images of suffering and violence may actually be fetishized and the authors argue that we have come to "desire" them, which ultimately serves as legitimation of that violence and suffering. In their discussions of horror films such as the *Saw* franchise and video games like *The Last of Us*, the authors come close to the kinds of moralizing "moral panics" about the desensitizing effects of the representations of graphic violence; there is an untenable assumption that citizens in neoliberal societies all "consume" violence in the same way. However, there are some extremely illuminating sections here too, particularly in chapter 6 ("Fascinating Fascism Revisited") and especially in the discussion of the media techniques employed by ISIS in the last chapter. For genocide studies scholars, I contend, it raises the question of how to nurture something of an "ethical gaze" (e.g. 40-41; 64) in response to images and reports of genocidal violence. How ought images of and information about distant violence and suffering, the subject matter of genocide studies, be approached when bearing in mind the authors' warnings about the objectifying, reifying and voyeuristic potentials inherent in global communications technologies? Such a question chimes with recent proposals for an increased epistemological reflexivity in writings on critical genocide studies.

But artistic representation can also be a site of resistance. Artistic work can, and frequently does, stray into the future in a way that scholarly work cannot, even when geared towards the practice of prevention. Hannah Arendt, whose attempts to understand the violence of the 20th century are among the most influential and incisive reflections on that period, raised a conundrum which applies to studies of genocide today. The Nazi concentration camps, she argued,⁵ not only demanded a rethinking of social science concepts, but threatened them entirely. The appearance of a new and unexpected phenomenon could not be understood within existing categories. The question Arendt raised was: how are we to understand the unprecedented? If it is true, as is suggested by Evans and Giroux (13), that the atrocious crimes of the 20th century were prefigured most vividly in the dystopian novels of Kafka, Orwell, and Huxley, how might contemporary dystopias point to tendencies within the present, such as Michel Houellebecq's *The Possibility of an Island* or Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*. Literature and film, for instance, can pull out certain tendencies, potentially genocidal, in the present and reflect them back to us from an imagined future. I think that this element of the book can point to ways in which genocide studies would benefit from a consideration of cultural texts, an area that has seemingly been under explored hitherto.

The book can be read as an extended polemic against the vagaries of neoliberalism. As can often be the case with this kind of writing, the authors at times run the risk of anthropomorphising neoliberalism and using the concept too liberally and unspecifically. However, more specific and nuanced definitions do emerge as the book develops. For instance, in chapter 4 ("A Promise of

⁵ Hannah Arendt, "Social Science Techniques and the Study of Concentration Camps," *Jewish Social Studies* 12, no.1 (1950): 49-64.

Violence”), they specify neoliberalism as: “much more than a system of economic organization and reasoning. It makes overt political, ethical, moral, and cultural claims to authenticate forms of individual subjectivity premised on the purity of profit maximization rationales, along with claims to rightful stewardship over the global domain and its resources as no less than a matter of security, peace, and prosperity. From this perspective, neoliberalism has always been about governance, not merely about the virtues of a self-regulating invisible hand” (84). This is the line more or less put forward by Michel Foucault in his lectures on biopolitics at the Collège de France.⁶ From this position, the authors draw on Foucault’s notion of biopolitics to elucidate the links between social death (here conceptualised as “disposability”) and physical killing, how the former is constitutive of the latter, but also operates autonomously from killing (e.g. 92). These discussions will be of great interest to those interested in structural violence and its relationship to genocide. Again chiming with emergent works in critical genocide studies, and reminiscent of the work of Nancy Scheper-Hughes and the stage-models of “the genocidal process” developed by Raul Hillberg and Gregory Stanton, the book is notable for problematizing all-too-common assumptions about the “distance” of Western societies from processes and logics of violence. They draw on a number of examples of how certain groups of people are rendered disposable through the means of “slow forms of violence” (153), even raising the spectre of genocide when talking about the contemporary examples of state violence and repression in Ferguson, Missouri (129; 137-138). Though such statements are extremely provocative, the engagement with such contemporary events gives the book an urgency and up-to-datedness that is rarely seen in scholarly work.

The tone and style adopted throughout the work is unabashedly – at times, excessively – rhetorical. There are plenty of epochal declarations, demonstrated in statements like “sociality has been reduced to an economic battleground” (110), and there is throughout an insistence that we are living in a time of unregulated global flows when rootedness in time and space matters less and less (2). The book does not have much to say about violence that is not enacted in the centres of neoliberalism or through these global economic forces, such as the ongoing conflicts in the Central African Republic or South Sudan. The book is also marked by a profound pessimism, which is not offset by a slightly vague faith in social movements or in critical pedagogy. They argue that “one of the real casualties of the post-9-11 terror wars has been the idea that we can transform the world for the better” (75). Surely, those working towards the goal of genocide prevention, or those combatting racism in places like Ferguson, indeed even Evans and Giroux themselves in writing this book, are acting with the belief that the world can be transformed for the better? Moreover, anybody looking for empirical documentation of some of the processes described and critiqued by the authors are better off looking elsewhere, for instance in Saskia Sassen’s excellent recent book *Expulsions*.⁷

As aforementioned, it would be unfair to judge this book on the basis of its contribution to genocide studies alone. However, the book will be both interesting and useful to many genocide studies scholars, particularly those intrigued by structural violence, those interested in how we might see genocide appear in new forms in the future and how cultural texts might be utilised in this endeavour, or those of the so-called critical genocide studies turn who have questioned the problematic assumptions of the comfortable distance of Western scholars from those processes that they claim to study objectively. This is the book’s greatest strength; that it will be many things to many different people. What it lacks in empirical rigour, it makes up for in the heuristic value of the sheer breadth of ideas presented.

⁶ Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-1979* (New York, NY: Picador, 2010).

⁷ Saskia Sassen, *Expulsions: Brutality and Complexity in the Global Economy* (Boston, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).