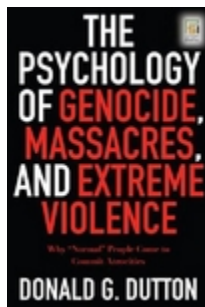


Journey Into "The Heart of Darkness" REDUX

A review of



The Psychology of Genocide, Massacres, and Extreme Violence: Why "Normal" People Come to Commit Atrocities

by Donald G. Dutton

Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2007.

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Reviewed by

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With the publication of *The Psychology of Genocide, Massacres, and Extreme Violence: Why "Normal" People Come to Commit Atrocities*, Donald Dutton, a distinguished professor of psychology at the University of British Columbia, joins Joseph Conrad, Francis Ford Coppola, and a host of professional peers as a commentator on the nature and origins of human evil. Dutton's volume, however, is neither fictional prose nor cinematic image; nor is it a study of a particular historical act. Rather, it is a carefully documented work that leads the reader on a journey into humanity's "heart of darkness" through a chapter-by-chapter

account of the brutal litanies of genocides, holocausts, military massacres, lynchings, prison riots, rapes, serial killers, and wars of the 20th century.

Each page in Dutton's volume is filled with description and analysis of horrible events of the 20th century we choose to forget, distort, or deny because of their sheer brutality. In Dutton's volume, the "nobility" of the human spirit is pitted against the reality of the 20th century's unconscionable acts of murder, torture, and atrocity. Like the characters in Conrad's novel and Coppola's film, Dutton's compendium takes us on journey into the "heart of darkness" within each of us.

The tragedy of human history is that in spite of episode after episode of violence and brutality, we continue—as individuals, societies, and nations—to engage in genocides, massacres, and extreme violence even as we cloak our acts under the virtues of freedom, morality, and noblesse oblige. "We come to free you from your ignorance"; "We come to bring you the virtues of civilization"; "*Arbeit Macht Frei*" read the signs above the entrances to Nazi concentration camps. "We come to bring you democracy," the U.S. government asserts in Iraq, Afghanistan, and a host of other countries. And the carnage continues. Why can't we cease this killing and brutality? Is there something inherent in our nature and our cultures that continues to overwhelm our conscience and to release it from its normal constraints? Is there an impregnable evil in our hearts, readily freed as selfish interests, perverted impulses, and lust for power, dominance, and wealth come to the fore?

Heart of Darkness: The Novel

In Joseph Conrad's novel, *Heart of Darkness* (1902/2006), the reader is taken on a journey into the wilds of the African Congo through the perceptions of Marlow, a "decent" but naïve man, initially ignorant of the dark mysteries of the African Congo and

the darker mysteries of the human heart. Marlow journeys up the Congo River toward a meeting with a shadowy figure named Kurtz, the ivory-trading company's most successful trader living in a distant jungle outpost. In the course of his journey, Marlow witnesses many African natives being beaten, starved, and killed with no remorse or hesitation by Whites claiming to be their superiors in nature and culture. To Marlow's shock, the natives are often killed or tortured for the sheer blood-lust delight of the Whites, who are drunk with their own power, immune to any remorse, and committed only to the certainty of their superiority.

Take up the White Man's burden—
Send forth the best ye breed—
Go send your sons to exile
To serve your captives' need;
To wait in heavy harness,
On fluttered folk and wild—
Your new-caught, sullen peoples,
Half devil and half child.

—Kipling, "The White Man's Burden"

Marlow's illusions of the "civilized" virtues of the Whites ultimately collapse when he encounters a dying Kurtz in his remote jungle outpost, surrounded by impaled heads and other obvious signs of barbarism. As the dying Kurtz is taken aboard the boat to bring him back to "civilization," a bitter irony is revealed. Unlike others, Kurtz no longer has any pretense of being civilized. Amid the darkness of the Congo, Kurtz has encountered the darkness in his own heart. Resigned to his mortality, Kurtz affirms the savagery of what he has seen and done. With a mixture of "somber pride, ruthless power, craven terror," and "hopeless despair" he utters his final words "The horror... the horror" (Conrad, 1902/2006, p. 69).

Heart of Darkness: The Film

In 1979, Francis Ford Coppola directed the film *Apocalypse Now* (Coppola, 1979) based on Conrad's earlier exploration of the darkness in the human heart. In the film, Capt. Benjamin Willard (Martin Sheen) is assigned to assassinate Capt. Walter Kurtz (Marlon Brando), a rogue officer who has abandoned the civilized savagery of the U.S. military in Vietnam in favor of primitive fighting methods considered to be unacceptable by his military superiors. In parallel with Conrad's novel, a dying Kurtz utters the words that remain the hallmark of the film and the novel—“The horror... the horror.” Within minutes of Kurtz's death, Willard calls in napalm bombs on Kurtz's isolated jungle camp, destroying everyone and everything in apocalyptic horror.

