



# LUND UNIVERSITY

## Book review Ilana Feldman, *Life Lived in Relief: Humanitarian Predicaments and Palestinian Refugee Politics* (2018)

Gren, Nina

*Published in:*  
Conflict and Society

2020

[Link to publication](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Gren, N. (2020). Book review Ilana Feldman, *Life Lived in Relief: Humanitarian Predicaments and Palestinian Refugee Politics* (2018). *Conflict and Society*, 2020(6), 260-262.

*Total number of authors:*

1

### General rights

Unless other specific re-use rights are stated the following general rights apply:

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal

Read more about Creative commons licenses: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/>

### Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

LUND UNIVERSITY

PO Box 117  
221 00 Lund  
+46 46-222 00 00

### **Sacrificial Limbs: Masculinity, Disability, and Political Violence in Turkey**

By Salih Can Açıksöz. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2020. 272 pp. 19 illus. Paperback. ISBN 978-0-5203-0530-4.

An engaging, sophisticated contribution to the literature on conflict studies, political violence, medical anthropology, gender studies, and disability studies, *Sacrificial Limbs: Masculinity, Disability, and Political Violence in Turkey* is likely to put Turkey on the map of world anthropology as never before. The book is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted by Salih Can Açıksöz in Istanbul between 2005 and 2008 with working-class, disabled veterans of the Kurdish conflict. The preface powerfully expresses the quandaries of a Turkish citizen studying the most taboo subjects in Turkey: the military, the Kurdish conflict, and heteronormative masculinity.

In the introduction, Açıksöz explains why disabled veterans of the Kurdish war make such compelling subjects for the study of conflict and political violence. These conscripted soldiers inhabit a gray zone as both perpetrators and victims, being associated with society's center and its margins, what it holds sacred and what it views as abject. Through his detailed analysis of how disabled veterans become drawn into ultranationalist politics as their phantom limbs are made sacred objects like the bodies of martyrs, Açıksöz contributes to ongoing theoretical debates on sovereignty, necropolitics, hauntology, biopolitics,

and nationalism. In particular, he argues that theories on sovereignty can benefit from the literature on sacrifice, and his analysis draws productively on the seminal works of Giorgio Agamben, Achille Mbembe, René Girard, Henry Hubert, and Marcel Mauss.

In chapter 1, "Being-on-the-Mountain," Açıksöz narrates the stories of young men whose experience of military conscription, a masculine rite of passage, is radically transformed with the emergence of a Kurdish guerilla movement. These soldiers develop a new, intimate relationship with Turkey's unnamed Kurdish region as part of the counter-insurgency campaign of the 1990s. Açıksöz describes the disturbing and surreal world of the soldier on the move who "takes carcasses" of guerillas imagined as demasculinized heathen Others or masculinized females. A lengthy anecdote about smoking in the mountains conveys brilliantly soldiers' affective states, both during the conflict and afterward.

In chapter 2, "The Two Sovereignties: Masculinity and the State," Açıksöz analyzes the production of a gendered regime of citizenship in Turkey. He suggests a pact was created between the modern state and male citizens, who were privileged with masculine sovereignty in return for military service. Açıksöz goes on to argue that disability created a double crisis of masculinity and political legitimacy. He shows that the state responded by making disabled veterans gazi, a status historically associated with the wounded in religious wars. This allowed disabled veterans access to prostheses, jobs, housing credit, and



assisted conception. Açiksöz depicts the production of this new governmental regime in the orthopedic clinics of military hospitals. Moving on from the affordances of being wounded in war, chapter 3, “Of Gazis and Beggars,” analyzes disabled veterans’ complex positionality as both abject and sacralized—for just as stigmatized beggars depend on alms, stigmatized disabled veterans depend on state welfare.

In chapter 4, “Communities of Loss,” Açiksöz describes the urban spaces of the organizations that bring disabled veterans together, creating an activist movement. His ethnographic anecdotes bring to life the everyday camaraderie and humor characteristic of groups of disabled veterans. While the title of *gazi* gives them a standing akin to martyrs, Açiksöz suggests that the everyday experience of living with disabled and stigmatized bodies makes veterans feel that their gift to the state can never be repaid. This crisis of legitimacy, he argues, is resolved through the interpellation of disabled soldiers into an ultranationalist political movement. In this process, disabled veterans become aware of the value of their bodies—and absent limbs—as a political commodity. They use their victimhood to remake themselves as sacrificial heroes. He demonstrates the role that mafia TV series play in constituting these new subjectivities. Açiksöz points tellingly at the notorious figure of Polat Alemdar in *Valley of the Wolves*, who, refusing to submit even to the state, claims that he himself is the state.

Chapter 5, “Prosthetic Revenge,” focuses on the spectacular political performances associated with ultranationalist politics. Açiksöz describes the emergence in the media of the disturbing figure of the disabled veteran using his prosthetic limb to make political claims. He argues that when the government abolished the death penalty under pressure from the EU, and rescinded PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan’s execution, the ultranational movement needed a scapegoat. He suggests the murder of Armenian journalist Hrant Dink and the persecution of intellectuals and aca-

demics can be read as a search for surrogate sacrificial victims. More recently, of course, the changing policies of the Erdoğan regime and its need for the support of the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) have reduced the distance between the government and ultranationalist political movements.

