Making Sense of Political Violence in Postcolonial Africa

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We have just ended a century replete with violence. The twentieth century was possibly more violent than any other in recorded history – just think of world wars and revolutions, of colonial conquests and anticolonial resistance, and, indeed, of revolutions and counterrevolutions. Yet even if the expanse of this violence is staggering, it makes sense to us. For the modern political sensibility sees political violence as necessary to historical progress.
Ever since the French Revolution, moderns have come to see violence as the midwife of history. The French Revolution gave us terror and it gave us a citizens' army. The real secret behind Napoleon's spectacular battlefield successes was that his army was comprised not of mercenaries but of patriots, those who killed for a cause, who were animated by sentiment, by what we have come to recognize as a civic religion: nationalism. Reflecting on the French Revolution, Hegel thought of man – in the generic sense – as different from animals in that he was willing to die for a cause higher than life. Hegel should have added: man is also willing to kill for a cause higher than life. This, I think, is truer of modern man and woman than it is true of humanity in general.

The modern political sensibility is not horrified by all violence. Just put millions in the wrong uniform: a body of citizens and patriots will celebrate their deaths as the end of its enemies. The world wars are proof enough of this. What horrifies the modern political sensibility is not violence per se but violence that does not make sense. And the violence that appears senseless to us is violence that is neither revolutionary nor counterrevolutionary, violence that cannot be illuminated by the story of progress. Not illuminated paradigmatically, nonrevolutionary violence appears pointless.

Unable to explain such violence, we turn our back on history. Two such endeavors are worth noting: the first turns to culture, the second to theology. The cultural turn distinguishes modern from premodern culture and then offers premodern culture as an explanation of political violence. If revolutionary or counterrevolutionary violence arises from market-based identities such as class, then nonrevolutionary violence is said to be an outcome of cultural difference.
On a world scale, it is called a clash of civilizations.[1] Locally – that is, when it does not cross the boundary between the West and the rest – it is called communal conflict, as in South Asia, or ethnic conflict, as in Africa.
Faced with political violence that arises in a modern context but will not fit the story of progress, theory has also tended to take refuge in theology. The violence of the Holocaust is branded as an evil that can only be understood outside historical time.[2] Rather than understand the Holocaust as a clue to the debased and grim side of humanity, this kind of thinking turns this horror into a question mark against the very humanity of its perpetrators. There is a huge resistance, moral and political, to thinking through this violence by locating it in a historical context.

Thinking through the Holocaust:
The Violence of the Settler

In the corpus of Holocaust writing, Hannah Arendt stands apart. Rather than talk of the uniqueness of the Holocaust, Arendt insisted on locating the Holocaust in the history of genocide. The history

she sketched was that of the settler genocide of the native. It was the history of imperialism, and specifically of twin institutions – racism in South Africa and bureaucracy in India and Algeria – forged in the course of an earlier European expansion into the non-European world.[3] Not only did genocide have this history but modern genocide, Arendt wrote, was nurtured in the colonies: the "elimination of Hottentot tribes, the wild murdering by Carl Peters in German Southwest Africa, the decimation of the peaceful Congo population – from 20 to 40 million reduced to 8 million people and … worst of all … the triumphant introduction of such means of pacification into ordinary, respectable foreign policies".[4]

Of the two main political devices of imperialist rule, race was discovered in South Africa and bureaucracy in Algeria, Egypt, and India. The former was originally European man's barely conscious reaction to tribes of whose humanity he was ashamed and frightened, whereas the latter was a consequence of that administration by which Europeans had tried to rule foreign peoples whom they felt to be hopelessly their inferiors and at the same time in need of their special protection. Race, in other words, was an escape into an irresponsibility where nothing human could any longer exist, while bureaucracy was the result of a responsibility that no man can bear for his fellowman and no people for another people.

The idea "that imperialism had served civilization by clearing inferior races off the earth" found widespread expression in nineteenth-century European thought, from natural sciences and philosophy to anthropology and politics.[5] When the British Prime Minister Lord Salisbury claimed in his famous Royal Albert Hall speech on May 4, 1898, that "one can roughly divide the nations of the world into the living and the dying", Hitler was but nine years old, and the European air was "soaked in the conviction that imperialism is a biologically necessary process, which, according to the laws of nature, leads to the inevitable destruction of lower races". The paradigmatic example of the destruction of lower races was Tasmania, an island the size of Ireland where European colonists first arrived in 1803, the first massacre of natives occurred in 1804, and the last original inhabitant died in 1869. Similar fates awaited the Maoris of New Zealand, the Native Americans, the Hereros of Southwest Africa, and so on.[6]

By the time the twentieth century dawned, it was a European habit to distinguish between civilized wars and colonial wars. Laws of war applied to wars among the civilized, but laws of nature – that is, of biological necessity, expressed in the extermination of the lower races – applied to colonial wars. In World War II, Germany observed the laws of war against the Western powers but not against Russia. Among English and American prisoners of war, 3.5 percent died in German captivity, but 57 percent of Soviet prisoners – 3.3 million people in all – lost their lives. The gassings of Russians preceded the gassings at Auschwitz: the first mass gassings were of Russian prisoners of war in the southern Ukraine.[7] The first to be gassed in Auschwitz were Russians, beginning with intellectuals and communists. The Nazi plan, writes Sven Lindqvist, was to weed out some 10 million Russians while keeping the remainder alive as a slavelabor force under German occupation. When the mass murder of European Jews began, the great Jewish populations were not in Germany but in Poland and Russia, where they formed 10 percent of the total population and up to 40 percent of the urban population "in just those areas Hitler was after". The Holocaust was born at the meeting point of two traditions that marked modern Western civilization: "the anti-Semitic tradition and the tradition of genocide of colonized peoples".[8] Here then was the difference in the fate of the Jewish people: they were to be exterminated as a whole. In that, their fate was unique – *but only in Europe.*