Like readers of Conrad's novel, the viewers of Coppola's film are compelled to confront the issue of evil within their own heart. The illusion of civilization we hold before us as the justification for our own acts of evil is exposed in both the novel and the film, revealing a savagery that remains even as we speak pretentiously of human evolution and civilization's progress. Yet at no point in human history has this savagery been more demonstrated than in the 20th century, when wars, massacres, democides, genocides, torture, and atrocities have left hundreds of millions dead and an endless number injured and scarred forever by trauma.

If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and to destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being, and who is willing to destroy his own heart?

—Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*

Heart of Darkness: Dutton's Volume

Dutton's volume is neither the first to address the topics of genocide, massacres, and extreme violence, nor is it likely to be the last. Other volumes abound (e.g., Chirot & McCauley, 2006; Chirot & Seligman, 2001; Conroy, 2000; Kressel, 2002; Newman & Erber, 2002; Waller, 2002; Zimbardo, 2007). But what makes Dutton's volume unique and, in my opinion, essential reading for everyone is its straightforward, clear, and unadulterated presentation of the panorama of brutality that marks the 20th century. It is all here—the familiar names, places, and events. Dutton's volume is not bedtime reading, but it is, in my opinion, required reading because it asks repeatedly "Why did this happen?" and "How did we let this happen?" The answers Dutton provides are an interaction of biological, psychological, and social determinants that result in a loss of conscience and moral responsibility within the context of situations that unleash normal human restraints and judgments. Dutton is clear in his contention that we live closer to the primal limits of our nature than we are often willing to acknowledge.

The belief in a supernatural source of evil is not necessary; Men alone are quite capable of every wickedness.

—Conrad, *Under Western Eyes*

After trying a number of approaches to present the volume's contents in an accurate and thorough manner, I concluded that the extensive material is best served by a traditional chapter-by-chapter summary.

"History of Violence"

Dutton begins with a discussion of the medieval history of genocides, massacres, and extreme violence. He takes us through the slaughter of the Crusades in the Holy Land, pointing out the strategies of thought and persuasion used by the popes of the day to justify the war and its atrocities. The formula they used was quite simple: They called the Crusades a “just war”—a “holy war”—in which a Christian god condoned the killing of the infidels because they challenged his dominance in his holy land. The brutalities were approved, sanctioned, and encouraged. They were authorized brutalities; therefore, those who did the killing and torture were absolved from any personal responsibility.

The authorization to kill is often followed by remarks that denigrate and dehumanize the outgroup, which is depicted as trying to destroy the ingroup. In the Crusades, the outgroup was the Muslims. Interestingly, Muslims have once again been cast as an outgroup. This approach to justifying the slaughter of others through authorization and vilification has been used across the ages—it is used because it works. The medieval popes, as Dutton points out, were clearly defining and identifying the “other”; the “other” is not us and thus can be destroyed with impunity and with no regret.

We cannot turn our backs on the tendency to turn the world and its beings into objects which we call ‘other.’ We are called more than ever to realize the obvious, that we are not, nor were we ever, living in a world of isolation. We are completely and inescapably interconnected and interdependent.

—Joan Halifax, *Buddhist Peacework: Creating Cultures of Peace*

“Mass Violence in the Twentieth Century”

In this chapter, Dutton presents extensive historical material that affirms that violence and atrocity have occurred throughout human

history and has occurred among virtually all human societies. However, Dutton notes that instances of democide (murders of more than one million people by governments) and genocide (acts committed with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group) increased dramatically in the 20th century.

Citing the scholarly work of Rudy Rummel (2005), a political scientist who has tracked deaths and violence across time, Dutton notes that 169,198,000 victims were killed in the 20th century by democide and genocide led by megamurderers (e.g., Stalin, Mao, Hitler, Chiang Kai-shek) and by other individual (e.g., Hirohito, Pol Pot, Milosevic, King Leopold of Belgium) and national (e.g., imperial Britain, colonial France, and a militaristic United States) villains of history.

"Genocides and the Holocaust"

The litany of genocides in the 20th century is discussed (Armenia, the Ukrainian starvation [this is called the Holodomor and resulted in seven million deaths], Cambodia, Rwanda, and Bosnia). The facts and figures presented are almost too shocking to believe. Is it possible that human beings did this? And, of course, there is the Jewish Holocaust committed by the Nazis and Eastern European collaborators. Of special note in this chapter is an analysis of the systematic steps used by the Nazi leaders to defuse any perception of the violence they were committing (i.e., begin with verbal assault and then progress to physical assault, physical separation, deportation, slave labor, genocide, and death marches).

