

A Terrible Normality: The Massacres and Aberrations of History

Through much of history the abnormal has been the norm

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Theme: [Crimes against Humanity](#), [History](#)

Global Research, August 18, 2014

[Dandelion Salad and Global Research](#) 27

January 2013

Through much of history the abnormal has been the norm.

This is a paradox to which we should attend. Aberrations, so plentiful as to form a terrible normality of their own, descend upon us with frightful consistency.

The number of massacres in history, for instance, are almost more than we can record.

There was the New World holocaust, consisting of the extermination of indigenous Native American peoples throughout the western hemisphere, extending over four centuries or more, continuing into recent times in the Amazon region.

There were the centuries of heartless slavery in the Americas and elsewhere, followed by a full century of lynch mob rule and Jim Crow segregation in the United States, and today the numerous killings and incarcerations of Black youth by law enforcement agencies.

Let us not forget the extermination of some 200,000 Filipinos by the U.S. military at the beginning of the twentieth century, the genocidal massacre of 1.5 million Armenians by the Turks in 1915, and the mass killings of African peoples by the western colonists, including the 63,000 Herero victims in German Southwest Africa in 1904, and the brutalization and enslavement of millions in the Belgian Congo from the late 1880s until emancipation in 1960—followed by years of neocolonial free-market exploitation and repression in what was Mobutu's Zaire.

French colonizers killed some 150,000 Algerians. Later on, several million souls perished in Angola and Mozambique along with an estimated five million in the merciless region now known as the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

The twentieth century gave us—among other horrors—more than sixteen million lost and twenty million wounded or mutilated in World War I, followed by the estimated 62 million to 78 million killed in World War II, including some 24 million Soviet military personnel and civilians, 5.8 million European Jews, and taken together: several million Serbs, Poles, Roma, homosexuals, and a score of other nationalities.

In the decades after World War II, many, if not most, massacres and wars have been openly or covertly sponsored by the U.S. national security state. This includes the two million or so left dead or missing in Vietnam, along with 250,000 Cambodians, 100,000 Laotians, and 58,000 Americans.

Today in much of Africa, Central Asia, and the Middle East there are “smaller” wars, replete with atrocities of all sorts. Central America, Colombia, Rwanda and other places too numerous to list, suffered the massacres and death-squad exterminations of hundreds of thousands, a constancy of violent horrors. In Mexico a “war on drugs” has taken 70,000 lives with 8,000 missing.

There was the slaughter of more than half a million socialistic or democratic nationalist Indonesians by the U.S.-supported Indonesian military in 1965, eventually followed by the extermination of 100,000 East Timorese by that same U.S.-backed military.

Consider the 78-days of NATO’s aerial destruction of Yugoslavia complete with depleted uranium, and the bombings and invasion of Panama, Grenada, Somalia, Libya, Yemen, Western Pakistan, Afghanistan, and now the devastating war of attrition brokered against Syria. And as I write (early 2013), the U.S.-sponsored sanctions against Iran are seeding severe hardship for the civilian population of that country.

All the above amounts to a very incomplete listing of the world’s violent and ugly injustice. A comprehensive inventory would fill volumes. How do we record the countless other life-searing abuses: the many millions who survive wars and massacres but remain forever broken in body and spirit, left to a lifetime of suffering and pitiless privation, refugees without sufficient food or medical supplies or water and sanitation services in countries like Syria, Haiti, South Sudan, Ethiopia, Somalia, and Mali.

Think of the millions of women and children around the world and across the centuries who have been trafficked in unspeakable ways, and the millions upon millions trapped in exploitative toil, be they slaves, indentured servants, or underpaid laborers. The number of impoverished is now growing at a faster rate than the world’s population. Add to that, the countless acts of repression, incarceration, torture, and other criminal abuses that beat upon the human spirit throughout the world day by day.

Let us not overlook the ubiquitous corporate corruption and massive financial swindles, the plundering of natural resources and industrial poisoning of whole regions, the forceful dislocation of entire populations, the continuing catastrophes of Chernobyl and Fukushima and other impending disasters awaiting numerous aging nuclear reactors.

The world’s dreadful aberrations are so commonplace and unrelenting that they lose their edge and we become inured to the horror of it all. “Who today remembers the Armenians?” Hitler is quoted as having said while plotting his “final solution” for the Jews. Who today remembers the Iraqis and the death and destruction done to them on a grand scale by the U.S. invasion of their lands? William Blum reminds us that more than half the Iraq population is either dead, wounded, traumatized, imprisoned, displaced, or exiled, while their environment is saturated with depleted uranium (from U.S. weaponry) inflicting horrific birth defects.

What is to be made of all this? First, we must not ascribe these aberrations to happenstance, innocent confusion, and unintended consequences. Nor should we believe the usual rationales about spreading democracy, fighting terrorism, providing humanitarian rescue, protecting U.S. national interests and other such rallying cries promulgated by ruling elites and their mouthpieces.