This historical fact was not lost on postwar intellectuals from the colonies. In his D*iscours sur le colonialisme* (1951), Aime Cesaire writes that a Hitler slumbers within "the very distinguished, very humanistic and very Christian bourgeois of the twentieth century", yet the European bourgeois cannot forgive Hitler for "the fact that he applied to Europe the colonial practices that had previously been

applied only to the Arabs of Algeria, the coolies of India and the Negroes of Africa",[9] "Not so long ago", recalled Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), "Nazism turned the whole of Europe into a veritable colony".[10]

The first genocide of the twentieth century was the German annihilation of the Herero people in Southwest Africa.[11] The German geneticist Eugene Fischer did his first medical experiments on the "science" of race-mixing in concentration camps for the Herero; his subjects were both Herero and the offspring of Herero women and German men. Fischer argued that these Herero "mulattos" were physically and mentally inferior to their German parents. Hitler read Fischer's book, *The Principle of Human Heredity and Race Hygiene* (1921), while in prison, and later made Fischer rector of the University of Berlin, where he taught medicine. One of Fischer's prominent students was Joseph Mengele, who would run the gas chambers at Auschwitz. The Holocaust was the imperial chickens coming home to roost.

The link between the genocide of the Herero and the Holocaust was race branding, whereby it is possible not only to set a group apart as an enemy but also to annihilate it with an easy conscience. To understand the mindset that conceived the Holocaust, one would have to return to political identities crafted by modern imperialism: the identities of the settler and the native. Arendt and more recently Lindqvist focused on the agency of the settler but not on that of the native, yet the native just as much as the settler is a product of the imperial imagination. Framed by a common history, they define two sides of a relationship. Unless they are transcended together, they will be reproduced together.

The historians of genocide have sketched half a history for us: that of the settler's annihilation of the native. To glimpse how this could trigger a countertendency, the native annihilating the settler, one has to turn to Fanon.[12] Hailed as a humanist by most of those who came to pay him homage after death, Fanon ironically came to be regarded as a prophet of violence after Arendt claimed that his influence was mainly responsible for the growing violence on American campuses in the 1960s".[13] He was recognized as the prophet of decolonization on the publication of his monumental *Wretched of the Earth*; yet one needs to recognize that he was also the first critic of decolonization. To understand the central thesis of *The Wretched of the Earth* – summed up in a single sentence, "The colonized man liberates himself in and through violence" – one needs to put it in a triple context: the respective histories of Algerian colonization, modernist thought on the historical necessity of violence, and the postwar movement to decolonization. Put in context, Fanon's thesis was at the same time a description, a claim, and a problematization. First, it was a *description* of the violence of the colonial system, of the fact that violence was key to producing and sustaining the relationship between the settler and the native. Second, it was a *claim* that anticolonial violence is not an irrational manifestation but belongs to the script of modernity and progress, that it is indeed a midwife of history. And third – the more important for this essay – it was a *problematization* of a derivative violence – the violence of victims turned killers.

It is in Fanon that one finds the premonition of the native turned perpetrator, of the native who kills not just to extinguish the humanity of the other but to defend his or her own, and of the moral ambivalence this must provoke in other human beings like us. Although the extermination of colonizers by natives never came to pass, there were enough uprisings in which many were killed for extermination to hover in the settler imagination as a historical possibility.[14] No one understood the genocidal impulse better than Fanon. Native violence, this Martinican-born psychiatrist and Algerian freedom fighter insisted, was the violence of yesterday's victims, the violence of those who had cast aside their victimhood to become masters of their own lives.

Listen to Fanon: "He of whom they have never stopped saying that the only language he understands is that of force, decides to give utterance by force… . The argument the native chooses has been furnished by the settler, and by an ironic turning of the tables it is the native who now affirms that the colonialist understands nothing but force". For Fanon, the proof of the native's humanity consisted not in the willingness to kill settlers but in the willingness to risk his or her own life. "The colonized man", he wrote, "finds his freedom in and through violence".[15] If the outcome was death, natives killing settlers, that was still a derivative outcome. The native who embraces violence to safeguard his or her freedom is the victim-turned-perpetrator.

Legal and Political Identities

If we are to make political violence thinkable, we need to understand the process by which victims and perpetrators become polarized as *group identities*. Who do perpetrators of violence think they are? And who do they think they will eliminate through violence? Even if the identitiesties propelled through violence are drawn from outside the domain of politics – from domains such as race (from biology), or ethnicity or religion (from culture) – we need to denaturalize these identities by outlining their history and illuminating their links with organized forms of power.
Just as we must locate market-based identities such as class in the history of markets if we are to understand them as the outcome of specific historical relations, so we need to turn to the history of state formation to understand the historical nature of political identities. This is particularly so with the modern state, which tries to naturalize political identities as anything but political. On the one hand the modern state enforces particular group identities through its legal project; on the other it gives depth to these identities through a history-writing project. It is by giving group identities both a past and a future that the modern state tries to stand up to time.

The identities of settler and native may be drawn from biological discourses on race, but they need to be understood as political identities enforced by a particular form of the state. If they became politically potent, it is because they were legally enforced by a state that made a distinction between those indigenous (natives) and those not (settlers), and that turned this distinction into grounds for political, social, and civic discrimination. Where indigeneity was stigmatized as proof of lack of civilization, and taken as sufficient reason to deny the rights of those conquered; and where foreignness was valorized as a hallmark of civilization and turned into a guarantee of rights – indeed privileges – for immigrants, there settler and native were racialized as legal and political identities.
The colonial history of Africa lends itself to a distinction between two distinct modes of rule, each identified with a different form of the colonial state. In the literature on modern colonialism these modes are characterized as direct and indirect rule. The transition from direct to indirect rule is one from a modest to an ambitious project: whereas *direct rule* was preoccupied with shaping elite preferences, *indirect rule* aimed to shape popular preferences. Indirect rule needs to be understood as a response to the crisis of direct rule, which focused on native elites, aiming to create native clones of Western modernity through a discourse on civilization and assimilation. Direct rule generated a dual crisis: on the one hand, its civilizational project tended to divide society between an alien minority claiming to be civilized and a native majority stigmatized as backward; on the other hand, the products of this civilizational project – native intellectuals and entrepreneurs – aspired to replace alien rule by self-rule as the basis of a native modernity. The demand for self-rule was the crisis of direct rule.
The colonial response was to subordinate the civilizational project to a law-and-order project. The big shift was legal: whereas direct rule aimed at introducing the rule of law as a single project, indirect rule replaced this single rule of law with a multiple construction of many sets of "customary" laws. In doing so it bypassed the modernizing native elites by championing alternate elites – said to