In chapter 6, “Prosthetic Debts,” Açiksöz shows that with the emergence of a privatized health and welfare regime, disabled veterans became heavily indebted through the financial system. This was grist to the mill for the nationalist media, which created sensational stories about prosthesis repossession. In the epilogue, Açiksöz narrates the dizzying events that have transformed Turkey since the end of his fieldwork in 2008. Reiterating a common feeling among anthropologists working on Turkey, he suggests that what begins as ethnography soon becomes history. As much has changed in Turkey since 2002, when the Justice and Development Party (AKP) first came to power, and particularly since the coup attempt of 15 July 2016, the story ethnographers tell feels out of sync with the present. This raises questions about the convention of writing in the ethnographic present and bringing the story up to date in the conclusion or epilogue. Given the fact that contemporary anthropologists are more able to maintain their relationship to the field than in the past, multiple temporalities and changes in interpretation can more readily be incorporated into the narrative itself. This necessitates experimenting with and rethinking the conventions of writing ethnography.

Unlike many academic tomes, this book is a compelling read, as the author makes his own voice, presence, and experience felt in a palpable, visceral, and moving way. *Sacrificial Limbs: Masculinity, Disability, and Political Violence in Turkey* is particularly suited for teaching theory in anthropology, as, unlike many ethnographies, it succeeds in managing the difficult balance between ethnography and theory. Rather than feeling extrinsic to the local story, the theories of Mbembe, Agamben, Girard, Hubert, and Mauss are

used to illuminate the case study, while the case study contributes to theory at the same time, suggesting that sacrifice is central to sovereignty and that the homo sacerization of some is paralleled by the sacralization of others. Furthermore, as the author shows, the process of sacralization is itself ambiguous, with sacrificial victims beings divided within between sovereignty and abjectness.

Salih Can Açiksöz's research raises important ethical, moral, and theoretical questions about the limits of fieldwork, particularly for anthropologists coming from the societies they work in. Açiksöz and his informants come from different class and cultural backgrounds, and they inhabit radically different political universes. It would have been good to know more about how Açiksöz dealt with this in building his relationship to his informants. He does admit that he was unable to bring himself to participate in ultranationalist political protests along with the veterans. Furthermore, when Açiksöz became a signatory of the Academics for Peace petition, which critiqued the state's Kurdish war in January 2016, he realized that as someone now accused of being a "terrorist," he would have difficulty maintaining the relationships he had worked so hard to cultivate. This raises the issue of the limits of fieldwork, which includes dealing with the consequences of publishing one's work. Some readers may raise questions about Açiksöz's empathy for disabled veterans, given that they are affiliated with ultranationalist movements that condone the killing of their enemies. Yet Açiksöz has taken up a particular challenge, given that anthropologists prefer to work with the powerless with whom they often identify politically. What makes the disabled veterans fascinating, both ethnographically and theoretically, after all, is their ambiguous status as victims who long for sovereignty. Açiksöz reminds us of the importance of conducting fieldwork on the majority in Turkey: Turkish speakers of Sunni Muslim origin who identify as Turks.

*Sacrificial Limbs: Masculinity, Disability, and Political Violence in Turkey* depicts Tur-

key's Kurdish war from the perspective of Turkish conscripts. Given the fact that Kurds who are Turkish citizens are also conscripted, it would have been useful for Açiksöz to refer to this. There is also little analysis in the book of the racialization of the Kurdish conflict, even though Açiksöz does provide ethnographic anecdotes such as disabled veterans labeling strangers as Kurds based on their appearance. Despite his invaluable contribution to gender studies, Açiksöz underplays the discussion of sexuality, a subject that requires more ethnographic research in Turkey, particularly vis-à-vis violence. While Açiksöz does make some reference to the other side of the looking glass, more discussion of the complex relationship between the world of the conscripts and that of the guerillas would have been of interest. An ethnography of the Kurdish war from the perspective of the Kurds is a much-needed complement to this important book, and I hope publications by other members of this new generation of anthropologists will provide us with this vantage point.

Leyla Neyzi  
University of Glasgow

### **For the Love of Humanity: The World Tribunal on Iraq**

By Ayça Çubukçu. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018. 240 pp. 7 illus. Hardcover. ISBN 978-0-8122-5050-3.

The 2003 invasion of Iraq prompted worldwide popular opposition that was most visible in the images of millions of protestors who took to the streets. Those protestors were united in their opposition to the war but are in fact diverse in the nature of their political commitments. Among them was a group who wanted to bring justice where the "official institutions of international law failed to act" and to be the actor that will "chronicle the untold death and destruction that the war would bring . . . [and] to record the great

opposition to this war” (2) This group was a global network of activists, among whom was the author of the book under review, Ayça Çubukçu, and named itself the World Tribunal on Iraq (WTI). *For the Love of Humanity* is the result of the author’s ethnographic research and theoretical reflections on questions that emerged during the two years of this group engagement.

Çubukçu’s main argument is articulated in the fourth and last chapter and takes the form of a critique of the normative project of legal cosmopolitanism. The latter term seems to denote the establishment of a global legal order. On this basis, and given the reality that such an order can operate only within the existing (US) imperial order, Çubukçu argues that legal cosmopolitanism will only serve to legitimize the empire and its hegemonic project. She arrives at this conclusion through a theoretical discussion of arguments put forward by political, social, and legal theorists in this chapter. The book concludes by citing Issa Shivji’s statement to the final WTI session in Istanbul: “The law and its premises, the liberal values underlying law, the Law’s Empire itself needs to be interrogated and overturned.” Instead of the law as the framework for materializing global justice, Çubukçu suggests that “perhaps then, less violent and necessary may be acting for the love of humanity” (157).

