

## Interview – Benjamin Meiches

Written by E-International Relations

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# Interview – Benjamin Meiches

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**This interview is part of a series of interviews with academics and practitioners at an early stage of their career. The interviews discuss current research and projects, as well as advice for other early career scholars.**

Benjamin Meiches is an Associate Professor of Security Studies and Conflict Resolution at the University of Washington-Tacoma. His research focuses on questions of genocide, armed conflict, and humanitarian intervention. He is the author of *The Politics of Annihilation: A Genealogy of Genocide* and *Nonhuman Humanitarians: Animal Interventions in Global Politics* (Spring 2023). His research has also appeared in *International Political Sociology*, *Security Dialogue*, *Review of International Studies*, *Journal of Genocide Research* and other venues. He was the recipient of the *Review of International Studies* 'Best Article of 2019 Prize' for "Nonhuman Humanitarians." He completed his doctorate at Johns Hopkins University.

**What (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking or encouraged you to pursue your area of research?**

I first read David Campbell's *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity* when I was fifteen or sixteen years old in the context of high school debate. I still remember a few paragraphs of that book verbatim and it prompted me to think about language, concepts, history, and danger in ways that were radical to someone in their teens. This was shortly before 9/11 happened and global media coverage was all about terrorism, heavily invested in the worst kinds of orientalist tropes, and mobilizing for war in the Afghanistan and Iraq. Campbell's book remains a watershed text for me since it gave me a measure of critical distance that was valuable at a point when I was still young, very privileged, and didn't have much interest in, let alone sense of the scope and complexity of world politics.

I was aware of mass violence from an early age from stories shared by grandparents and family from different backgrounds about the horrors of Nazism and displacement, but I didn't have any formal academic interest in thinking about the politics of genocide until I was in my first year of graduate school. What struck me then was Raphaël Lemkin's texts themselves because they were so transparently inventing (or proposing the invention of) concepts to talk about and criminalize mass violence. Now, Lemkin is far less novel than he seems, but he was doing this on the cusp of or just within generational memory. What was fascinating to me was partly how he assembled the concept, but also that he was largely unknown and writing notes and proposals about genocide during a war, which somehow became the signature language for identifying violence and evil today. Genocide is a term that has a shocking or stilling power. Offhand, I am not sure I can think of another concept that, in such a short timeframe, became such a prominent device for framing a collective experience. I don't mean, as much of the literature does, to turn Lemkin into an unsung prophet. His activism isn't what interests me as much as how he put together a concept that resonated or caught. Once I started to learn more about it, I discovered this unexpected, bumpy history, where the way we used to talk about genocide differs dramatically from how we discuss it today. So, I just found this interesting history with some counterintuitive parts to it that also felt significant to many aspects of both national and international politics.

In building my account of Lemkin, I benefited tremendously from completing my doctorate at Johns Hopkins, which

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had a rich engagement between International Relations and Political Theory so I was also reading Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Frantz Fanon, and Catherine Malabou all of whom helped me frame some of my work, consider the importance of epistemic shifts, the creation of concepts, the importance of affect in making something sensible, the role of colonialism in international law, and the relationship between materialism and language more carefully. I also wouldn't be nearly as careful a thinker without Siba Grovogui's guidance, Jennifer Culbert's incomparable ability to break any idea or proposition down into its elemental parts, or Bill Connolly's aspirational pluralism. Many figures in genocide studies like Dirk Moses, Alex Hinton, Mahmood Mamdani, and Helen Fein were also inspirations as they pushed genocide studies to think more the field more critically.

**Your research has involved rethinking the hegemonic discourse of genocide. What could this broader discourse mean in practice for survivors of genocide?**

In *The Politics of Annihilation*, I use three terms to define my inquiry. Politics of genocide, genocide as politics, and hegemonic understanding of genocide. Most studies of mass violence are interested in what I call 'genocide as politics,' that is studying the dynamics of how violence occurs, the factors, variables, and causes that contribute to it. My book addresses the 'politics of genocide,' which is the contestation surrounding the concept in political discourse. While genocide has long been seen as a 'contestable concept' and the Genocide Convention viewed as a problematic document, I didn't think there was a thorough effort to think through the discursive transformations surrounding genocide nor to put them into conversation with how different institutions responded to mass violence. The basic insight here is that the 'politics of genocide' structures a lot of how the study of 'genocide as politics' is framed and, more importantly, acted upon by people and institutions. The 'hegemonic understanding of genocide' is a term I use to describe a common theme in the politics on genocide, which is to treat the concept of genocide as if it has a stable definition, consistent features, indisputable moral and political implications, and as actionable. It isn't a single definition of genocide per se, so much as a practice of defining or ascribing genocide significance. The most prominent version tends to use the Nazi genocide as the archetype of genocide, to focus on the state, on well-established categories of identity, to focus on physical violence and so on. The hegemonic understanding is often leveraged in disputes over recognizing or dismissing a case of violence as genocide, but it also legitimates interventions in response to genocide. To be clear, this doesn't make the hegemonic understanding inherently bad. I label it to identify and critique it as a mechanism in the politics of genocide, but not to treat it as a trite, contrived, or ideological fiction.