be traditional – who would be allies in the enterprise of shaping mass preferences through a discourse grounded in tradition. But indirect rule did not accept tradition benignly, as a historical given. It treated history as a raw material, putty from which to shape "genuine" tradition. Whereas direct rule was dogmatic, and dismissed native tradition as backward and superstitious, indirect rule was analytical. The political project of indirect rule aimed to unpack native tradition, to disentangle its different strands, to separate the authoritarian from the emancipatory, and thereby to repack tradition as authoritarian and ethnic and to harness it to the colonial project. By repacking native passions and cultures selectively, it aimed to pit these very passions and cultures against one another. I wrote of this in *Citizen and Subject*[16], and need not elaborate on that argument here.

Unlike those who seek to explain political violence by turning to the domain of culture, I intend to argue that even when political identities are drawn from the domain of culture, they need to be understood as distinct from cultural identities. Theoretically the experience of indirect rule should alert us to the relationship between culture and politics. When the raw material of political identity is drawn from the domain of culture, as in ethnic or religious identity, the link between identity and power allows us to understand how cultural identities are translated into political identities, and thus to distinguish between them. At the same time, to historicize political identity by linking it to political power is to acknowledge that all political identities are historically transitory and all require a form of the state to be reproduced.

Politically, indirect rule was an attempt to stabilize colonial rule by moving away from direct rule. This created a volatile context in which the identity of both rulers and ruled was racialized, but the former as a minority and the latter as a majority. Indirect rule dealt with this through a legal project that fractured the singular, racialized, and majority identity *native* into plural, ethnicized, minority identities called *tribes*.

To understand how political identities may be defined through the force of law, let us take an African example from any indirect-rule colony in the first half of the twentieth century. Recall that the colonial census classified the population into two broad overall groups. One group was called *races*, the other *tribes*. This single distinction illuminates the technology of colonial rule. To elaborate that technology I would like to make five observations.

First, the census divides the population into two kinds of groups: some are tagged as races and others as tribes. Why? On examination one can discern a clear pattern: *nonnatives* are tagged as races whereas *natives* are said to belong to *tribes*. *Races* – specifically Europeans, Asians, and Arabs – were all those whom the colonial state defined as not indigenous to Africa. *Tribes* – called "ethnic groups" in the postcolonial period – were all those defined as indigenous in origin.

Second, this distinction had a direct legal significance. All races were governed under a single law – civil law. True, civil law was full of discriminations: it distinguished, for example, between the *master race* (Europeans) and *subject races* (Asians and Arabs). Subject races were excluded from the exercise of certain rights considered the prerogative only of members of the master race. But this discrimination needs to be understood as internal, for the domain of civil law included all races.

The situation was different with tribes and customary law. Although all tribes were defined as one racialized group – natives – they were not governed by a single law. Instead, each tribe was ruled under a separate set of laws, called customary laws. It was said that each tribe was governed by a law that reflected its own tradition. Yet most would agree that the cultural difference between races – such as whites, Asians, and Arabs – was greater than that between different tribes. To begin with, different races spoke different languages, which were mutually unintelligible. They often practiced different religions. They also came from different parts of the world, each with its own historical archive. Diffe-

rent tribes, in contrast, often spoke languages that were mutually intelligible.

My point is simple: even if races were as different culturally as whites, Asians, and Arabs, they were ruled under a single law, the imported European law called "civil law". But *ethnic groups*, even if their languages were similar and mutually intelligible, were governed under separate laws, called "customary laws", which were in turn administered by ethnically distinct native authorities. With *races*, cultural difference was not translated into separate legal systems. Instead it was contained, even negotiated, within a single legal system, and enforced by a single administrative authority. But with *ethnicities* the opposite was the case: cultural difference was reinforced, exaggerated, and built up into different legal systems and, indeed, separate administrative and political authorities. In a nutshell, different races were meant to have a common future; different ethnicities were not.

My *third* observation: the two legal systems were entirely different in orientation. We can understand the difference by contrasting English common law with colonial customary law. English common law was presumed to change with circumstances. It claimed to recognize different interests and interpretations. But customary law in the colonies assumed the opposite: it assumed that law must not change with changing circumstances. Rather, any change was considered prima facie evidence of corruption. Both the laws and the enforcing authorities were called "traditional". Indeed, Western colonial powers were far more concerned to establish the traditional credentials of their native allies than they were to define the content of their allies' tradition. Their preoccupation was with defining, locating, anointing the traditional authority.

Most important, traditional authority in the colonial era was always defined in the singular. We need to remember that most African colonies had never before had an absolutist state. Instead of a single state authority whose writ was considered law in all social domains, the practice was for different authorities to define separate traditions in different domains of social life. The rule-defining authority thus differed from one social domain to another: besides chiefs, the definers of tradition could include women's groups, age groups, clans, religious groups, and so on. The big change with the colonial period was that Western colonial powers exalted a single authority, called the chief, as *the* traditional authority. Marked by two characteristics, age and gender, the authority of the chief was inevitably patriarchal. As David Laitin showed in his study of Yorubaland, the practice was to look for those local elites most in danger of being sidelined, local elites that had legitimacy but lacked authority, and then to sanctify their position, enforce their point of view as customary, and reinforce their authority in law as traditional.[17]

Colonial powers were the first fundamentalists of the modern period. They were the first to advance and put into practice two propositions: one, that every colonized group has an original and pure tradition, whether religious or ethnic; and two, that every colonized group must be made to return to that original condition, and that return must be enforced by law. Put together, these two propositions constitute the basic platform of every religious or ethnic fundamentalism in the postcolonial world.