The author foregrounds this critique by introducing, especially in the first two chapters, the debates among members of the WTI. In debating how best to frame the tribunal’s arguments, and sources of legitimacy, members fell roughly into two groups. One draws on political (anti-imperialist) arguments, while the other draws on (international) legal arguments. The outlining of the debates among the political and legal perspectives is effective in showing the competing arguments and reasons that people with a common cause can have. At the same time, it is not clear that the legal perspective necessarily implies a commitment to a form of legal cosmopolitanism. The explicit arguments for legal cosmopolitanism in the book are artic-

ulated not by those activists but through a reading of works by scholars and public intellectuals (most notably, Jürgen Habermas) in their support, condemnation, or reflection on acts of aggression in the name of justice, human rights, or international law.

Çubukçu’s argument that legal cosmopolitanism can lead to dangerous political consequences is convincing. She effectively shows how legal arguments have been used to justify wars and create further injustice like in the cases of Iraq, Kosovo, and Libya. At the same time, the argument treats human rights and international law politics as equal things that are in essence politically dangerous. This raises a critical challenge for this book: it is not clear that the politics of international law or of human rights is necessarily and exclusively a politics of legal cosmopolitanism and thus, seamlessly and necessarily normalizes imperial hegemony and power. One can make this sweeping normative judgment only if one does not consider the history and sociology of this politics. For example, the Russell Tribunal, which gave inspiration to the formation of the WTI, was firmly placed in the context of the anti-colonial struggles. The author does not consider or reflect on the use of international law by anti-colonial movements and thinkers to bring forth their political demands, which was a significant political context for the Russell Tribunal. International law as such cannot be so easily and unproblematically be constructed as a tool of empire.<sup>1</sup>

The critique of human rights politics similarly follows an ahistorical normative line of argumentation. A substantive part of chapter 2 is dedicated to discussing a report by Human Rights Watch (HRW) on the Iraqi High Tribunal’s (IHT) handling of the Dujail case against members of the former regime. The IHT was established under the authority of occupying power in Iraq in 2004, and later domesticated into Iraqi law in 2005 after the formal end of the occupation. The main critique seems to be that HRW was complicit in normalizing the imperial project by not criticizing the fact that this Tribunal was possible

only because of the American (i.e., imperial) intervention and occupation, and thus (in the author's eyes) illegitimate. HRW's preference was for a truly international tribunal under UN control. Çubukçu presents this position as also problematic because (1) it was based on the legal logic that the crimes under consideration are classified within international law, and (2) part of the logic of HRW for this suggestion is the organization's conclusion that the Iraqi legal system did not have the capacity of handling this case, thus "faulting" the Iraqi side (78) instead of focusing on the bigger problem which is the US occupation.

What is not clear from the book is how, or if, Iraqi opposition to the occupation led to an Iraqi opposition to those trials, a point that raises questions concerning the author's argument about the illegitimacy of the trials. One might therefore ask, what kind of (il)legitimacy and in whose name? The IHT's trials in Iraq were understood by many (Iraqis) as political trials, and indeed the Iraqi government under Nouri al-Maliki regarded them as such: they had little interest in "fair trials" or "international legality," much to the chagrin of the IHT's American legal advisers. This fact is given little attention in the book, despite the opportunity it provides to understand the politics of the trials as they were understood by those in whose name they were conducted. The IHT trials were not the first political trials in Iraqi history of that magnitude. Upon the overthrow of the monarchy in 1958, a People's Court was set up by the new revolutionary government to try members of the monarchical regime, and later expanded its reach to Ba'athists and Arab nationalists who were in competition with the communists to control the state. The IHT had more in common with this experience than with the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem, as Çubukçu suggests. Both trials, the author suggests, were possible because of acts of violence and illegal action: the kidnapping of Eichmann by Israeli secret service in Argentina, and the establishment of new state institution by the US occupation in Iraq (81). The only historical example of a

political trial that is considered in this book are the Maoist people's courts that were discussed by Michel Foucault (chapter 1), rather than the Iraqi People's Court trials that were discussed in and outside Iraq at the time of the IHT.

The context and politics of HRW's involvement in Iraq before 2003, during the trials, and post-2003 is largely absent. HRW has historically documented atrocities in Iraq before and after 2003. For instance, the revelation and documentation of the Anfal campaign's use of villagization and chemical weapons in Iraqi Kurdistan were possible only because of the work of HRW researchers.<sup>2</sup> If "chronicl[ing] the untold death and destruction" is a desirable political act in the absence of effective intervention to stop atrocities, then HRW did just that multiple times in Iraq. An international trial of the members of the former regime, called for by this organization and many others, might well have documented the role of the United States in enabling many atrocities that took place in Iraq at the hands of the former regime.

The author's criticism of HRW's report for raising questions about the capacity of the Iraqi legal system of handling a trial of that magnitude is puzzling given her own criticism of these trials as being illegitimate because of the American (i.e., imperial) role in their setup and functioning. Iraqi judges, politicians, and actors are portrayed as tools of the occupier with no capacity to act without US assistance and with no other legitimacy or agency. In contrast, following Iraqi politics at that time, and now, reveals that the United States' role was never as absolute as portrayed by the author. The fact that those trials started to take a life of their own outside US control was documented by the same HRW report that is the object of critique. Iraqi (and Iranian) actors of different political agendas had a lot of power to act in ways that did not always line up with American wishes. This point is obvious during the process of constitution-making. The actual discussion of the constitution (chapter 5) uses Amnesty Inter-

national's advice on the making of the constitution, and the WTT's response, as an entry point. The discussion unfolds into a series of theoretical arguments drawing extensively on abstract theoretical works of constitutional and legal scholarship, yet it would have been relevant for a book based on political ethnography to have a discussion of the constitution-making process itself, including an engagement of works on this process. A book on this process by Andrew Arato is cited in one passing quote in the introduction (10), but none of the complexities of that process and the political power dynamics (by no means purely derivative of imperial wishes) are engaged when discussing the constitution making process.<sup>3</sup>

Despite these questions, *For the Love of Humanity* offers a compelling ethnography into the difficulties and competing legal and political perspectives within a community of activists who seek global justice but must wrestle with imperial realities. Its theoretical ambition to build an argument against legal cosmopolitanism through a critique of the politics of international law and human rights, however, is undermined by the weak historical and sociological treatment of the wider context that it discusses. Overall, this book will be sure to raise discussion among legal ethnographers and Middle East scholars.

