

# Review: Sabby Sagall, *Final Solutions: Human Nature, Capitalism and Genocide*

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Sabby Sagall, *Final Solutions: Human Nature, Capitalism and Genocide* Pluto Press, 2013 £20.50

Sabby Sagall has written a hugely ambitious book which covers immense historical ground and attempts to answer one of the most challenging historical and theoretical questions of our time. The historical events it deals with are four genocides: that of Native Americans at the hands of European settlers; the Armenian genocide perpetrated by Turkey; the Nazi Holocaust and the Rwanda genocide of 1994. The question it tries to answer is how to provide a convincing overall explanation of these dreadful events.

The essence of his argument - and this is what makes this book so distinctive and original - is that such an explanation requires a combination of socio - economic historical analysis with psychoanalysis. The historical analysis is based on classical Marxism, or what might be called orthodox historical materialism i.e. it takes as its point of departure the development of the forces and relations of production and the consequent class struggle. The psychoanalysis is drawn mainly from Freud as mediated by the Freudo-Marxism of the Frankfurt School, in particular the work

of Erich Fromm.

As might, perhaps, be expected given the author - Sagall is a very long standing member of the British SWP - he tends to take the relevance of Marxist historical materialism to the problem more or less for granted - there is no sustained comparison of Marxist historical explanations of these events with non-Marxist explanations of them. He does, however, feel the need to justify in some detail the psychoanalytic concepts which he believes are necessary to supplement or complete more conventional Marxist analysis in this field and this takes up the first half of the book. In the second half, he attempts to demonstrate the applicability of this Marxist/psychoanalytic methodology to each of the aforementioned genocides in turn.

The most important concept deployed by Sagall is that of 'social character' developed by Fromm. For Freud, human behaviour and character is heavily influenced by the unconscious and each individual's unconscious, and therefore their character, is shaped primarily by their experiences in early childhood and how these interact with their basic sexual drives and development.

Freud's analysis of this process, with its concepts of oral, anal and genital stages, the Oedipus Complex and sublimation, though enormously influential and genuinely insightful, is open to the criticism of being asocial in that on the one hand it focuses on separate individuals (and their parents) and, on the other, claims to be universal across all societies and time periods.

Fromm's concept of social character gives the Freudian account a Marxist twist by being applied not to isolated individuals but to social classes or communities and by being shaped by that class/community's role in the process of production (as productive or unproductive, exploiter or exploited, reactionary or progressive). To this Sagall makes the impor-

tant addition of the idea of social character also being formed by the experience of the given class/community in the class struggle, especially its experience of victory or defeat. In Sagall's hands, therefore 'social character' is a class and historically specific concept.

His argument as a whole is as follows: first, that genocide is 'a modern phenomenon rooted in the social, economic and psychological nature of capitalism [a] society based on individual greed and competitiveness, political domination, the alienation of human labour and the commodification of human beings and their relationships.' (p.248). But because capitalism is only episodically, not permanently, genocidal, this background analysis must be supplemented by analysis of the specific circumstances and conflict precipitating the genocide and the social character motivating the perpetrators to carry it out.

In particular, Sagall identifies the capitalist 'middle class' (or petty bourgeoisie) with their 'anal destructive' and 'authoritarian' social character as the prime agents of genocide, especially when they 'have suffered major historical defeats or other forms of extreme stress' (p.248). In the genocide of Native Americans he focuses on the middle class English Puritan and later the Scots-Irish as main villains of the piece. In relation to the Armenians, it is the middle class would be modernisers of the Young Turk movement in the Ottoman Empire. In the Holocaust it is the petty bourgeois based Nazis and in Rwanda it is the middle class Hutu Power leaders and their peasant followers.

In the case of the Anglo-settlers in North America, there is a clear conflict with the Native Americans over land occupancy, usage and ownership but this is augmented and driven to genocide by the social character of the settlers with its puritanical sexual repression, its anxieties about salvation and its suppressed rage at religious persecution and other violent conflict in Britain.

The Young Turks were a middle class movement that wanted to modernise the Ottoman Empire in order to save it. They were frustrated in their attempts, disorien-

tated and driven to narcissistic rage by the progressive disintegration of the Empire in the 19th and early 20th century. This rage was tipped over into genocidal aggression by catastrophic defeats in the 1st World War and projected on to the Armenians 'the enemy within'.