Fourth, this legal project needs to be understood as part of a political project. The political project was highlighted by the central claim of the indirect-rule state: that natives are by nature tribal. Although this claim was first fully implemented in the late nineteenth century, in the African lands colonized by Britain in the aftermath of the Berlin Conference of 1884–85, it had already been made by Sir Henry Maine, Law Member of the Viceroy's Commission in post-1857 India. To quote Maine's *Ancient Law*: "I repeat the definition of a primitive society given before. It has for its units, not individuals, but groups of men united by the reality or the fiction of blood-relationship".[18] In time this very claim, that natives are by nature tribal, would be advanced to explain why the African colonies had

no majority but only tribal minorities. This claim needs to be understood as political, not because it is not true but because this truth reflects not an original fact but a fact politically created and legally enforced.

It is not that ethnicity did not exist in African societies prior to colonialism; it did. I want to distinguish ethnicity as a *cultural* identity – an identity based on a shared culture – from ethnicity as a *political* identity. When the political authority and the law it enforces identify subjects ethnically and discriminate among them, ethnicity turns into a legal and political identity. Ethnicity as a cultural identity is consensual, but when ethnicity becomes a political identity it is enforced by the legal and administrative organs of the state. These organs make a distinction between ethnic groups, between those considered indigenous and those not. The former are given access to rights considered "customary", such as the right to use land, but the latter are denied these same rights.

This takes me to my fifth observation. When law imposes a cultural difference, the difference becomes reified. Prevented from changing, it becomes frozen. Meanwhile, as the basis of legal discrimination – between those said to belong (whether in terms of religion or ethnicity) and those said not to belong, between insiders entitled to customary rights and outsiders deprived of these rights – these culturally symbolic differences become political.

The distinction between cultural and political identities is important for my argument. Cultural identities are as a rule consensual and voluntary, and they can be multiple.[19] All postmodernist talk of hybridity and multiple identities belongs to the domain of culture. Once enforced by law, however, identities cease to be all of these. A legal identity is neither voluntary nor multiple. The law recognizes you as one and as none other. Once cultural identity is enforced legally, it is drawn into the domain of politics and becomes political. Such an identity cannot be considered solely as a vestige of tradition, even if it has an ancient history, nor can it be dismissed as just an invention of the colonial power, because it is legally enforced. Even if they are grounded in a genealogy that precedes colonialism, popular identities like religion and ethnicity need to be understood as the very creation of colonial modernity. To distinguish between cultural and legal/political identities is to distinguish between self-identification and state-identification.

Rwanda: A Metaphor for Political Violence

Rwanda was different in an important respect from the picture I have just described: in Rwanda the census did not identify tribes. It only identified races: Hutu as Bantu, Tutsi as Hamites. The Bantu Hutu were presumed to be uncivilized, the Hamite Tutsi to be civilizing agents. We shall see that this difference between Rwanda and other African colonies – that political identities in Rwanda were racialized but not ethnicized – would turn out to be of great significance. Rwanda is today a metaphor – for political violence, but more particularly for senseless violence in politics. I recently wrote a book on Rwanda. I would like to describe the intellectual and political journey that became the writing of the book. [20]

Rwanda had a revolution in 1959. On the face of it, the revolution pitted Hutu, the indigenous majority, against Tutsi, the immigrant minority who had been favored by the colonizers. The identities "indigenous" and "immigrant" came straight out of colonial history books and colonial law. Within the revolution there was debate over who was the enemy and thus over who was the people. Two tendencies contended for supremacy; those who lost maintained that the battle was not in fact of Hutu against Tutsi but of the majority against the minority, the poor against the rich, the nation against the colonizers. This tendency lost not because it lacked support but because its support eroded when the counterrevolution attempted a restoration of the Tutsi monarchy. With the defeat of the counter-

revolution, the targets of revolutionary violence broadened, from those who had symbolized the local manifestations of power (such as the chiefs) to all Tutsi. When the revolutionaries of 1959 talked of justice, they didn't talk of justice for the poor or for Rwandans but of justice for the Hutu – at the expense of the Tutsi. To ensure that justice would indeed be done, they insisted that the revolutionary state continue the colonial practice of issuing cards identifying every individual as Hutu or Tutsi (or Twa, an insignificant minority). Henceforth the Hutu would be the Rwandan nation and the Tutsi an alien minority.

One can today find two kinds of writings on Rwanda. The first is preponderant in the academy, the second in the world of journalism. Academic writing on Rwanda is dominated by authors whose intellectual perspective was shaped by sympathy with the Rwandan Revolution of 1959.[21] They saw the revolution and the political violence that effected it as progressive, as ushering in a more popular political and social order. Unable to see the dark underbelly of the revolution, and thus to grasp the link between it and the 1994 genocide, this kind of writing portrays the genocide as exclusively or mainly the state project of a narrow ruling elite. In doing so it totally avoids the question of mass participation in the genocide. In portraying racism and racialized identities as exclusively state-defined and state-enforced, it fails to explain how these same identities got socially embedded and were reproduced socially. In portraying the genocide as exclusively a *state project*, its singular failing is an inability to come to terms with the genocide as a *social project*.

But this claim is not easy to make. The massacres in the Rwandan genocide were carried out in the open. Roughly 800,000 Tutsi were killed in 100 days. The state organized the killings, but the killers were by and large ordinary people. The killing was done mainly by machete-wielding mobs. You were more than likely to be killed by your neighbors or your workmates, by your teachers or doctors or priests, or even by human-rights advocates or your own husband. A few months ago in Belgium, four civilians stood trial for crimes against humanity in Rwanda. Among the four were two nuns and a physicist. How do we explain their participation – and the participation of other sectors in civil society – in the genocide?

