

## BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

**George Steinmetz**, *The Devil's Handwriting: Precoloniality and the German Colonial State in Qingdao, Samoa, and Southwest Africa*. Chicago Studies in Practices of Meaning. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007, 608 pp. \$US 33.00 paper (978-0-226-77243-1), \$US 90.00 hardcover (978-0-226-77241-7)

**T**he year 2004 marked the hundredth anniversary of what has come to be known as the first German genocide; that is, the planned and officially sanctioned attempted extermination of the Herero people in German Southwest Africa, now Namibia. The anniversary of this event was marked by calls from the Herero people for restorative justice and reparations, an almost apology from the German government, and in the academic world, a number of conferences and symposia seeking to understand German colonialism in and of itself as well as considering the links between German colonial practices within Europe and those less remarked upon practices outside Europe.

George Steinmetz's book is an important contribution to the emerging debates, not least because at 600 pages it provides a wealth of information about the German colonies, not only in Africa, but in Samoa and in the Qingdao province in China as well. What is striking in comparing these three sites of colonial "encounter" — especially considering the short timescale of German colonialism, about thirty-five years — are the patterns of variation in those practices. While German Southwest Africa is widely recognized as the site of "the first genocide of the twentieth century" (p. 9), Steinmetz claims that Samoa was organized as an "overseas plantation economy" (p. 12), and Qingdao, "coercively leased from China for ninety-nine years," was run, at times, in collaboration with the Chinese inhabitants (p. 16). The German depredations in Africa were not repeated in either Samoa or Qingdao and, thus, he argues, it appears there was "no singular German approach to colonial governance" (p. 19).

In making an argument for the heterogeneity of German colonial practice and policy, Steinmetz seeks to locate the explanation for these differences in two places: in precolonial ethnographic discourse and in "imperial Germany's three-way intra-elite class struggle" (p. 49). He suggests that "native policy rarely went beyond suggestions that were already present in precolonial ethnographic discourse" (p. 25) and that

it is possible to understand “why one strand of precolonial discourse rather than another guided colonial practice once we know who was put in charge of a given colony” (p. 54). The elite classes within Wilhelmine Germany were each “rooted in a different social source of status” (p. 49) — the economic bourgeoisie, the nobility, and the middle class intelligentsia — and these differences, according to Steinmetz, were significant in the way in which the colonial state made use of the ethnographic discourses available to it. For example, Steinmetz argues that China’s meritocratic system was regarded as attractive by those Germans “who lacked economic wealth and hereditary cultural capital” (p. 369) and should be seen as part of the explanation of why the colonizers were not trying to transform their Chinese subjects, but rather working with them (p. 430). Another part of the explanation was the dominance of Sinophilia within Europe, where Europeans regarded China as civilizational equals, at least in the early 19th century. This contrasts sharply with the representations of other colonized peoples and the subsequent Sinophobia which saw the racialization of the Chinese people “from ‘white’ to ‘yellow’” (p. 388) in order to distance them from European “civilization.”

The link between ethnographic representation and colonial policy draws, of course, from Said’s germinal work in *Orientalism*. While acknowledging the importance of Said in opening up this field, Steinmetz uses the work of Bourdieu and Bhabha to argue for the necessity of deepening his analysis by attending to the social and psychic levels of causality between representation and policy and by examining the ways in which social practices and perceptions are arranged in patterned social fields. The charge of “reductionism” occasionally levelled at the work of Said can be avoided, Steinmetz argues, if one specifies more fully the links that lead from travellers’ tales and ethnographic discourses to colonial policies. In line with his engagement with the work of Bourdieu and Bhabha, Steinmetz suggests that there is a need to address “(1) patterns of resistance and collaboration by the colonized, (2) symbolic competition among colonizers, and (3) colonizers’ imaginary cross-identification with images of their subjects” (p. 27). Steinmetz argues that in Samoa, as elsewhere, German efforts to regulate domestic colonial practices would not have been successful in any real measure without the collaboration of the colonized, and seeks to demonstrate how “the colonized became co-authors or, at least, copy editors of their own native policies” (p. 358). As is made clear in the case of Southwest Africa, however, collaboration is often a consequence of divisive policies which require the colonial state endowing some with the position of “favoured subaltern” (p. 237) and using them to effect the exterminationist policy of “colonialism without the colonized” (p. 202).

The case of Southwest Africa, Steinmetz argues, confirms at least one aspect of Said's argument in *Orientalism* that, regardless of the amount of empirical evidence to the contrary, the observations of Khoi culture that fed into the making of colonial policy were primarily based on dominant misrepresentations and stereotypes (p. 81). Even the partial assimilation of the Khoikhoi into European culture and the take up of some forms of European lifestyles led to hostility as they were seen as "seesawing uncontrollably between their abject origins and modern assimilated lifestyles" (p. 104). Particularly disturbing for the Germans was the fact that one of the rebel leaders organizing campaigns against German colonial rule "claimed to have received inspiration for his rebellious campaign from a Christian God" (p. 121). The dominant representation of African peoples as "*Naturvolk*" meant that any change was regarded as negative and problematic, and the previously reviled Bushmen began to be seen "as preferable to the Khoikhoi, as more natural and unspoiled" (p. 109). This characterization of others as primitive or natural was also dominant in Samoa, as was the colonial government's hostility to any form of "modernization" there and their attempt to maintain what were seen as traditional practices (p. 326). While some have argued that German rule protected Samoa from the ravages of capitalism, Steinmetz makes the point that this "overlooks the ways in which colonialism necessarily redefines indigenous culture in the very act of traditionalizing it" (p. 314).

The wealth of detail and information synthesized here is remarkable, and the book as a whole goes a long way towards filling an inexplicable gap in the historical literature. Steinmetz's identification of the impact of precolonial ethnographic discourse on the development of colonial policy presents an interesting question, but is ultimately unanswered. This is particularly so in one crucial respect. To this reviewer it still remains a puzzle why, in terms of the analytical framework presented, genocide happened in Southwest Africa and not in Samoa. The suggestion that the answer lies in the differing social status of respective colonial administrators promises to be a fruitful avenue of inquiry, but at times it looks as if Steinmetz devolves the question of social differences to the different personal sensibilities of the respective administrators. While the sociological analysis remains much less developed than the historical detail of the case studies themselves, the book is a significant achievement and a rewarding read. It is the deserving 2008 winner of the American Sociological Association Comparative and Historical Sociology Section's Barrington Moore Award for the best book in the area of comparative and historical sociology.

Gurminder K. Bhambra is Assistant Professor of Sociology at the University of Warwick. Her research interests are in the areas of historical sociology, contemporary social theory, and the intersection of the social sciences with postcolonial studies. She is author of *Rethinking Modernity: Postcolonialism and the Sociological Imagination* (Palgrave, 2007), which won the 2008 British Sociological Association's Philip Abrams Memorial Prize for the best first book in sociology, and co-editor (with Dr. Robbie Shilliam) of *Silencing Human Rights: Critical Engagements with a Contested Project* (Palgrave, 2008). [g.k.bhambra@warwick.ac.uk](mailto:g.k.bhambra@warwick.ac.uk)