

## **Lecture Series, *Climate and Genocide***

### **Fall Semester 2021**

A series of lectures presented during the fall 2021 semester addressed the intersection of climate catastrophes and mass violence. The impetus for these events was the publication of a powerful statement regarding climate change, signed by leading genocide scholars, including Taner Akçam and Thomas Kühne, that urged a paradigm shift in the field. Pivoting away from an exclusive focus on mass violence perpetrated by human beings against other human beings, the signatories proposed a fundamental change to their cornerstone mentalities.

Genocide scholarship examines why one group of people seeks the annihilation of another group of people and its practitioners seek to understand how to prevent mass atrocities. Until now, devastating man-made crises such as pandemics and environmental disasters were mostly left to the natural sciences. Yet, the consequences from these human induced catastrophes have the potential to imperil not only Earth's ecosystems but also all living species, which creates a moral imperative to act. Moreover, climate catastrophes disproportionately impact marginalized and disadvantaged communities around the globe. The eventual cost to human life may eventually approach an unforeseen scale. In order to push these issues to the center of genocide studies, the scholars' statement advocated advancing the conversation linking climate change to potential mass death through university curricula, research priorities, and scholarly discourse.

Historian Mark Levene, an Emeritus Fellow at the University of Southampton (UK) who authored the climate statement, opened the series. In his talk, “Facing Off or Facing up to ‘The End’? Reflections on the Omnicidal Trajectory of Homo Anthropocenus” (28 September 2021), he examined how mankind has repeatedly ignored opportunities to avert major existential threats to the planet. In presenting the subject through the lens of his political and intellectual evolution, Levene considered milestones from his life as an environmentalist and peace activist. He began by showing the doomsday clock that the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists created, at the dawn of the nuclear age, to broadcast the dangers inherent in technology. The scientists who monitor the world’s vulnerability eventually incorporated climate change into their prognostications, which currently calculate that mankind is within 100 seconds of extinction.

Already in the 1970s, Levene recognized that the future of the planet looked bleak. He began protesting nuclear power and advocating for environmental awareness. In the wake of the oil crisis, there were attempts to reduce the carbon footprint and the addiction to fossil fuel. Nonetheless, climate change was not on the political or social horizon and the opportunity to intervene was missed. At the same time, the Cold War brought the nuclear threat to a crisis point. These developments inspired Levene to dedicate himself to active campaigning against these potentially catastrophic dangers. He highlighted the influence on him of the scholar activist E.P. Thompson who, during the 1980s, was a leader in the movement to ban nuclear weapons in Europe. During the 1990s, as the nuclear crisis waned, the dangers related to climate change intensified. Levene concluded by suggesting that we may have already passed midnight on the doomsday clock.

Princeton University historian Emanuel Kreike considered the history of environmental degradation in the context of mass violence in his talk, “Environcide: Environmental Warfare as a Crime against Humanity and Nature” (21 October 2021). In examining the impact of conventional war on society and the environment, he distinguished between crimes against culture and those against nature. While international crimes against civilians are the subject of human rights law, with genocide at the apex, environmental warfare belongs to a separate realm of law that has never been prosecuted successfully although current initiatives are underway to have *ecocide* and wartime environmental destruction recognized as crimes against humanity. Kreike proposed the term *environcide* to describe the destruction of environmental infrastructure, which he defined as neither solely a gift from nature nor a human artifact but occupying a middle ground between nature and culture.

Throughout history, wars have damaged, destroyed and rendered inaccessible the environmental infrastructure that communities depend on to sustain lives and livelihoods. To illustrate, Kreike presented two cases: the Dutch revolt against the Spanish also known as the War of Flanders (1568-1648), which was the last of the pre-modern wars, and the Dutch Aceh War (1873-1904), a modern war of colonial conquest on the Indonesian island of Sumatra. In the former war, Dutch rebels led by William the Orange caused massive flooding to break the siege of Leiden. Several months after opening Holland’s southern sea dykes, the landscape became inundated and caused the Spanish to retreat. The victory brought about the birth of the Dutch Republic but the flooding caused an immense water wilderness that consumed agricultural lands, displaced the population, and impoverished the countryside. In the second case, the Dutch invaded the Aceh Sultanate to complete their conquest of Sumatra and Indonesia. The protracted and brutal war

became known as a volkerenmoord, a Dutch word that equates to genocide. The densely populated Aceh River Delta depended upon an elaborate hydraulic system to cultivate rice that could be stored for long periods as a buffer against floods and droughts. Dutch invaders pursued scorched earth policies and targeted food supplies to advance their conquest, which ultimately succeeded but at a huge cost to the Achinese people and the region. Kreike used these cases to highlight continuities in the conduct of war by which armies intentionally target environmental infrastructure to advance their side despite steep costs.

The intersection between environmental destruction and violence against Indigenous Peoples was the subject of “The Ecology of Genocide” (3 November 2021) a lecture by Felipe Milanez. A Brazilian journalist and a professor at the Federal University of Bahia, Milanez was a visiting scholar with A New Earth Conversation, a recently established Clark University initiative that grapples with issues of climate change. His work examines the relationship between genocide and ecocide in contemporary Brazil where the current authoritarian government of Jair Bolsonaro has pursued historic practices of controlling indigenous resources and has perpetrated violence against indigenous and forest peoples. Defending their communities and natural environment has been challenging for these communities especially recently as they have suffered disproportionate harm during the Covid 19 pandemic.

The commodification of life is an expression of extreme capitalism in Brazil where private industry and the economy of extraction are complicit in the making of a racist nation. Milanez presented the paradigmatic case of the Piripikura, a tribe from the western part of the Brazilian Amazon, who were victims of rubber tappers engaged in enslaving, killing, and kidnapping

villagers. A people at risk of total extermination from genocide, the Piripikura have only three surviving members. Their case reveals the interconnection between racism, extractivism, international capital, interests of local bosses, land grabbers, loggers, cattle ranchers, and the military in profiting off raw material and territory. In raising attention to this ongoing tragedy, Milanez quoted the Indigenous leaders who attended COP 26, the UN Climate Conference in Glasgow underway at the time of the lecture, “there is no solution to the climate crisis without us!”

Highlighting the nexus of ecocide, climate change, and genocide, these lectures raised awareness and challenged the Strassler Center community to place scholarship at the service of building a more secure future for all peoples. To that end, Chris Davey, the Charles E. Scheidt Professor of Genocide Studies, is co-teaching “Climate and Conflict: Understanding Violence in the Anthropocene.” This interdisciplinary course will examine how conflict is worsened by climate change and how conflict, in turn, increases climate change -- an intersection that should be of concern to all genocide students and scholars.

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