In contrast, journalistic writing focuses precisely on this aspect of the genocide.[22] Its peculiar characteristic is to constitute a pornography of violence. As in pornography, the nakedness is of others, not us. The exposure of the other goes alongside the unstated claim that we are not like them. It is a pornography in which senseless violence is a feature of other people's cultures, in which they are violent but we are pacific, and in which a focus on their debasedness easily turns into another way of celebrating and confirming our own exalted status. In the process, journalistic accounts also tend to reinforce larger claims: that the world is indeed divided into the modern and the premodern, whereby moderns *make* culture but premoderns live by a timeless culture.

If the social science account is overly *instrumentalist*, accenting only the agency of the state and the elites, journalists tend to lean heavily on a *primordialist* account that tends to explain contemporary conflicts as replays of timeless antagonisms.[23] If social science accounts tend to explain mass participation in the genocide as mass obedience to rulers (for ordinary Rwandans, the most widespread reasoning goes, an order is as heavy as a stone), journalists see the masses as gripped in ancient passions and antagonisms. In the final analysis, neither the instrumentalist nor the primordial account can give a historical explanation of agency in the genocide.

Politically, journalistic writing has given us a simple moral world, in which a group of perpetrators faces another group of victims but neither history nor motivation is thinkable because both groups stand outside history and context. When journalists did address the genocide as a social project, I thought they failed to understand the forces that shaped the agency of the perpetrator. Instead, they

looked for a clear and uncomplicated moral in the story. In a context in which victims and perpetrators had traded places, they looked for victims distinguished from perpetrators for all time. Where yesterday's victims are today's perpetrators, where victims have turned perpetrators, this attempt to find an African Holocaust could not work. Thus I called my book *When Victims Become Killers*. How many perpetrators were victims of yesteryear? What happens when yesterday's victims act out of a determination that they must never again be victimized, *never again*? What happens when yesterday's victims act out of a conviction that power is the only guarantee against victimhood, so that the only dignified alternative to power is death? What happens when they are convinced that the taking of life is really noble because it signifies the willingness to risk one's own life, and is thus, in the final analysis, proof of one's own humanity?

I thought it important to understand the humanity of the perpetrator, as it were to get under the skin of the perpetrator – not to excuse either the perpetrator or the killing, but to make the act "thinkable", so as to learn something about us as humans. How do we understand the agency of the perpetrator? Framed by which history? Kept alive, reproduced, by which institutions? Who did the Hutu who killed think they were? And whom did they think they were killing in the persons of the Tutsi?

The History of Violence Between Hutu and Tutsi

The significance of Fanon became clear to me as I tried to understand the history of political violence in Rwanda, and specifically of violence between Hutu and Tutsi. I was struck by one fact: I could not find any significant episode before 1959 in which battle lines were drawn sharply between Hutu on one side and Tutsi on the other. It was 1959 that saw the first significant episode of Hutu being pitted against Tutsi in a political struggle, so that "Hutu" and "Tutsi" became names identifying political adversaries.

I thought this contrasted sharply with earlier political struggles, such as the Nyabingi episode at the outset of the colonial period. Nyabingi was a spiritual cult and political movement in what is today northern Rwanda, a region incorporated into the expanding kingdom of Rwanda at the beginning of the twentieth century. I thought two facts striking about this movement. First, when the Bakiga fought the alliance of German imperial power with the Tutsi aristocracy of the Rwandan kingdom, they did not fight as Hutu against Tutsi. They fought the Tutsi in power, but they fought in alliance with the Tutsi out of power. In fact they fought under the leadership of a former Tutsi queen, Muhumuza, and then under the leadership of her son, Ndungutse.

Second, these mountain people called themselves not Hutu but Bakiga (the people of the mountains). Only when they were defeated, and incorporated into the Rwandan kingdom, did they cease to be Bakiga and became Hutu. For "Hutu" was not the identity of a discrete ethnic group but the political identity of all those subjugated to the power of the Rwandan state. In Rwanda before colonialism, prosperous Hutu had become Tutsi over the course of generations. True, the numbers involved were too few to be statistically significant. Yet this was a process of great social and ideological significance. This process of ritual ennoblement, whereby a Hutu shed his Hutuness, even had a name: *kwihutura*. Its counterpart, whereby an impoverished Tutsi family lost its status, this too over generations, also had a name: *gucupira*.

Belgian colonialism did not invent Tutsi privilege. There was Tutsi privilege before colonialism. So what was new with Belgian colonialism? Not Tutsi privilege but the justification for it. For the first time in the history of Rwanda, the terms "Hutu" and "Tutsi" came to identify two groups, one branded indigenous, the other exalted as alien. For the first time, Tutsi privilege claimed to be the

privilege of a group identified as racially alien, specifically as Hamitic. Only with Belgian colonialism did Hutu become indigenous and Tutsi alien, the degradation of the Hutu a degradation of the native and Tutsi privilege an alien privilege. As Belgian authorities issued identity cards to Hutu and Tutsi, Tutsi became sealed from Hutu. Legally identified as two biologically distinct races, Tutsi as Hamites and Hutu as Bantu, Hutu and Tutsi became distinct legal identities. The language of race functioned to underline this difference between indigenous and alien.

The point will become clear if we return to the difference between race and ethnicity in twentieth-century colonial thought. I have pointed out that only natives were classified as tribes in colonial Africa and as ethnic groups in postcolonial Africa. Nonnatives, those not considered African, were tagged as races. Tribes were neighbors, not aliens. In this context ethnic violence is different from racial violence. Ethnic violence is between neighbors. It is about borders. It is about transgression across borders, about excess. In the conflict between neighbors, what is at issue is not the legitimacy of the presence of others; at issue is an overflow, a transgression. It is only with race that the very presence of a group can be considered illegitimate, and its claim for power an outright usurpation. This is why, when political violence takes the form of genocide, it is more likely to occur between races than between ethnic groups.

The racialization of the Tutsi, and of the difference between Hutu and Tutsi, is key to understanding the political violence between Hutu and Tutsi. This is so for one reason: it is the language of race that defined insiders and outsiders, distinguishing those indigenous from those alien. Ultimately, it set neighbors apart from outsiders, friends from enemies.

