Review - East Asia's Other Miracle: Explaining the Decline of Mass Atrocities

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East Asia's Other Miracle: Explaining the Decline of Mass Atrocities
By Alex J. Bellamy
Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017

This is a timely, significant, and fascinating book that shines an important light on East Asia whilst teasing out broader lessons that will undoubtedly shape future studies on mass atrocities. At the heart of the book lies the following fact, '[a]t the height of the Cold War, East Asia accounted for around 80 per cent of the world's mass atrocities. By the second decade of the twenty-first century, it accounted for less than 5 per cent' (p.1). The expansive study leads Bellamy to identify what *did* and *did not* facilitate this trend. Regarding the former, he identifies four interconnected factors: 'the consolidation of states and emergence of responsible sovereigns; the prioritization of economic development through trade, the development of norms and habits of multilateralism, and transformations in the practice of power politics' (p.8). Whilst acknowledging that North Korea and Myanmar buck the trend, these factors help us make sense of what is going on in East Asia.

Regarding the latter, it is equally compelling to read what did not facilitate the decline. For example, '[a] notable absence from the story here is democratization' (p. 11). This omission holds broader relevance for how we understand the relationship between democracy and mass atrocity. Traditionally, studies have concluded that totalitarian and authoritarian regimes are the primary perpetrators of mass violence (Rummel 2017). This may indeed be the case, but such thinking helped shape a mainstream view that democratization plays a critical role in pacification processes.[1] Bellamy's study highlights that the significant decline of mass violence in East Asia cannot be explained through a traditional appeal to democracy. Accordingly, such declines do not have to be predicated on 'western values and political styles' (p. 287). This, of course, has significant implications in that it challenges the idea that to create peace we have to spread Western-type democracy. First and foremost therefore, the book provides an excellent regional analysis, however, it goes further in that it asks us to reassess international approaches to the prevention of atrocity crimes.

The book dedicates two chapters to the problematic cases of North Korea and Myanmar. With limited space, I will focus on the latter. To be clear, Bellamy does not set out to provide an analysis of the violence in the Rakhine state. Writing in January 2017, the focus is on answering two questions, 'why did Myanmar not experience the earlier decline in mass atrocities experienced elsewhere in the region?', and 'why, from 2010, did Myanmar's military regime embark on a program of reform and what effect has this had on the incidence of mass atrocities?'(p. 237). As the chapter goes on to explain, the fundamental problem lies in the failure of state consolidation that can be traced back to the birth of the nation in 1948. A weak state with little institutional capacity was home to a mosaic of groups divided along two fault lines, ideological (Maoist communism and Burmese nationalism) and ethnic (those wanting a unitary Burmese-led state and those who wanted a federal state) (see p. 253).

Ten separate cases of mass violence leading to an estimated 158,000 civilian deaths reflected the use of mass violence as a strategic tool to oppress any challenge to military rule. In the post-Cold War era, Myanmar found itself bucking the trend as its problems were compounded by economic decline and political isolation, yet by the time of the

2015 election, all ten cases of mass violence had come to an end reflecting a 'daunting path to reform' had been undertaken (p. 260). This is explained through a number of factors as Bellamy details: the domestic call for reform, an acceptance that Myanmar should not become over-reliant on China, the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis, a significant change in relations with the West, and finally the leadership of Thein Sien and Aung San Suu Kyi. This is not to suggest that progress is inevitable and Bellamy stressed that Myanmar is at a 'crossroads'; events since, cast a dark shadow.

Of course, no book can capture everything and the analysis of Myanmar does reveal a limitation in the approach taken. The book would have benefitted from a greater engagement with the anti-progressive forces at play in the region. Crises, such as those witnessed in Myanmar and the Philippines in 2017, have long historical roots. At times, the optimistic narrative put forth by Bellamy omits the underlying processes that were evident for decades in both of these countries. For instance, in October 2015, the International State Crime Initiative released a report entitled *Countdown to Annihilation: Genocide in Myanmar.* In which it highlights decades of mistreatment of the Rohingya people which paved the way for the 'textbook case of ethnic cleansing' in 2017.[2] As the authors note,

Significant steps in this strategy have included the removal in 1982 of Rohingya from the list of officially recognised ethnic minorities and stripping them of citizenship; the refusal to issue Rohingya babies with birth certificates since 1994; the government's refusal even to use the term 'Rohingya' and to condemn anyone nationally or internationally who does so; the exclusion of Rohingya from the 2014 census; banning Rohingya from standing in the November 2015 elections; and the longstanding restrictions upon freedom of movement and denial of access to healthcare, employment opportunities and higher education (Green et al. 2015: 19).

The statement provides insight into the underlying processes of dehumanisation and marginalisation that could and should have featured more prominently in Bellamy's study. Here, it would have been interesting to see Bellamy engage with the interplay between civilizing and decivilising processes.[3] By doing so, the author would have been able to address the extent to which the four factors identified above can be understood as civilizing processes. At the same time, this approach would have enabled Bellamy to explore the role of the decivilising processes at play in the region.

Overall, this is an outstanding study. The regional analysis challenges Western narratives and asks us to reconsider international approaches to mass atrocity crimes in the wake of a striking decline in mass violence in East Asia. It draws on a rich body of History, East Asian studies, and International Relations, to put forward a compelling case. In so doing, it makes a major contribution to the field. All books have limitations but these also provide opportunities and I hope the students reading *E-International Relations* can go on to address these through their own work.

References:

Green, P., MacManus, T. and A. de la Cour (2015) *Countdown to Annihilation: Genocide in Myanmar*. International State Crime Initiative.

Rummel, R. J. (1997) *Death By Government: Genocide and Mass Murder since 1900.* Transaction Publishers.

[1] The exception being Michal Mann's, *The Dark Side of Democracy: Explaining Ethnic Cleansing* (Cambridge University Press, 2005).

[2] This was the phrase used by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights in September 2017.

[3] Drawing on the work of Norbert Elias, Andrew Linklater's on-going studies on harm have brought this approach to the forefront of International Relations, see *Violence and Civilization in the Western States-Systems* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016). *The Problem of Harm in World Politics: Theoretical Investigations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

About the author:

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