Your question focuses on what this means in practice for survivors of genocide? Here, I think several things. First, genocide donates a sense of order to an experience. It scripts what happened in a way that makes an event intelligible even if that mark signals an unspeakable or incomprehensible violence. In some contexts, the hegemonic understanding might offer surviving individuals and communities a sense of recognition, which might be psychologically useful or enable advocacy on their behalf. Of course, the underside is if the hegemonic understanding dismisses an experience as non-genocidal. My work highlights several cases where there are efforts to stretch genocide to encompass new forms or modes of violence. These efforts are typically marked by hostility. Here, I think the hegemonic understanding could be damaging to survivors if the form of violence they've encountered isn't one that registers with dominant expectations. Still, in other cases, I think there is a colonial potential in the hegemonic understanding of genocide that needs to be called out. For instance, ascribing genocide to an indigenous people who view themselves as a living, vibrant, and sovereign community can be a problematic trope that marks their life solely as a tragic loss. It's a racist move that positions people as survivors in a way that strips them of their agency. So, care and reflexivity about it are important.

Second, one point in my work is that the hegemonic understanding builds from dominant histories and experiences, but also commonplaces about space and time. I've always loved a short article by Sheri Rosenberg's entitled "Genocide is a Process, Not an Event," because it speaks to the fact that, much like armed conflict, it is hard to establish clear boundaries around the event. Violence mutates as it occurs. I think the hegemonic understanding tends to stop us from thinking in these ways and so it inhibits an understanding of genocide as something ongoing after physical violence stops. We sort of separate out life before and after an event when it's not exactly clear how to do that with analytical precision or, more importantly, due ethical consideration. The loss of a language, for example, doesn't stop with displacement but rebounds through generational interactions. In this sense, forms of slow violence

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or slow genocide don't really have a place in the hegemonic understanding, but I think they're incredibly important and I suspect they are a practical challenge for the survivors of mass violence.

Third, my goal is not to legislate which claims about genocide are or are not salient or correct. I wanted to show the conditions of possibly, the functions behind what made genocide discourse work in the way it does. For me, the ethical stake is to create more space for marginalized claims about genocide, but also to stir up greater creativity in thinking around genocide. I hope that is useful to survivors of violence, but I also think that my most immediate impact is in causing scholars and some practitioners to consider their use of the concept more carefully. Survivors likely have more immediate needs than this form of political contestation.

### **Claudia Card theorized that central to genocide's evil is "social death". How does this fit into the wider discourse of genocide?**

Claudia Card's approach to genocide is one that I greatly appreciate. I think her first piece on this came out in *Hypatia* in the early 2000s and then was developed into a larger theory in her book *Confronting Evils: Torture, Terrorism, Genocide*. There have been some excellent applications of her work to give a scope of the harm and complexity of genocide by scholars like Louise Wise, Damien Short, Mohammed Abed, and others. I also think it is worth noting that Card builds her account from Orlando Patterson's book *Slavery and Social Death*, which focuses on the phenomenon of 'natal alienation' in the context of Transatlantic Slavery. Social death has also become a prominent framework in multiple critical literatures, such as afropessimism, which genocide studies hasn't really engaged. Robbie Shilliam, Sara-Maria Sorentino, and other folks have recently taken up an interest in how Patterson's work has been received, but, to my knowledge, no one has really addressed Card's building an account of genocide out of this literature.