Political Identities and the Nationalist Revolution

Colonialism is the genesis of Hutu-Tutsi violence in Rwanda. But colonialism does not explain why this violence continued after the revolution of 1959. If colonialism is the site of the origin of the Hutu-Tutsi problem as one of racialized political identities, then nationalism reproduced that problem. Here is the dilemma we must confront: race-branding was not simply a state ideology, it also became a social ideology, reproduced by many of the same Hutu and Tutsi branded as native and alien. That reproduction took place through the nationalist political project that translated the colonial identity of Hutu as the indigenous Bantu race into the postcolonial Rwandan nation, thereby translating the colonial race-branding project into the postcolonial nation-building project. To problematize the nation-building project is simultaneously to critique the revolution of 1959 and the popular agency that it shaped.

The Rwandan Revolution of 1959 was heralded as the "Hutu Revolution". As the revolutionaries built Rwanda into a "Hutu nation", they embarked on a program of justice: justice for Hutu, a reckoning for Tutsi. And in doing so they confirmed Hutu and Tutsi as political identities: Hutu as native, Tutsi as alien.

When does the pursuit of justice turn into revenge? The revolutionaries turned the world upside-down, but they failed to change it. The irony is that instead of transforming the political world created by colonialism, the world of natives and settlers, they confirmed it. Here, then, is the question for a postcolonial study of nationalism in Rwanda: why did nationalism fail to transform the colonial political edifice?

In South Asia, popular agency has been the subject of an ambitious project in history-writing called "Subaltern Studies". Taken from Antonio Gramsci, the word "subaltern" signifies popular strata as opposed to those who command. The great historical contribution of Subaltern Studies has been to rescue subalterns from victim status in world history by illuminating them as historical agents, people capable of changing things. The historical lesson of Rwanda suggests that we accept the limits of this contribution and recognize that subaltern agency too is undergirded by specific institutions. To accept the time-bound nature of subalternity – as Fanon did – is to begin to subvert it. To generate a perspective that can transform existing identities, we need to stand outside the institutions that reproduce them. We need to understand group identities as institutionally produced and thus of limited historical significance.

Is not every perspective, no matter how popular, locked in the narrow parameters of the relations that generate and sustain it? Untransformed, a subaltern identity is likely to generate no more than an aspiration for trading places, for hegemonic aspirations. This is why a subaltern identity can neither be embraced nor rejected unconditionally. Unless we highlight its historical boundaries and limitations, the subaltern struggle will be locked in a dilemma, a catch-22. Without a recognition and subversion of limits, without an institutional transformation leading to a transformation of identities, every pursuit of justice will tend toward revenge, and every reconciliation toward an embrace of institutional evil.

Lenin once chided Rosa Luxemburg for being so preoccupied with Polish nationalism that she could not see beyond it, and so risked being locked in the world of the rat and the cat. The world of the rat and the cat is the political world of Hutu and Tutsi as produced by colonialism and reproduced by the 1959 revolution. For the rat, there is no animal bigger in presence than the cat: not the lion, not the tiger, not the elephant. For the cat, meanwhile, there is nothing more delicious than the rat. Similarly, the political world set in motion by the modern state and modern colonialism generates subaltern identities endlessly, in binary pairs. For every sergeant there is a subaltern, for every settler a native. In a world where cats are few and rats are many, one way for cats to stabilize their rule is to tag rats by tapping their historicity through a discourse on origins, indigenous and nonindigenous, ethnic and racial. This is why, in a world where rats have belled cats, it is entirely possible that rats may still carry on living in a world defined by cats, fired by identities generated by institutions created in the era of cats.

My point is simple yet fundamental: you can turn the world upside-down but fail to change it. To change the world you need to break out of the world view of not just the cat but the rat; not just the settler but the native. Unless we break out of the world view of the rat, postcolonialism will remain a purgatory punctuated by nonrevolutionary violence. The genocide in Rwanda poses this dilemma more sharply than any other contemporary event.

The Civil War and the Genocide

A political analysis of the genocide in Rwanda finds three pivotal moments. The first is that of the Belgian colonization and racialization of the state apparatus in the 1920s. The second is that of nationalism and the revolution of 1959, a turning of tables that entrenched colonial political identities in the name of justice. The third is that of the civil war of 1990. The civil war was not born of a strictly internal process; it was an outcome of a regional development, one that joined the crisis in Rwanda with that in Uganda.

The Tutsi exiles of 1959 found refuge in many countries, including Uganda. Living on the margins of society, many joined the guerrilla struggle against the regime of Milton Obote that ruled Uganda in 1981–85. When the victorious National Resistance Army (NRA) entered Kampala in January 1986,

roughly a quarter of the 16,000 guerrillas were Banyarwanda, who had emigrated to Uganda throughout the colonial period. In the Luwero Triangle – the theater of the guerrilla struggle – migrants were nearly half the population. The largest group of migrants was from Rwanda.

Every time NRA guerrillas liberated a village and organized an assembly they confronted a challenge: who could participate in that assembly? Who could vote? Who could run for office? The dilemma sprang from the colonial political legacy of linking rights to ancestry: by defining migrants as nonindigenous the colonizers deprived them of political rights. The NRA's answer was to redefine the basis of rights from ancestry to residence. Simply put, every adult resident of a village was considered to have the right of participation in the village assembly. This new notion of rights was translated into a nationality law after 1986: any one with a ten-year residence in the country had the right to be a citizen. The big change was that the 1959 refugees of the Rwandan Revolution were now considered Ugandans.

This political inheritance was called into question with the NRA's first major political crisis, in 1990, triggered by an attempt to honor one of the ten points in the guerrilla program: the pledge to redistribute absentee-owned land to pastoralist squatters. When it came to distributing land among a population of mobile pastoralists, there arose the question: who should get the land? Who was a citizen?