The repetitious patterns of atrocity and violence are so persistent as to invite the suspicion

that they usually serve real interests; they are structural not incidental. All this destruction and slaughter has greatly profited those plutocrats who pursue economic expansion, resource acquisition, territorial dominion, and financial accumulation.

Ruling interests are well served by their superiority in firepower and striking force. Violence is what we are talking about here, not just the wild and wanton type but the persistent and well-organized kind. As a political resource, violence is the instrument of ultimate authority. Violence allows for the conquest of entire lands and the riches they contain, while keeping displaced laborers and other slaves in harness.

The plutocratic rulers find it necessary to misuse or exterminate restive multitudes, to let them starve while the fruits of their land and the sweat of their labor enrich privileged coteries.

Thus we had a profit-driven imperial rule that helped precipitate the great famine in northern China, 1876-1879, resulting in the death of some thirteen million. At about that same time the Madras famine in India took the lives of as many as twelve million while the colonial forces grew ever richer. And thirty years earlier, the great potato famine in Ireland led to about one million deaths, with another desperate million emigrating from their homeland. Nothing accidental about this: while the Irish starved, their English landlords exported shiploads of Irish grain and livestock to England and elsewhere at considerable profit to themselves.

These occurrences must be seen as something more than just historic abnormalities floating aimlessly in time and space, driven only by overweening impulse or happenstance. It is not enough to condemn monstrous events and bad times, we also must try to understand them. They must be contextualized in the larger framework of historical social relations.

The dominant socio-economic system today is free-market capitalism (in all its variations). Along with its unrelenting imperial terrorism, free-market capitalism provides “normal abnormalities” from within its own dynamic, creating scarcity and maldistributed excess, filled with duplication, waste, overproduction, frightening environmental destruction, and varieties of financial crises, bringing swollen rewards to a select few and continual hardship to multitudes.

Economic crises are not exceptional; they are the standing operational mode of the capitalist system. Once again, the irrational is the norm. Consider U.S. free-market history: after the American Revolution, there were the debtor rebellions of the late 1780s, the panic of 1792, the recession of 1809 (lasting several years), the panics of 1819 and 1837, and recessions and crashes through much of the rest of that century. The serious recession of 1893 continued for more than a decade.

After the industrial underemployment of 1900 to 1915 came the agrarian depression of the 1920s—hidden behind what became known to us as “the Jazz Age,” followed by a horrendous crash and the Great Depression of 1929-1942. All through the twentieth century we had wars, recessions, inflation, labor struggles, high unemployment—hardly a year that would be considered “normal” in any pleasant sense. An extended normal period would itself have been an abnormality. The free market is by design inherently unstable in every aspect other than wealth accumulation for the select few.

What we are witnessing is not an irrational output from a basically rational society but the

converse: the “rational” (to be expected) output of a fundamentally irrational system. Does this mean these horrors are inescapable? No, they are not made of supernatural forces. They are produced by plutocratic greed and deception.

So, if the aberrant is the norm and the horrific is chronic, then we in our fightback should give less attention to the idiosyncratic and more to the systemic. Wars, massacres and recessions help to increase capital concentration, monopolize markets and natural resources, and destroy labor organizations and popular transformative resistance.

The brutish vagaries of plutocracy are not the product of particular personalities but of systemic interests. President George W. Bush was ridiculed for misusing words, but his empire-building and stripping of government services and regulations revealed a keen devotion to ruling-class interests. Likewise, President Barack Obama is not spineless. He is hypocritical but not confused. He is (by his own description) an erstwhile “liberal Republican,” or as I would put it, a faithful servant of corporate America.

Our various leaders are well informed, not deluded. They come from different regions and different families, and have different personalities, yet they pursue pretty much the same policies on behalf of the same plutocracy.

So it is not enough to denounce atrocities and wars, we also must understand who propagates them and who benefits. We have to ask why violence and deception are constant ingredients.

Unintended consequences and other oddities do arise in worldly affairs but we also must take account of interest-driven rational intentions. More often than not, the aberrations—be they wars, market crashes, famines, individual assassinations or mass killings—take shape because those at the top are pursuing gainful expropriation. Many may suffer and perish but somebody somewhere is benefiting boundlessly.

Knowing your enemies and what they are capable of doing is the first step toward effective opposition. The world becomes less of a horrific puzzlement. We can only resist these global (and local) perpetrators when we see who they are and what they are doing to us and our sacred environment.

Democratic victories, however small and partial they be, must be embraced. But the people must not be satisfied with tinselled favors offered by smooth leaders. We need to strive in every way possible for the revolutionary unraveling, a revolution of organized consciousness striking at the empire’s heart with the full force of democracy, the kind of irresistible upsurge that seems to come from nowhere while carrying everything before it.

Michael Parenti’s most recent books are [The Culture Struggle](#) (2006), [Contrary Notions: The Michael Parenti Reader](#) (2007), [God and His Demons](#) (2010), [Democracy for the Few](#) (9th ed. 2011), and [The Face of Imperialism](#) (2011). For further information about his work, visit his website: www.michaelparenti.org.

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