For my part, I think Card's intervention is important for a few reasons. First, it crystallizes a lot of what I have tried to describe as 'social genocide.' One of the main disputes in genocide studies concerns whether cultural genocide is a meaningful category or not. Card provides maybe the best principled explanation for why the destruction of a social world is not only a possible form of genocide, but constitutive of genocide. So, she makes a major contribution there by changing the terms of the discussion. Second, in doing so, I also think she's breaking down aspects of the hegemonic understanding of genocide. She's pointing out that genocide scholars need to be less interested just in physical violence, something that may miss the complexity of social textures that constitute a form of life, and more on the gravity of the harms of losing a world. It opens a lot of room for critically analyzing forms of violence that are invisible or acts that don't initially seem destructive as types of violence.

In my work, I have a small, friendly critique of her position. I try to show that by shifting the question of genocide into the loss of a social world she also makes assumptions about the coherence of a social unit or social world prior to its disappearance. In this view, groups aren't static, preexisting entities, but they are socially meaningful relationships that we can point to and say have been definitively lost. One of my worries, and again it's a small point of divergence, is that destructive acts also create identities and interests. If we mark it solely by natal alienation of a prefigured social world, then it may obscure this possibility. So, Card is making valuable inroads on the problems of the hegemonic understanding of genocide, but there are some new issues that emerge along the way. She passed away about seven years ago and I would have loved to dialogue with her about these questions.

### **As part of your article "Genocide and the Brain" for the Journal of Genocide Research, you discuss the neuroscientific progress that has given a new meaning to the "mental harm" element of the Convention on Genocide. Is the intersection between Biology and International Relations essential to explore?**

I wouldn't say 'essential' so much as potentially important. This article begins by unpacking the origins of one of the subclauses of Article II of the Genocide Convention, which describes an act of genocide as "causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group." While a lot of contemporary readings of this line associated with things like torture, some of the first arguments in favor of this language were referencing the Chinese experience under Japanese occupation. One of the major points of emphasis was the damage caused by the forced distribution of opium because it undermined the mental health, biological well-being, and political capacities of Chinese citizens.

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This background has been a bit lost in discussions about this aspect of the Genocide Convention so that was my first point. The second point was to show that these early deliberations are talking about a model of human health that resonates with a lot of the insights about brain injury and brain trauma from contemporary neuroscience, which is a language that lawmakers and diplomats in the 1940s simply didn't have available to them.

Based off my reading, a lot of the literature on medicine and neuroscience points in a similar direction. As I understand the research to date, physical injuries, such as traumatic brain injury, can permanently alter someone's life, but much lower scale, chronic stresses, malnutrition, and even changes in social dynamics, can also have widely disparate effects on brain development and health. A lot of medical research related to human health and brain function looks at populations that have been subjected to specific conditions or diseases: how do the brains and bodies of people with meningitis look different from a population without that exposure, how do American football players, who suffer repeated trauma to their heads, look different from the standard populace. The concept that widespread policy might deliberately enact harms that affect the brain isn't the kind of research question that would get posed, but it is strikingly like the acts that Ti-Sun Li and the other folks are proposing should go into the Genocide Convention.

In the article, I make the claim that if you stretch neuroscience in this way, you get some startlingly implications. First, it's possible that forms of harm that fall well short of biological death/killing can still have devastating impacts on individual and communal health. So, the presumption we can just look at killing as the easiest way to interpret acts of genocide becomes harder to maintain. Second, there is some unique value in the debate about how to address colonial and cultural genocide. One of the common themes in genocide studies literature is to say that the Genocide Convention doesn't really have room for addressing cultural genocide. This is a misreading of the deliberations that happened around the language that ended up in the Genocide Convention. It is also an argument that relies on a strong nature/culture split. The neuroscience literature is pushing back on this claim I think and saying no, there are complex, medically documentable impacts here that need to be taken seriously that can be physical and social. The brain is one site in the body where teasing those terms out ends up being really tricky, so neuroscience might help develop a richer understanding of the consequences and depth of violence and genocide. It's a bit strange, but when Frantz Fanon at the end of *The Wretched of the Earth* references the "bloodless genocide" of one and a half billion people, I believe this is also what he's getting at and mobilizing for anticolonial purposes. While I don't think we need to substantiate claims of colonial or cultural harm in the language of neuroscience or biology, I do think this is an underexplored epistemological resource that could also be used to advance and strengthen these claims.

If the question is do I think all accounts of International Relations need to reference biology or neuroscience, the answer is no. I consider myself a materialist committed to a mind-independent reality, but I certainly don't want to replicate the kinds of science envy that have sometimes detrimental to the discipline. Neuroscience is thinking about harm in new ways, that's potentially interesting and useful. Having broadly materialist commitments shouldn't be prescriptive though, it doesn't mean, for me, that I believe we all need to be reading chemistry or biology to do our work successfully.