The opposition mobilized around this question, aiming to exclude Banyarwanda as noncitizens. The magnitude of the resulting crisis was signified by an extraordinary session of parliament lasting three days. At the end of its deliberation, the Ugandan parliament changed the citizenship law from a ten-year residence to a requirement that to be recognized as a citizen you had to show an ancestral connection with the land, i.e., show that at least one of your grandparents were born in the territory later demarcated as Uganda. One month later the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) crossed the Ugandan border into Rwanda. My point is that this was not simply an armed return to Rwanda; it was also an armed expulsion from Uganda.

To understand the explosive impact of the civil war on Rwanda, we need to understand the changing political position of the Tutsi from the First Republic, which was inaugurated by the 1959 revolution, to the Second Republic, which began in 1973, with the coup that brought Juvenal Habyarimana to power. We have seen that the First Republic was a culmination of the struggle between two lines in the revolution. The victorious line, associated with the new president, Gregoire Kayibanda, defined Hutu and Tutsi as two different *races*, two different *nations*: Tutsi were thus to be treated as aliens in Rwanda, the home of the Hutu nation. In Habyarimana's Second Republic Tutsi were redefined from a race to an ethnicity. In the First Republic, then, Tutsi had been resident aliens; in the second they became a political minority. Instead of insisting on the distinction between Hutu and Tutsi, the Second Republic highlighted the distinction between Tutsi in Rwanda and Tutsi exiles outside Rwanda: whereas the former were politically elevated as a Rwandan minority that could legitimately expect minority representation in the country's political institutions, the latter were denationalized as perpetual aliens for whom there was no longer any room in Rwanda. During the Second Republic, the key political division inside Rwanda was not between Hutu and Tutsi but within the Hutu elite, between those from the north and those from the south.

It was the exiled Tutsi's military organization, the Rwanda Patriotic Army (RPA), and their entry into Rwanda, that triggered the civil war. The civil war in turn had multiple political effects. First, it allowed the Habyarimana regime to pose as the defender of the nation against what was said to be an attempt by exiled Tutsi to restore the colonial monarchy (a repeat of 1963), this at a time when the regime was under great pressure to liberalize – pressure from the predominantly Hutu internal opposition. Second, it allowed radical Hutu, hitherto marginalized in the Second Republic, to reemerge in the political mainstream. Describing itself as the defender of "Hutu Power", this tendency organized a variety of media, from radio and television to print, to claim that the gains of the revolution were under threat from Tutsi, who were cast as indeed a race, not an ethnicity – indeed as non-Rwandan aliens, not a Rwandan minority.

Third, the more the civil war grew and the RPA gained ground, the more the internal opposition was discredited as a political fifth column tied to the RPA, and its democratic program painted as an antinational agenda. Fourth, everywhere the RPA gained military control, the local Hutu population either fled or was expelled through administrative pressure. Most observers estimate that by 1994, as many as 15 percent of the Rwandan population had been so displaced, some of them as many as four times. Most now lived in camps in and around Kigali and the southern part of the country. Some of the most enthusiastic participants in the genocide came from the youthful populations of these camps. Fifth and finally, against the backdrop of the victorious march of the RPA, the plight of the displaced spread fear among those yet to be engulfed by the civil war. The "Hutu Power" media warned them of a fate that the sight of the displaced only confirmed: if the Tutsi returned to power, they would lose both their land and their freedom – in short, everything.

The civil war of 1990–94 hurled Rwanda back into the world of Hutu Power and Tutsi Power. The possibility of the return of Tutsi Power provided radical Hutu, earlier a marginal tendency in the Second Republic, with their first opportunity to return to the political center stage as defenders of the 1959 revolution. Without the civil war there would have been no genocide.

The Rwandan genocide needs to be located in a context shaped by three related moments: the global *imperial* moment defined by Belgian colonialism and its racialization of the state; the *national* moment that was the 1959 revolution, and that reinforced racialized identities in the name of justice; and the *postcolonial* regional moment, born of a link between the citizenship crisis in postrevolutionary Rwanda and its neighbors. True, the crisis of postcolonial citizenship was regional in scope, and led to civil wars in not only Rwanda but also Uganda and Congo. But only in Rwanda did the civil war unfold in a context that could and did set alight a powder keg born of a distinctive colonial legacy, *race-branding*, that was reproduced as a revolutionary legacy of *race-as-nation*. Though this outcome was not necessary but contingent, it is imperative that we draw lessons from it.

Political Power and Political Identity

My argument on the Rwandan genocide linked that violence to political identities that drove it, and the reproduction of these political identities in turn to a particular form of the state. Instead of taking group identities as a given, I have tried to historicize the process of group formation. Linking political identities to the process of state formation makes it possible to distinguish prepolitical identities – whether cultural, economic, or biological – from political identities. In addition, it allows for an understanding of the dynamics whereby binary political identities, like Hutu and Tutsi, become polarized.

The Rwandan genocide raises three important issues for those who must live in its aftermath, as well as for those who study it. The *first* concerns the link between political identities and the process of state formation. To understand how "Hutu" became synonymous with "indigenous" and "Tutsi" with "alien", I found it necessary to go beyond an analysis of the colonial state to a critique of the nationalist revolution of 1959 – a revolution that, in the name of justice, embraced political identities created by colonial power.

The *second* issue arises from the combined legacy of colonial rule and nationalist power. It is also the issue that represents the most troublesome legacy of the Rwandan genocide, and has bitterly divided those who write on it: was not the organization of genocidal violence from the summit of political power linked to mass participation on the ground? The evidence shows that this was indeed the case, which is why we need to understand the genocide as both a state project and a social project.