In Germany the already authoritarian social character of the middle class, as it developed in the 19th century, was intensified by the experience of defeat in the 1st World War and the trauma of the Great Depression and given expression by Hitler and the Nazis. The decision to launch the Final Solution itself in 1941/42 was precipitated by defeat on the Russian front which signalled the collapse of the Nazi dreams of conquest.

In Rwanda the background to genocide lay in a long period of domination by Tutsi minority which was intensified and racialised by German and Belgian colonial rule. With independence a Hutu based government was established and many Tutsis went into exile. For a while the economy grew but then in the early nineties it crashed and the exiled Tutsis launched a civil war to regain power. Rwanda was traditionally a very authoritarian society and the economic collapse, combined with panic that the invading Tutsi forces were on the verge of victory, precipitated the mass slaughter of Tutsis.

The question that immediately confronts a reviewer is does Sagall's argument stand up? Answering it is no easy task. I note that in his review of the book in *Socialist Review* Donny Gluckstein, who has written books on the Nazis and on the Second World War and so is no ignoramus on these matters, concludes with the rather evasive remark 'Whether he [Sagall] has succeeded is something that the reader will have to decide.' I am not surprised. A proper scholarly assessment of Sagall's thesis demands expert knowledge of each of the four genocides he investigates, plus a serious grounding in psychoanalytic theory in its totality, plus a good grasp of historical materialism and issues of historical method. In all likelihood this will be the work of many specialist hands rather than one individual.

Here I will confine myself to some overall, rather impressionistic comments and a discussion of some issues that it throws up.

First, the book is well written and clearly explained; the first part on psychoanalytic concepts is more difficult than the second on the actual genocides but in general it is accessible to the lay reader and is certainly full of very interesting material. Second, it combines a large amount of theory with a great deal of wide ranging empirical evidence and this is a very impressive achievement. It is clearly the product of a deep and sustained engagement with the material and the issues it raises.

The tone of the book is also impressive. Sagall's commitment to social justice and human liberation and, of course, to ensuring that the horrors he describes are not repeated, is evident throughout but there no descent into rhetoric or superfluous moralizing. It is a scrupulous, social scientific investigation.

This said, the first problem that strikes me is a very basic one: is psychological analysis really required here? Clearly all human action from the most everyday to the most historically significant has a psychological aspect or component to it, just as it has a biological or physiological component. Neither walking down the road nor storming the Bastille is possible independent of the law of gravity but that doesn't mean we expect historical analysis of the French Revolution to include an exposition of the theory of gravity. Sagall acknowledges this problem when he writes, 'if we wish to analyse the causes of the First World War, Lenin is more useful than Freud' (p.55). In other words, although a psychological dimension is involved it can be 'assumed' or taken for granted because it is a relatively minor element whereas it is economic, class and political factors that are causally decisive.

One answer to this objection is that the best Marxist history does incorporate the psychological element as a link in the chain of analysis that begins with the development of the forces of production. The outstanding example of this is Trotsky's *History of the Russian Revolution* and it is notable that in the Preface to that mighty work he writes, 'The

dynamic of revolutionary events is directly determined by swift, intense and passionate changes in the psychology of classes'. But the psychology involved here is an understanding of changes in consciousness, mass or individual, rather than invoking the role of the unconscious, and hence does not make use of Freudian or psychoanalytic concepts such as id, ego and super ego or projective identification which Sagall wants to employ.

But Sagall advances a different argument. He maintains that there is a fundamental difference between the genocides that he is trying to explain and other bloody historical events such as the First World War (or, for example, the suppression of the Paris Commune or Franco's terror during and after the Spanish Civil War, or Pinochet's repression in Chile) in that the latter were 'rational' but the former were 'irrational'. What he means by this is that in the First World War or in crushing the Commune the ruling classes were acting on the basis of, and in rough conformity to, their economic and class interests. His four chosen genocides, however, were 'irrational' in they did not correspond to the objective class interests of their perpetrators. This is why psychoanalytic concepts are needed.