### What are you currently working on?

The past few years I have been working on a book about nonhuman animals (dogs, rats, caprines, and bovines) in humanitarian interventions and services. It's entitled *Nonhuman Humanitarians: Animal Interventions in Global Politics* and coming out with University of Minnesota Press this Spring. The book dedicates a chapter to each nonhuman animal and examines how they became laborers or participants in humanitarian initiatives, what equips them for this labor, how it affects the outcomes of humanitarian aid, and how nonhumans are treated in different lines of work. I start with the movement of explosive detection dogs from military to humanitarian services, turn to the much more recent use of Giant African Pouched rats in explosives' detection work and infectious disease management by APOPO, and finally look at the Heifer Project's (now Heifer International) model of donating heifers to address hunger and economic development.

It has been a very rich, multifaceted project. I had to learn a tremendous amount of biology, animal science, ethology, and behavioral science to complete it. I find nonhumans' involvement fascinating partly because it turns out that

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humans often treat one another better when they're joined by a nonhuman companion animal. Perhaps more importantly, humanitarianism and human rights are built on the importance of addressing human suffering, but also purport to do so because of a special human capacity for empathy or reason. It is a universalizing, humanist discourse and there are a lot of critiques of that for its implicit gendering, racializing, and colonizing potential. However, nonhuman animals are kind of a limit figure for humanitarianism. It's a weird reframing, but humanitarianism offers anthropocentrism as a kind of antidote to exclusionary nationalism.

When humanitarians work with nonhuman animals that are commonly seen in the Global North as helpful, such as dogs, they're lauded as co-participants, but if they're just a resource for milk and meat, like cattle, killing weirdly becomes an essential part of humanitarianism. What's stranger still is within humanitarian discourses you find a lot of efforts to identify nonhumans, like dogs, as possessing degrees of empathy, reason, agency, and communication to promote their status as humanitarian agents, but you rarely see the same in the context of goats or rats when the underlying science says they all have their own version of these capacities. The point becomes an interesting way to get into the implicit presuppositions of humanitarianism and then also to ask questions about what ethical dilemmas and issues humanitarianism needs to address, how it considers ecological politics and so on. It's been a joyful project to work on during COVID partly because you get to learn all kinds of interesting things about vomeronasal canals, how some species can smell micro-bacterial emissions on a scale that is mind boggling, or why we arrived at the concept of the mammal, which etymologically derives from milk making, as a way of classing a wide assortment of animals. It also raises some important questions about the orientation of human rights, humanitarianism, and atrocity prevention in an age of mass extinction.

### **What is the most important advice you could give to other early career or young scholars?**

I confess to being wary of dispensing advice for a couple reasons. First, I come into the discipline with a set of privileges associated with social location and position that I imagine many early career scholars don't have. Second, after the work of folks like Robert Vitalis on the deep history of our discipline's biases, I think folks in my position should be cautious about normalizing their sense of experience and priorities. Those caveats in place, here are just few things I did that I think worked for me over the past half decade in different areas of my career. Take them, leave them, I only have only an intuitive sense that they were useful to me.

First, I tried to learn about some of the behavioral science around writing. Analyzing one's behavior sounds a bit off-putting to social scientists, but it's just another, somewhat pragmatic way to just assess how you're using time, unpacking the conditions that produce writer's block, or the way email labor gets you bogged down differently at different parts of the day. It's also highly case dependent and, for me, it was just another lens, one I was unfamiliar with, to help reflect on aspects of my labor conditions. Second, because I started academically in the context of debate, I tend to think about my research as much in terms of argument as observation. Whenever I'm writing I've found that useful because I am constantly asking myself basically two questions: what is unique or novel about what I am observing and saying and how does it impact existing discussions? Framing that helped me to abandon some of the perfectionism that used to trap me, slow my work, and lead to stress. It gave me more confidence than if I had thoroughly looked at the literature and could answer both of those questions that reviewers would also support my work. Articles and books look like finished objects, but I tend to believe they're really extended, partly blinded, conversations about these two questions. Finally, Nicholas Onuf gave me one stellar piece of advice when I was in graduate school, which was to, on occasion, like once a semester, teach a class with zero prep work. I was initially skeptical, but I've found that sometimes that produces a much more creative, engaged class where you're forced to invent new pedagogical techniques.