The third issue highlights the citizenship crisis in the entire region. Just as the civil war of 1990/1994 joined the citizenship crisis in Rwanda with that in Uganda, so the entry of Rwandan troops into eastern Congo in 1996 joined the citizenship crisis in Rwanda with that in Congo. If the 1959 revolution and its aftermath underlined the difference between the colonial experience of Rwanda and that of its neighbors – the difference being that colonial rule in Rwanda created racialized political identities but not ethnicized ones – then postgenocidal Rwanda underlines the aspect of similarity in the regional colonial experience. I argued in my book that colonial Rwanda was like a halfway house between direct and indirect rule. Like direct rule, it generated exclusively racialized political identities; at the same time, like indirect rule, it legitimized the despotic power of local chiefs as a carryover of precolonial practices rather than a reorganization on the part of the colonial state. The discourse on custom ties citizenship (and rights) to cultural identity and historical origins.

The proliferation of political minorities in contemporary Africa is not a necessary reflection of Africa's cultural map. Rather, it is the outcome of a particular form of the state – the indirect-rule state – whose genesis lies in the colonial period. The real distinction between race and ethnicity is not that between biology and culture, with race a false biological identity and ethnicity a true and historically created cultural identity. Rather, both race and ethnicity need to be understood as a politicization of identities drawn from other domains: race a political identity of those constructed as nonindigenous (settlers), ethnicity an identity of those constructed as indigenous (natives). Africa's real political challenge, I have argued, is to reform and thus sublate the form of the state that has continued to reproduce race and ethnicity as political identities, alongside a discourse on nativism and "genuine" tradition.

Colonial power not only shaped the agency of popular strata, it also stamped itself on the agency of the intellectual. Colonial power was not only etched on the boundaries of the public sphere, it was also imprinted on the tables of contents of scholarly works. Just as it set into motion first the settler and then the native in the public sphere, so it preoccupied the intellectual imagination with the question of *origins*. How origin was understood depended on the language of power, and specifically on how power framed agency through customary law.

In the African context, customary law framed agency – and "custom" – as ethnic. In other contexts, such as India, agency was framed as religious. Is it then mere coincidence that if the postcolonial African preoccupation is with who is a native and who is not, the postcolonial Indian preoccupation has been with who is a convert and who is not? Is it any less surprising that if the native imagination in postcolonial Africa tends to absorb the immigrant into a script of invasion, the native imagination in postcolonial India seems to view the agency of the convert as veritable treason, as a transgression so subversive that the convert is seen as forever lacking in authentic agency?

Why is it that when it comes to the postcolonial political vocabulary, Hindu and Muslim in India, or for that matter Sinhala and Tamil in Sri Lanka, like Hutu and Tutsi in Rwanda, sound like political synonyms for native and settler? The challenge, I have argued, is neither to deny separate histories nor to build on this separation. It is rather to distinguish our notion of political community, from that of cultural community, and, as a consequence, to separate the discourse on political rights from that on cultural or historical origins. The point of difference between cultural and political communities is sharpest when we contrast diasporic with immigrant communities. Diasporic communities share a common history but not necessarily a common future; immigrant communities, by contrast, are dedicated to building a common future, but may not necessarily share a common past. To distinguish between cultural and political communities is to distinguish between the past – several pasts – and a single future. The single uniting feature of a political community is the commitment to building a common political future under a single political roof. This recognition should be an important step to creating a single political community and citizenship from diverse cultural and historical groups and identities.

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2 For a discussion of group violence as evil see Ervin Staub, The Roots of Evil: The Origins of Genocide and Other Group Violence (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989). On the relationship between evil and historical time see Paul Ricœur, The Symbolism of Evil (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), Alain Badiou, Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil (London and New York: Verso, 2001), Georges Bataille, Literature and Evil (London: Marion Boyars, 2001), Malcolm Bull, ed., Apocalypse Theory and the Ends of the World (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), and Alenka Zupancic, Ethics of the Real (London and New York: Verso, 2000). I am thankful to Robert Meister of the University of Calfornia, Santa Cruz, for suggesting this latter set of readings.

3 Hannah Arendt, The Origins of Totalitarianism (New York: Harcourt Brace), 1975, p. 185.

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5 Herbert Spencer wrote in Social Statics (1850), "The forces which are working out the great scheme of perfect happiness, taking no account of incidental suffering, exterminate such sections of mankind as stand in their way." Charles Lyell pursued this train of thought in Principles of Geology (1830-33): if "the most significant and dimunitive of species ... have each slaughtered their thousands, why should not we, the lords of creation, do the same?" His student, Charles Darwin, confirmed in The Descent of Man (1871), "At some future period not very distant as measured in centuries, the civilized races of man will almost certainly exterminate and replace throughout the world the savage races." "After Darwin," comments Sven Lindqvist in his survey of European

thought on genocide, "it became accepted to shrug your shoulders at genocide. If you were upset, you were just showing your lack of education." See Lindqvist, "Exterminate all the Brutes": One Man's Odyssey into the Heart of Darkness and the Origins of European Genocide (New York: The New Press, 1996), pp. 8, 107, 117 This paragraph is based on Lindqvist, "Exterminate all the Brutes," pp. 119, 141, 149–51.

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7 See Arno J. Mayer, Why Did the Heavens Not Darken? "The Final Solution" in History (New York: Pantheon, 1988).

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9 Aimé Césaire, Discours sur le colonialisme (Paris and Dakar: Présence Africaine, 1995), p. 12.

10 Frantz Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth (London: Penguin, 1967), p. 75; for a discussion, see David Macey, Frantz Fanon: A Biography (New York: Picador, 2000), pp. 111, 471.

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16 Mahmood Mamdani, Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996).

17 See David Laitin, Hegemony and Culture: Politics and Religious Change among the Yoruba (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1986).

18 Sir Henry Maine, Ancient Law (Washington, D.C.: Beard Books, 1861), p. 178.

19 I write this without any intent to romanticize the domain of consent or to detract from the existence of power relations in the domain of culture.

20 Mamdani, When Victims Become Killers: Colonialism, Nativism and Genocide in Rwanda (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

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23 For a crossover journalistic account that strongly criticizes journalistic voyeurism but gives an unabashedly conspiratorial (instrumentalist) explanation, see Bill Berkeley, The Graves Are Not Yet Full: Race, Tribe, and Power in the Heart of Africa (New York: Basic Books, 2001).