The persecution and killing of homosexuals, gypsies, and undesirables are summarized in Chapter 4, which was the most difficult for me to read and reflect upon. The horrors of the Nazis turning on their own women and child soldiers in the final days are further testimony of the implosion that occurs with a society's preoccupation with violence and destruction. Perhaps there is a

warning here for the United States, certainly the most militaristic nation today and a society that is rampant with examples of violence as a norm.

"Military Massacres"

The militaries of the world have been a major source of massacres throughout history. In the 20th century, the slaughter, rape, and atrocities in Nanking, China, in which there were more than 250,000 victims, were perpetrated by the Japanese Imperial Army in 1937; and more recently, the brutalities in Rwanda, in which more than 800,000 people were killed, most by machetes. The list of places is well known: Bosnia, El Mozote (El Salvador), Germany in final days of World War II, Russia, My Lai (Vietnam), and on and on. These massacres involved more than shooting or stabbing; they also included vivisection, mutilations, insertions, sodomy, disemboweling, burying alive, burnings, and beheadings. While not noted in the book, to this list of savagery must be added the U.S. soldiers' murder of Filipino soldiers and civilians at the turn of the century because the Filipinos were considered subhuman.

I cut their throats, cut off their hands, cut out their tongue,
their hair, scalped them.

—Varnado Simpson, U.S. Infantry

My Lai, South Vietnam, May 16, 1968

348 killed, most of them women and children.

"Lynchings"

In this chapter, the frenzy of mobs bent on killing is described in all of its gruesome horror. For example, there is the early 1900s' case of Sam Hose, a Black man who killed his employer when the former threatened to kill him. The *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*,

today a respected Southern newspaper, inflamed the public passions for violence at the turn of the century by writing of the possibilities for lynching, torture, and burning that would exist when Hose was captured. Dutton also points out that lynchings are linked to economics, population density, political machinations, and racism. Of the 3,724 people killed by lynching, the vast majority were African Americans; 94 percent of these were killed by White mobs, many of whom were churchgoers in the morning and lynchers in afternoon and evening. Dutton provides vivid descriptions of the brutality used in these lynchings of Black men that I simply cannot repeat. Know this: Racism remains alive and well, and its brutal consequences continue often in the disguised form of poverty, disenfranchisement, and the abandonment of societal conscience and responsibility.

"Prison Riots"

In most discussions of extreme violence, prison life and prison riots are often ignored. It is simply accepted that violent individuals can engage in violent acts, since that is why they are incarcerated. What I learned, however, from this chapter is much more than what occurred at Attica or Santa Fe penitentiaries or other well-known prison riots. I learned how authorities can create cultures that provoke, sustain, and exacerbate violence by encouraging distrust among groups, creating scapegoats, and using unnecessarily oppressive control methods.

"Societal Transitions: Normative Shifts in Genocide"

In this fascinating chapter, Dutton identifies those conditions that shift people from their normal social restraints to a willingness to participate in genocide and other acts of massacre. His analysis of

the Rwanda massacre is best understood through his own words because they reveal the complex forces that act to encourage and sustain genocidal brutalities. Dutton writes:

Killer groups engaging in group think have an illusion of invulnerability and moral righteousness that leads to excessive risk taking, a collective rationalizing of warnings that might temper position, and unquestioned belief in the group's moral superiority, negative stereotypes of out-group making negotiation unfeasible, direct pressure on dissenters from group ideology, self censorship of deviation from apparent consensus, a shared disillusion of unanimity, and the emergence of self-appointed mind guards to protect the group from adverse information. (pp. 102–103)

I am compelled to cite this quotation because of its relevance to current situations in the Middle East on all sides of the brutal struggles that have resulted in the destruction of Iraq and Afghanistan as nation states, and the deaths of more than 650,000 people on all sides. This is a brilliant chapter—one that alone warrants owning this book.

"Individual Transitions (Soldiers)"

Using analyses of the World War II German Battalion 101 atrocities in Poland and the U.S. military's My Lai massacre in Vietnam, Dutton examines the "overkill" principle that characterizes these situations and is found in so many others. Dutton points out that a lethal combination of a leader who is prejudiced, a power imbalance or hegemony, expected obedience to authority, xenophobia, "deindividuated aggression" (i.e., pleasure is derived from violence), and "moral disengagement" can explain some of the most brutal acts of killing and destruction.