Nida Alahmad  
University of Edinburgh

#### ■ NOTES

1. See, e.g., Dietrich (2017), who illustrates how anticolonial elites sought to bring questions of economic sovereignty into the international arena of the United Nations and the resistance they faced, especially from the United States. Their struggle was part and parcel of the anticolonial movement, not an exception to it.
2. One of those researchers later left the organization and wrote a book that draws on this research and further documents the US role in the building and attainment of Iraq's

chemical weapons program, (see Hiltermann 2007).

3. This particular process has been lengthy and complicated because of many issues, including that of the Kurdish autonomy and control of oil revenues. Another critical work on this process that is not addressed in this book is the work and commentary by Iraqi lawyer Zaid al-Ali (2014), who was an observer of the constitution-making process in Iraq.

#### ■ REFERENCES

- Al-Ali, Zaid. 2014. *The Struggle for Iraq's Future: How Corruption, Incompetence and Sectarianism Have Undermined Democracy*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Arato, Andrew 2009. *Constitution Making Under Occupation: The Politics of Imposed Revolution in Iraq*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Dietrich, Christopher R. W. 2017. *Oil Revolution: Anticolonial Elites, Sovereign Rights, and the Economic Culture of Decolonization*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hiltermann, Joost R. 2007. *Poisonous Affair: America, Iraq, and the Gassing of Halabja*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

### Life Lived in Relief: Humanitarian Predicaments and Palestinian Refugee Politics

By Ilana Feldman. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018. 320 pp. 20 illus. Hardcover. ISBN: 978-0-520-29963-4.

Compared to earlier decades, the Palestinian predicament has received little recent interest internationally. The emergencies in the Middle East, notably in Syria and Egypt, in addition to global issues such as climate change and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic seem to have redirected the media attention away from Palestine. To some, the Israeli/Palestinian issue may even seem solved, since the current Israeli regime is moving in the direction of annexation of the West Bank, backed up by the Trump administration. However, anthropologist Ilana Feldman's book from 2018

indicates that it would be illusionary to think there are any easy resolutions to the Israeli/Palestinian issue. On the contrary, Feldman shows us how the question of Palestinian refugees has local and regional effects beyond macro-politics and conflict resolution. Without dealing with the status of refugees, it is difficult to imagine a stable and peaceful future for either Israelis or Palestinians.

*Life Lived in Relief* is a welcome contribution to our understanding of Palestinian refugees' interactions with humanitarian organizations, not least with the United Nations Relief and Work Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), which assists some five million Palestinians in the Middle East with emergency relief, basic health care, and schooling. Feldman also brings up other humanitarian projects and organizations (e.g., Médecins Sans Frontières) as examples. Feldman writes that whenever humanitarian intervention stretches out over time, aid providers encounter challenges that emerge from humanitarianism's focus on the present. The book examines the complex web of interaction between humanitarian relief and refugees and its long-term effect on understandings of and ways of doing politics and life in Palestinian refugee camps transregionally. It aims to describe the experiences of both aid providers and recipients. However, since most humanitarian practitioners in this case are themselves Palestinian refugees, these categories are not exclusive. Throughout the book runs Feldman's distinction between "the politics of life" (i.e., how refugee populations are governed through aid delivery and humanitarian management) and "the politics of living" (i.e., how people express agency within humanitarian spaces despite constraints). The oscillation between a state of poverty, marginalization, political stalemate, and critical emergency is part of the Palestinian chronic, although shifting, condition (what Feldman calls "punctuated humanitarianism").

For this book, Feldman carried out research in the UN archives in the Jordanian capital of Amman, as well as several ethnographic field-

works in several different localities over a period of six years (2008–2014), but she obviously also builds on her earlier research experiences, notably her extensive studies of the situation in Gaza. This of course means that her book is based on very extensive material. Apart from the introduction, which is key to understanding her theoretical framework, the book is organized in eight chapters divided into two parts. The first, "The Humanitarian Situation," investigates humanitarianism as a historical and present context of disaster, mostly building on archival material, whereas the second, "The Humanitarian Condition," focuses more on the lived experiences of refugees in a less acute although troublesome state of long-term displacement and chronic crisis. As is widely acknowledged by scholars, Palestinian refugees' lack of political rights does not imply that they are not involved in politics. On the contrary, Feldman convincingly argues that "the refugee category does not perform a simple or complete exclusion from politics" but rather "shapes how refugees stage scenes of dissensus" (39).

One weakness of the book is ironically its richness; sometimes, it is difficult to see the forest for all the trees. Feldman provides the reader with so many ethnographic snapshots and archival examples from different times and localities that it is occasionally hard to follow the red thread. Another problem is indeed that these examples are not given much context. As Feldman herself mentions, the UNRWA is, for instance, not organized and does not function in the same way in all its localities. Although Feldman's aim is to make theoretical arguments, it would nonetheless have been interesting to know more about these regional and local differences when it comes to the UNRWA's and other organizations' management of and relations to Palestinian refugees. Hopefully, Feldman will take the opportunity to discuss some of these issues in other publications.

