

Book Review: Rape loot pillage: the political economy of sexual violence in armed conflict. By Sara Meger. New York: Oxford University Press

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Author post-print (accepted) deposited by Coventry University's Repository

Original citation & hyperlink:

Aroussi, S 2018, 'Book Review: Rape loot pillage: the political economy of sexual violence in armed conflict. By Sara Meger. New York: Oxford University Press' *International Affairs*, vol 94, no. 1, pp. 200-201

<https://dx.doi.org/10.1093/ia/iix225>

DOI 10.1093/ia/iix225

ISSN 0020-5850

ESSN 1468-2346

Publisher: Oxford University Press

This is a pre-copiedited, author-produced version of an article accepted for publication in International Affairs following peer review. The version of record Aroussi, S 2018, 'Book Review: Rape loot pillage: the political economy of sexual violence in armed conflict. By Sara Meger. New York: Oxford University Press' International Affairs, vol 94, no. 1, pp. 200-201 is available online at: <https://dx.doi.org/10.1093/ia/iix225>

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Book Review

In *Rape, loot, pillage* Sara Meger offers a feminist political economy perspective on sexual violence in conflicts. Meger's book is skilfully written and very well argued. In chapter one, Meger sets the scene by discussing the recent securitization of sexual violence. While this securitization phenomenon was previously raised by other feminist scholars¹, Meger goes deeper in her analysis by drawing on the Marxist concept of "commodity fetishism" to discuss the "fetishization" of sexual violence in international relations. Meger argues that this "fetishization" resulted in a political economy of conflict related sexual violence in which rape as a weapon of war becomes simply a commodity for consumption.

In Chapter Two, Meger advocates using a feminist political economy approach to analyse conflict related sexual violence. She argues that because conflicts involve struggles over productive and reproductive resources, sexual violence perpetrated in this context is often linked to the political and economic drivers of conflicts and to the operation of gender at the individual, cultural and structural levels. Conflict related sexual violence as Meger argues serves the wider project of "flexibilization" of raw material extraction that is essential for a larger productive global economy. In chapter Three, Meger provides a preliminary typology of sexual violence by looking at how and why sexual violence is perpetrated in ideological, economic, genocidal and interstate wars. Meger, goes on, in the following three chapters of the book, to discuss sexual violence as: an instrument of terror, a weapon of war and an element of genocide. She then dedicates the last two chapters to discussing the political economy of sexual violence in the DRC and sexual violence against men and boys in conflict.

Undeniably, Meger's book provides a valuable contribution on the study of conflict related sexual violence using a much needed feminist political economy perspective. However, after reading *Rape, loot, pillage* I was left with a number of questions. To start with, I wondered whether Meger's approach to sexual violence perhaps too reductionist and lacking in nuance. Despite acknowledging the diversity of sexual violence in conflict, Meger limited her analysis to sexual violence by armed actors including government's forces. For instance, in the DRC, while sexual violence is very widely committed by civilians including intimate partners² Meger's analysis was only focused on the violence by armed groups and the FARDC. By choosing to only focus on sexual violence by armed actors and as a strategy for warfare, Meger paradoxically prioritised this kind of sexual violence and inadvertently adopted a securitization perspective on rape that she herself is highly critical of.

On a theoretical level, Meger's book is very rich but would benefit from including the voices and experiences of survivors of rape in the analysis. In her study, Meger did not draw on

¹ See for instance, Charlotte Mertens and Maree Parry 'Sexurity' and its effects in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo', *Third World Quarterly* 2016, pp.1-24; Sahla Aroussi, 'Women, Peace and Security and the Democratic Republic of the Congo: Time to rethink sexual violence as gender based harm?', *Politics and Gender* 12:3, 2016, pp. 1-28.

² Amber Peterman, Tia Palermo, and Caryn Bredenkamp, 'Estimates and Determinants of Sexual Violence against Women in the Democratic Republic of Congo', *American Journal of Public Health* 101: 6, 2011, pp.1060-1067; Sarah Myers Tlapek, 'Women's Status and Intimate Partner Violence in the Democratic Republic of Congo', *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 30:14, 2015, pp. 2526- 2540.

interviews with victims of rape and as such, this volume lacks a grounded perspective rooted in survivors' experiences of rape in conflict. Distinguishing rape as an instrument of terror from rape as a weapon of war or rape as an instrument of genocide although conceptually possible, may not be easily applied in practice. Questions also need to be asked about the usefulness of such categorisation of rape to survivors on the ground.

Gender violence is a continuum and sexual violence by civilians and armed actors in conflict cannot be studied in isolation. A political economy approach alone does not account for the prevalence of sexual violence among and by civilians in conflict and in post conflict societies nor does it convincingly explain the opportunistic rape by armed groups. While Meger's book provides a very useful addition to the literature on rape by armed actors, a more nuanced and broader analysis of sexual violence in conflict, one that is rooted in survivors' experiences is needed.