"Rape, Serial Killers, and Forensic Psychology"

This chapter analyses rapes by serial killers (e.g., Gary Ridgeway, mutilation murders, lust killers), soldiers (e.g., Nanjing [Nanking] China, My Lai, Soviet soldier rapes in Germany), and others and includes a discussion of rape motives and behavior patterns. Sexual murderers are also discussed (e.g., Caligula, Gilles de Rais). This topic is one of Dutton's professional areas of expertise, and the depth of discussion and analysis is excellent.

"Individual Differences in Violent Aggression"

At the heart of this chapter is a discussion of those people who kill, torture, and maim with abandon, and those who resist in spite of group pressure and order. A discussion of "infamous" figures who have engaged in brutality and atrocity (e.g., Josef Mengele, Adolf Eichmann, Franz Ziereis [Mauthausen concentration camp], and Lt. William Calley) is presented. Making use of a multifactor model, Dutton notes that although powerful situational factors may operate, there are individual differences in the propensity for atrocity. Dutton contends that some of the individual variation may be linked to differences in neurobiological structures and chemistry.

"Final Thoughts"

A summing up by Dutton gives extensive attention to the role of evolutionary neurobiological factors in extreme violence. He concludes that war crimes trials will never be sufficient retribution for the acts of violence committed. In doing so, Dutton raises a critical issue for many contemporary conflict situations, and that is

the debate about retributive justice versus restorative justice.

Closing Comments

Dutton begins his volume by stating clearly that his purpose is "to describe human violence in all its horrors, not the sanitized version studied in academic psychology labs where the delivery of low level electric shocks or punching bags is as severe as it gets." He notes that it was his "hope... that, fully appraised of what can occur, we can be more mindful as humans in preventing its recurrence" (p. xii).

Dutton holds back little in presenting the cold, harsh, and brutal facts of genocides, massacres, and extreme violence in paragraph after paragraph of detailed description, analysis, and commentary. If a simple reading of this horror could deter violence, then Dutton's book would accomplish this end. I am grateful to Dutton for writing this volume and for reminding me and other readers of the legacy of horror we have wrought under the guise of national necessity, religious self-righteousness, and the delusions of demonical leaders. It is not simply a question, however, of being "reminded"; it is the necessity that we never forget what has occurred and that we act to ensure that it will not occur again.

There are a thousand hacking at the branches of evil, to one
who is striking at the root.

—Thoreau, *Walden*

Are there any topics missing from Dutton's volume? Four topics come to my mind: (a) genital mutilation, (b) murder of female newborns and fetuses, (c) human trafficking, and (d) slavery. Please know that their absence does not detract from Dutton's work, but I feel that they deserve mention and perhaps inclusion in future editions. Genital mutilation is a practice in some

Middle Eastern and Sub-Saharan African societies in which female genitalia (e.g., clitoris, labia) are removed, often with stone knives. The alleged purposes are at odds with any reasonable explanation and with international human rights, even for cultural relativists. It is, ultimately, a misogynous act. This is true also of the widespread murder of female newborns and fetuses, a practice prevalent in India and China, where males are considered to have more "functional" value.

Human trafficking for sweatshop labor and prostitution is also an act of extreme violence. The smuggling of workers from Asia and Latin America to work under oppressive sweatshop conditions cannot be excluded, especially since some of these shops have been affiliated with major international business corporations. In addition, human trafficking of women from eastern Europe, Southeast Asia, and Latin America to terminals in Turkey, Israel, and southern Europe is a despicable crime that destroys millions of lives. These women are kept under harsh and cruel conditions that often become abattoirs from which there is no escape. Last, though it is hard to believe, domestic slavery continues to exist in Middle Eastern and African societies, and in the United States. The victims are men, women, and children bought and sold as chattel, brutally treated, and often murdered (Bales, 2005).

Are there any scholarly issues that Dutton may have missed or given only limited attention? The only concern I had, and it is, at best, minor, is that I wish Dutton had done more to integrate the many biological, psychological, and social determinants he discusses. In the closing chapter, Dutton does discuss emerging evolutionary biology models of human aggression in which inborn instinctual and neurological capacities for violence are juxtaposed against situations in which there is the risk of abandoning normal social restraints.

I appreciated this discussion and learned much from it—but it was all too brief. I say this only because Dutton may well be the best person to offer an in-depth analysis, given the scope and

breadth of his knowledge. But this is at best a selfish wish and in no way detracts from the intelligence of Dutton's work. In my opinion, Dutton has written a book for our era that should be read by everyone. It compels us to explore the human heart of darkness.

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