Personally, I was intrigued by Feldman's brief discussion of the displaced Palestinians who refused to be registered as refugees.



To my knowledge, very little ethnographic research mentions them, and I know from my own fieldworks in the Bethlehem area that their lives have taken paths that are rather distinct from those of camp refugees nearby. In addition, it becomes clear that there is no single Palestinian refugee experience: differences abound due to individual and family matters, migration patterns, local contexts, and regional organization of humanitarian interventions.

Another interesting part of the book discusses how Palestinian refugees constantly insist on conjoining concerns that to outsiders seem separate and distinct. Feldman argues that this goes back to Palestinian refugees' rejection of the UNRWA as merely a humanitarian actor. Even though the UNRWA in recent years has made many efforts to distinguish itself as a neutral and nonpolitical organization, Palestinian refugees insist the agency is indeed a political actor that also holds responsibility for the plight of flight and protracted displacement. Asking for water and the right of return in the same protest thus does make sense.

*Life Lived in Relief* makes critical contributions to anthropology and refugee studies, as well as our understanding of humanitarian interventions, and opens up new conversations about the relations between refugee-ness, place, and politics. Overall, this book is a memorable example of research that puts anthropology in conversation with humanitarian interventions, human rights, and politics. Feldman argues that the Palestinian experiences of humanitarianism should not be understood as an exception: rather, Palestinian refugees' ways of living with and navigating humanitarianism can teach us about refugee conditions more generally. If used in postgraduate teaching on, for instance, human rights or migration, the book offers much food for thought also to future humanitarian actors.

Nina Gren  
Lund University

### **Peaceful Selves: Personhood, Nationhood, and the Post-Conflict Moment in Rwanda**

By Laura Eramian. New York: Berghahn Books, 2019. 202 pp. 3 illus. Paperback. ISBN: 978-1-78920-493-3.

"Rwanda: Land of a Thousand Hills and a Million Smiles." This was the slogan for a 2015 London business gathering to attract investment to Rwanda, the small East/Central African country infamous for a 1994 genocide. Anthropologist Laura Eramian's monograph contains many similarly vivid juxtapositions, showing how, as ordinary Rwandans have tried to rebuild their lives since 1994, they feel continual pressure to aim for positivity and a bright future—while simultaneously bearing the "solemn weight of the past" (33) as the memory of genocide reinserts itself into daily life (120). Their president tells them to smile more (113), but, as Eramian reminds readers, belief in prosperity through self-help and positive thinking is a global movement affecting us all. The case of Rwanda, however, with its violent past, uncertain future under authoritarianism, and endemic rural poverty, highlights questions of self and others in particularly stark terms for understanding the relationship between state formation and personal capacity within contradictory moral frameworks (5), a problem especially troubling in post-conflict settings.

*Peaceful Selves* asks how Rwandans think about and experience these contradictions about self and others: between home and school, at work, and among neighbors they may scarcely trust. In 1994, an estimated eight hundred thousand mainly ethnic Tutsi were killed by ethnic Hutu militias and their own neighbors. Now, the specter of businesspeople promoting a million smiles in order to direct investment to a country once engulfed by genocide is the reality during what Eramian calls in Rwanda "the post-conflict moment." Although the post-conflict moment of the book's title and analysis is not defined—is it the moment at the time of fieldwork, the

25-year period since the genocide, or perhaps the link to another catastrophe?—it seems that this very ambiguity between past and future keeps Rwandans in a sense of suspended animation about who they are and will become. The author, by illustrating slices of dissonance between positivity and the past, shows the profound displacement of ordinary people within their own sense of self. This quandary—how should I be? upbeat or mournful, social or independent, optimistic or wary?—takes on urgency in Rwanda today, as the author explains, because what caused the violence, Rwandans have been told many times, was the kinds of negative persons the people used to and still might be, with negativity contributing to cycles of poverty and the sorts of disaffected young men attracted to doing genocidal killings (112). Personhood and nationhood going forward, then, hinge on the tenuousness of each individual's own efforts for sense-making through self-making. This, as testified by Eramian, is a project on shaky ground. As one woman told her, "People say I'm strong, they praise me for what I've been able to do. I have my strength, but I feel like I could lose it at any moment. Then what would I become?" (120).

Butare, the southwestern city where the author conducted her fieldwork, is small (pop. 77,000) but long played an outsized role in debates about what Rwanda is and who Rwandans ought to be (18). Butare was a "colonial power nexus" (47) and site of struggle over ethnicity, Catholic missionary power, and higher education as a source of ideas and ideologies fueling ethnic tension and genocide. During the genocide, Butare "suffered the highest proportion of deaths of any single province" (35). In late April 1994, for example, several thousand ethnic Tutsi were lured to Butare's football stadium with the promise of food and security, only to be killed in the space of about an hour by Interahamwe militia with gunfire, hand grenades, and machetes at the direction of Pauline Nyiramasuhuko, the only woman later tried and convicted for genocide before the International

Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, including for promoting genocidal rape. (In another strange juxtaposition challenging sense-making, Nyiramasuhuko was then the Minister of Family and Women's Development.) So many intellectuals perished in 1994, a woman survivor tells Eramian, that Butare "is for the peasants now" (28). Some residents have become well off, others very much not. The prestige of Butare's flagship university has dimmed now that Rwanda has many other schools. With higher education no longer a clear path forward in Rwanda or East Africa generally, Butare residents find that entrepreneurship is no hero's journey, either. These realities strikingly come together in a simple photo Eramian took and includes, showing Butare's low-rise former commercial district, the "Arab Quarter," slated for demolition at the time of writing (30). The photo depicts a ghost town, but one evidently swept clean.