This seems to me a difficult argument in that distinguishing or separating out the rational and the irrational in human behaviour and human history as clearly separated out as Sagall tries to do is not easy. I suspect that unconscious drives would be very much at work in the slaughter of the Communards, and in all sorts of repression and individual and systematic torture etc. And it seems to be an unfortunate fact of history that no brutal regime has ever fallen through a shortage of torturers or thugs to enforce its will. (The famous Milgram Experiment of 1961, which showed the readiness of 'normal' citizens to torture when ordered to do so by an authority figure, is relevant here). Genocide, the attempt to exterminate a whole people, is clearly at the extreme end of the spectrum of human cruelty but is it qualitatively different in this respect from other forms of brutality that have gone on throughout the history of

class society?

Sagall defends his insistence on the need to deploy psychoanalysis not just on the grounds that unconscious factors were at work in the genocides he considers but that these genocides were so contrary to the class interests of the perpetrators that these unconscious factors have to be considered a major part of the explanation and that without them the genocides would not have taken place.

In itself, this is a strong argument but whether or not Sagall has shown that this was so in relation to each of his chosen episodes is a question to which I will return shortly, but first want to raise another issue: the concept of 'social character'. It is reasonable to argue that social classes develop certain distinctive 'character structures' on the basis of their roles in production and history but this does not tell us how much weight should be attributed to this factor in the analysis of history. It is also reasonable to argue that there exists such a thing as 'national character', formed by history, but we know how such a notion is often abused in journalism and poor history writing. Clearly Sagall's social character concept is much superior to and more Marxist than, that of national character, but some of the same dangers may arise. In the case of 'social character' these danger is compounded by the difficulty of providing empirical confirmation of claims about the nature of particular social characters (e.g. that the German middle class were 'authoritarian').

Sagall addresses this problem with the claim that there are four kinds of evidence for social character: social or social psychoanalytical surveys; psychoanalytical case studies; historical studies; realist creative literature. But much of this may be of doubtful reliability and sometimes in this book I think Sagall makes assertions about groups' social character (e.g. the Scots-Irish) on the basis of secondary sources that would be very open to challenge.

When it comes to the application of his theories and hypotheses to the four genocides I think Sagall's accounts are not equally convincing. Most convincing to my mind is his

treatment of the Nazi Holocaust. This may be because here he is able to build on the masterly work already done by Trotsky, as well as many other Marxist hands ranging from the Frankfurt School to Mandel and Callinicos. It may also be because it is with the question of the Holocaust that Sagall has been most engaged and which may have driven the whole enterprise. Also the massive diversion of resources involved in the Holocaust does seem to run clearly counter to the Nazi regime's overwhelming interest in winning the war.

I also found the section on the Armenian genocide pretty persuasive but certainly lack sufficient knowledge of this episode to pass any confident judgment. In the case of Rwanda I was more doubtful but felt even less qualified to offer an assessment,

It was the account of the Native American genocide that I found least satisfactory. This is because I was not persuaded of the argument that was predominantly 'irrational' in the sense defined by Sagall. This is partly because the process was gradual and protracted, over centuries, rather than a sudden outburst of ferocious destructiveness, as was the case with the other three. It is also because the settlers had such a clear self interest in terms of driving the Native Americans off the land and crushing their resistance. Doubtless this process involved innumerable excesses (in which social and individual character may have played a part) but I don't think the genocide as a whole was driven by these unconscious psychological forces rather than the irreconcilable clash of opposed modes of production and conflicting economic interests.

Sagall supports his argument by an extended comparison between the extermination in Anglo-America and the conquest of Latin America which though brutal in the extreme stopped short of actual genocide, attributing the difference to the different social character of the Spanish and Portuguese conquistadors and settlers. I thought this gave the latter too much credit and the more likely explanation was the fact, also mentioned by Sagall, that in the North the conflict was over

land, whereas in the South it was over control of labour. In other words, the Spanish and Portuguese refrained from full genocide because they needed the indigenous population to work for them, as was the case with African slaves in the US. But Sagall can counter this objection by saying that what made this genocide irrational was precisely that it deprived the white settlers of a potential labour force. Perhaps in the end it comes down to a question of degree.

These doubts and problems are intended

to stimulate discussion, however, and not at all to negate the interest and value of the book. I don't think it would be possible for anyone to cover this ground and attempt to answer the questions Sagall does here without raising a multitude of issues requiring further debate and discussion. That this book will, hopefully, be a provoker of such debate, and a significant reference point within it, is itself a major achievement on which the author should be congratulated.