Eramian places this study within the much-described anthropology of personhood, advancing it analytically by showing how issues of relational and individuated personhood reveal what it means to live in "the post-conflict moment" that includes ancestors and the dead: "The trouble is that no single set of values can eliminate the dissonance produced by the intersection of relational and individuated moral reference points in people's relationships with both the living and the dead" (6). These moral reference points arise as fraught in the smallest everyday social interactions. Sharing beer, for example, is mandatory for adult sociability, but opens the door to fears about how to discern true versus instrumental friends. While sharing beer or anything else exhibits generosity, generosity may be misread as patronizing. Anything harking of patron-client relations is a sorry reminder of former ethnically marked categories between Hutu and Tutsi that led to violence; yet, conversely, becoming dependent on someone else may also signal independent, strategic *savoir-faire*.

To illustrate these human dilemmas and their gradual, persistent psychic toll, the author

movingly describes the bind in which Charles, a university professor friend of hers, finds himself. Charles, a longtime Butare resident, is Hutu, though ethnic labels are outlawed in Rwanda. His work ethic and generosity evoke contradictory ethnic stereotypes among the public (57). No matter what Charles does—joining in required community work with lower-income neighbors, attending mandatory annual commemorations of the genocide, participating in meetings to understand and prevent future violence—his selfhood “is situationally marked by the stereotypes of Tutsiness” via ties to modernity through wealth and education, despite his Hutu heritage. The wider implications of these dilemmas—how to be, who to become—“tell a broader story of the subtle yet burdensome demands placed on selves and social relationships by global post-conflict imperatives to remember, forget, develop, or reconcile,” helping instruct scholars about how micro-practices and sense of self affect post-conflict reconstruction agendas and their uneven acceptance among survivors (5). Axes of class difference, inequality, and ethnicity are clearly staked in such micropractices. Furthermore, the feelings and experiences of people like Charles chillingly evoke similar personal and collective ordeals before the genocide took place, showing how a genocide never comes out of the blue and how peace may be achieved partially through silences about the past.

For now, Rwandans are in a bind. Their government dictates who lives where and what cash crops they grow, and expects citizens to contribute financially to the national Agiciro Development Fund, a “solidarity fund” whereby ordinary citizens can help lessen and eventually eliminate Rwanda’s dependency on foreign aid (33)—perhaps in favor of foreign investment attracted through a million smiles. Such are the painful contradictions. “The ‘New Rwanda’ is characterized by a peculiar alchemy of state exhortations to citizens to become autonomous economic agents, coupled with the expectation that they never tread on the tightly circumscribed lim-

its to just what kinds of autonomy they ought to cultivate” (33).

Thought-provoking and instructive as it is, analysis focused mainly on change at this juncture of Rwandan history might have benefitted from both a smaller frame and a wider one. A smaller frame could weigh in cultural practices of self-making that were there even before the genocide, so readers could understand how the practices and feelings of self-making that the author describes resonate or not with other experiences there. Rwandan naming, for example, is unique to each individual but expresses a community consensus of the individual’s personality. Naming may be one way through which people manage the tension between belonging and autonomy that Eramian describes. Then, a wider frame including neighboring countries in East Africa might highlight how Rwanda is both exceptional, owing to its dark past, and how its people as elsewhere struggle with the gap between aspirations and realities. The author rightly clarifies that not everything is related to the post-conflict moment even as much as intergenerational trauma reverberates.

Given East Africa’s young population, I also wondered the extent to which the self-making hardships of the author’s interlocutors, who survived the genocide, are similar to or different from those experienced by today’s Rwandan youth born since 1994, and what that would show about the social impact of what the author uncovers. The book would also join in more conversationally and broadly with East African trends of self-cultivation through attention to, for example, the pursuit of education and liberation through evangelical religion. Do these twin pursuits, not normally considered together, have anything to tell scholars about personhood in modern Africa? How does education inspire self-cultivation among youth in Rwanda despite the strong possibility of low-paying jobs or unemployment? It seems a missed opportunity in a university town to not explicitly study the drive for education as a form of youthful self-fashioning via relations of generosity and

dependency. That said, this is richly detailed and an often-startling ethnography with sharp insights and resonance for learning about post-conflict moments and the potential future for settings within, and far beyond, modern Rwanda.

Martha Lagace  
Boston University

### Counterrevolution: The Global Rise of the Far Right

By Walden Bello. Blackpoint: Fernwood Publishing, 2019. 196 pp. Paperback. ISBN: 978-1-77363-221-6.

The second decade of the twenty-first century has seen a rise in reactionary alt-right and authoritarian populist regimes. In answer, scholars worldwide have risen up to try and understand this phenomenon. Walden Bello meets this debate head-on in *Counter Revolution: The Global Rise of the Far Right*. Using sociological and comparative historical methods, he looks at counterrevolutionary and far-right movements in democracies around the globe. Bello focuses primarily on the Global South and, specifically, class conflict in the countryside and its effect on the revolutionary/counterrevolutionary struggle writ large. This is in keeping with the Agrarian Change and Peasant Studies series from Initiatives in Critical Agrarian Studies. The primary case studies explored in the book are the fall of the Communist Party of Indonesia and the related massacres, the rise of Pinochet in Chile, military coups in Thailand, Modi's India, and the accession of Duterte in the Philippines. Bello compares these cases from the Global South to the rise of fascism in Italy and some far-right movements in the Global North, such as the ones led by Le Pen in France, Trump in the United States, and Orbán in Hungary. The book then closes with a postscript on the recent election of Bolsonaro in Brazil. In a relatively short volume, Bello therefore covers a lot of ground.

The main thread that runs through all these case studies is the dialectic of revolution and counterrevolution. Bello theorizes that progressive movements that endeavor to improve the lives of more disadvantaged citizens provoke revolutions, while those who oppose these movements form counterrevolutions. This is more than just reactionary politics, however. Bello draws from Arno Mayer's distinction here, whereby the counterrevolutionary is implied to be more populist and embrace mass movement, though this distinction could be better teased out for readers unfamiliar with Mayer's (2000) work. Mayer's (1971) analytic approach is illuminating, as it highlights the differences in both objectives and social strata between the reactionary, conservative, and counterrevolutionary forces that constitute an anti-revolutionary coalition. Bello, however, does not clearly demonstrate consistency in the social strata of his counterrevolutionaries.

In this book, Bello suggests two types of counterrevolution. The first is what he calls a classical class-driven counterrevolution, wherein there is a revolutionary or reformist movement that opposes elites. This is exemplified in post-World War I Italy, Chile, post-World War II Indonesia, and Thailand. In these countries, we see the rise of agrarian, leftist, and labor movements with a powerful elite building a counterrevolution. The second type of counterrevolution is a counter-movement directed more broadly at a liberal democratic regime that is perceived as corrupt or inefficient. This is manifested in the extreme right of the United States, the Philippines, and India. The later movements tend to have more ideological diversity and hark back to a mythological golden age wherein the needs of the majority were given primacy.

Bello draws out many other comparisons between these unique counterrevolutions throughout the book, which are fruitful in weaving the patterns and texture of these movements. He demonstrates that although these cases are different culturally, geographically, historically, and politically, some gen-

eralizations are still possible. First, in many instances, middle-class and agrarian positionality played a pivotal role. Second, violence tends to be a heavily used tool of the counter-revolutionary, whether or not the revolutionaries themselves are using violence. Last, Bello notes that the rise of neoliberal policies globally and the lack of strong leftist opposition to them has left a window for populist influence, to which the far right has latched on. This populism is coupled with the “othering” of a common enemy of the people, whether that enemy is globalization itself or an ethnic or political minority within the state. By tracing these histories and showing the generalizability of countermovements, Bello opens up these phenomena to both critique and theory. In doing so, the book provides a good overview of counterrevolutionary movements, giving the reader an informed survey of some of these major dialectical struggles in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. It also provides a solid analysis for the growing field of alt-right and populist studies.

However, the book also suffers from a few shortcomings. Because it does not offer an in-depth analysis of any one movement, it delivers more of a theoretical than a methodological punch. The broad level of analysis and theory impedes a more granular understanding of the minutiae of any one of these countermovements, while seemingly preventing an inductive analysis. Consequently, readers may wonder whether the generalizability is as clear-cut as it seems. That said, I found Bello’s reasoning well-articulated and the overall picture convincing. I was also puzzled by the stated focus on peasant and agrarian movements, as they read more like an afterthought, lacking sufficient detail and consideration. While Bello makes it clear that agrarian agents have been important actors in far-right movements, I had expected, given the book’s stated emphasis on agrarian change and peasant studies, a more in-depth focus on them.

Despite these shortcomings, the book offers an excellent launching point for readers who are interested in the trends of far-right move-

ments. Bello articulately reminds us in this comparison that, though the Global South and reactionary movements within it are unique and must be treated as such, there are specific global trends and tendencies that we can and should be on guard for. This book offers a set of lessons for progressives to better understand those reactionary forces.

Chelsey Ancliffe  
McGill University

#### ■ REFERENCES

- Mayer, Arno. 1971. *Dynamics of Counterrevolution in Europe, 1870–1956: An Analytical Framework*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Mayer, Arno. 2000. *The Furies: Violence and Terror in the French and Russian Revolutions*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

#### Critique of Identity Thinking

By Michael Jackson. New York: Berghahn Books., 2019. 207 pp. Hardcover. ISBN 978-1-78920-282-3.

In *Critique of Identity Thinking*, Michael Jackson analyzes and questions the dubious resurgence of identity politics during the present dark times. World events such as the civil war in Syria, the migrant crisis in Europe, the election of Donald Trump as president of the United States, and so on brought him to reconsider the relevance of critical thinkers—in particular, Hannah Arendt, Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and Karl Jaspers—whose work was born out of the catastrophes of the past century.

Jackson argues that contemporary political and academic discussions based on notions of fixed identity and radical alterity must be questioned, since they lose sight of our common humanity and may lead to conflict and ultimately violence. In placing political and academic jargon on a par, Jackson makes a forceful critique of an academic complacency to buy into identity thinking. He argues

that a critique of identity thinking involves a suspension of one's political affiliation, with either the right or the left, since all human beings are susceptible to seeing the world exclusively from their own perspective, as well as reifying that perspective as if it were a universal truth. How does one do this in practice? He proposes two strategies. First is to suspend the question of who is right and who is wrong in a given situation to focus on the problem itself as a *human* problem. For Jackson, identity—like culture—is a vehicle for intersubjectivity, but it can never be seen as its final cause. Second, this involves a focus not only on difference—in terms of ethnicity, language, gender, history, class, or faith—but also on what we have in common.

In this book, Jackson in particular takes his cue from the negative dialectics of Theodor Adorno, who wrote, “If philosophy is necessary it is only in the way it has been from time immemorial: as critique, as resistance to the expanding heteronomy” (4). Critical to this perspective is the refusal to see concepts as isomorphic with reality. For Adorno (and Jackson), “the concept does not exhaust the thing conceived (5). Adorno’s critique of identity thinking was in part a response to Hitler’s emphasis of racial types and national identities, and he announced a new categorical imperative: “If thinking is not to entail hubris and harm, it must involve a continual self-reflecting ‘thinking against itself.’” Jackson goes on to argue that ethnography offers this kind of critical reality-testing rather than philosophy in and of itself—of being in close contact with real people in different contexts—and this goes against the kind of identity thinking in which people are numbered and classified, as in the case of bureaucracies—and sometimes academic projects.

Typical of Jackson’s style, he elegantly weaves together a patchwork of philosophical reflections, ethnographic vignettes, historical passages, literary and cinematic anecdotes, and memoir. In chapter 1, “Mistaken Identities: The Task of Thinking in Dark Times,” he outlines the fallacy of misplaced concreteness

by noting, for example, “A fetishist is a person who cannot relate to a whole partner, but only to the part—shoes, jewelry, scent. Something similar could be said of the racist” (21). In this analogy, an anthropologist is a fetishist when only emphasizing the parts that make the other (ontologically) different. Chapter 2, “Radical Empiricism and the Little Things in Life,” explores the redemptive power in the little things (23). Taking his point of departure in Arendt’s depiction of her friend Walter Benjamin’s fascination with “the little things in life,” Jackson takes us back to his fieldwork in Sierra Leone in 1970, among other things, to show how storytelling is an ability that enables people to see life from a new vantage point.

Chapter 3, “The Witch as a Category and as a Person,” starts with the spread of the Ebola epidemic in Sierra Leone in 2014 and leads to a reflection on the nature of witchcraft—instances when people are seen no longer as a person but merely as a category. In particular, Jackson analyzes the complex existential dynamics that push some people to “confess” to being witches. He understands this conundrum as “a last freedom,” which be understood not through the rationality or irrationality of beliefs but rather as surrendering to the exigencies of life. Chapter 4, “The New Materialisms,” presents a sophisticated critique of the new materialisms and the ontological turn, which Jackson takes to be a tendency to confuse forms of thought with forms of being. Chapter 5, “Words and Deeds,” starts with a Kuranko adage: “The word fire can’t burn down a house.” Jackson addresses the paradox that while writers and academics are in love with words, actions often speak louder. To many of the interlocutors he has worked with from West Africa (as well as the heartening story of a Ugandan interlocutor in Denmark), dialogue is less important than diapraxis.

Chapter 6, “Critique of Cultural Fundamentalism,” takes us to New Zealand, where Jackson outlines the historical and political contexts behind the identity politics of identifying as Maori. He argues, for instance,

that when liberal *pakeha* sometimes accuse Maori of “inverse racism,” this is a misnomer. According to Jackson, the word racism, like the word rape, refers to violently asymmetrical situations in which the strong dominate the weak: “the terms simply do apply in reverse” (94). However, this weapon of the weak should not be adopted by anthropologists, he argues; rather, such essentializing strategy should be placed in and understood in its context. Chapter 7, “Existential Scarcity and Ethical Sensitivity,” takes its point of departure in the quandary spelled out in Genesis (i.e., the jealousy between Cain and Abel), which according to Jackson can be seen as a primary existential dilemma to be found across historical epochs and societies: where do we draw the line between those we are obliged to look after and those we are not?

In chapter 8, “Identification and Description: An Essay on Metaphor,” Jackson meditates over the difference between representations and metaphors—especially bringing forth the embodied nature of many metaphors, as well as their therapeutic power—in contrast to the way in which identity thinking is so insistent on distancing itself from myth and metaphor, privileging mind over matter and reason over the senses. He argues that while identity thinking is at the service of hierarchical distinctions, metaphorical thinking is egalitarian, since the relationship between knower and the known, subject and object, are placed on a par. Chapter 9, “Islam and Identity among the Kuranko,” asks why so many Sierra Leoneans have converted to Islam. Rather than employing category terms, Jackson examines the phenomenon as a form of social pragmatism rather than being driven by strong personal conviction. As one interlocutor put it, “There are many ways that a bird can fly in the sky” (135).

In the final chapter, “In Defence of Existential Anthropology,” Jackson returns to nega-

tive dialectics and argues that both negative dialectics and existential anthropology are philosophically skeptical. Closure and wholeness are dangerous illusions. For existential anthropology, the task is “recognizing the oscillations in everyday life between quite contradictory tendencies—logos and life, compliance and resistance, the transitive and the intransitive—without making special claims for one over the other or seeking synthesis between them” (169). While Jackson skillfully draws on his ethnographic work in Sierra Leone, Australia, and Europe, the impact of his everyday context of living in the United States under Trump, who on one occasion is ironically compared with Charlie Chaplin’s *The Great Dictator*, also appears as a reoccurring leitmotif of the book. This is an aspect I would have enjoyed to hear more about, not just as anecdotes in passing but a comprehensive ethnographic exploration of how, in his view, the United States at this present moment is so ridden by dividing forms of identity politics.

Finally, a short note about the cover of this book—a simple half-completed circle drawn by a rough brush against a white background serves as reminder to leave the circle unfinished and the story open-ended. The image of the broken or incomplete circle to me brings to mind Leonard Cohen’s famous line “there is a crack in everything, that is how the light gets in.” When the circle becomes closed, categories essentialized or reified a totalitarian world emerges. *Critique of Identity Thinking* contains a wisdom, which comes from a lifetime of reading, writing, and doing ethnography, and it is a reminder of the redemptive power of not distinguishing so clearly between biography and ethnography as well as between science and art.

Susanne Bregnbæk  
University College Copenhagen