

WHY DID PEOPLE PARTICIPATE IN GENOCIDE? A THEORETICALLY INFORMED SYNTHESIS

In this chapter, I recapitulate what we learned about the causes of genocide in Rwanda. I do so by analyzing Rwanda's case in light of the explanations derived from the study of past genocides and of communal and ethnic violence. From the differences and similarities, we can learn more about the nature of Rwanda's genocide. The next chapter draws conclusions on the role of development aid in the processes that led to genocide.

The most common explanation of the genocide in Rwanda—which was presented in detail in Part II of this book—refers to the desire of Rwanda's elite to stay in power. These analyses begin by pointing to a series of political and economic factors occurring since the middle of the 1980s that, taken together, threatened the power and privileges of Rwanda's elite. As a result, this small group of people around Habyarimana—especially his wife's family, as well as some cronies and radicals—used all means at its disposal, including racism and violence, to fend off threats to its survival and its privileges (see, from very different perspectives, Reyntjens 1994, 117–20; Kagabo and Vidal 1994, 542; Percival and Homer-Dixon 1995; Prunier 1995; Chrétien 1993a, 191; Chrétien and others 1995, 7; Human Rights Watch 1995). It is this group that spread the message of racism, organized and financed the militia, and planned the murders.

These analyses rejoin explanations of communal violence made by other scholars for other African countries, as well as studies of past genocides and the broader sociology and political science literature on social conflict (Bienen 1993; Fein 1995; Horowitz 1985). And in one of the most famous and widely quoted articles of postwar sociology, Lewis

Coser (1956) outlined the important functions of out-group conflict for in-group stability and cohesion. There is thus ample theoretical and empirical evidence that demonizing Tutsi could be a strategy for securing control over Rwanda by a small elite.

I argued that although every factor discussed in this standard explanation—the economic crisis, the rise of political discontent, the Rwandan Patriotic Front (FPR) invasion, the international pressure for democratization, the hate propaganda and the role of the *akazu*—is important, they do not tell the whole story. What this explanation fails to account for is the deeper social basis on which these processes rest. While the role of elites and the state was surely important—indeed, all genocides in history have been state instigated, organized, and legitimized (Du Preez 1994)—this explanation is limited by its exclusive focus on a small group of people. All the attention focuses on the causes and the strategies of the manipulation of ethnicity by the elites, and too little mention is given to the people who perpetrated the violence or to the social structures that allowed such processes to be set in motion.

First, it is implicitly and wrongly assumed that there is a direct, one-to-one relation between elite manipulation of ethnicity and people's behavior—in this case, the communal violence that took place. Ordinary people are conceived of as passive recipients, conforming to ethnic manipulation from above. This is at best a partial and at worst a wrong explanation. The perpetrators of communal violence are not passive instruments but active participants; the genocidal use of ethnicity by elites rests on a profound social and historical basis.

Second, even if it can be convincingly asserted that Habyarimana or his wife or the *akazu* sought to use racism as a strategy for remaining in power, the question that remains is what kind of social structures allow a handful of people to plot and successfully execute such sinister plans. Let me explain. Among Rwandans and the few specialists on that country, the question of the personality and morality of Habyarimana, as well as the nature of his involvement in the preparation of the genocide, is a hotly debated issue. Was he a decent, tolerant man, bypassed by radical people in his entourage? Or had he always been a racist, although a pragmatic one? Or had he changed his attitude at some point, and, if so, when? Similar questions can be asked about the people around Habyarimana. Yet this whole debate is of little importance for understanding the genocide and the processes that led to it. What is

important in that context is a political structure in which one man's role can be so large and in which a few shadowy figures can plot mass murder; a society in which civil society is unable to stop the processes of genocide if it is not an active participant in them; a political culture in which lack of information and manipulation are realities for most people and in which racism, prejudice, and mutually exclusive histories are omnipresent; and so forth. Thus, although it is certainly of interest to understand the attitudes and objectives of the elites—from Habyarimana to the wider *akazu* to the whole “state class”—one cannot stop there: we are forced to go further and seek to understand the relations between these elites and society at large, as well as the features of that society that make it amenable to genocide.

The profound question, and the central puzzle of this book, is: how do situations come about in which people feel that they should, and may, exterminate innocent people? What kind of social and psychological processes are “so powerful that they outweigh the moral restraints that would normally inhibit unjustifiable violence” (Kelman and Hamilton 1993, 234; Du Preez 1994, 4)? Historically, Rwandans are every bit as peaceful and moral as anyone else on this planet. Yet, although cases of heroic resistance have been documented, there is little doubt that there was mass participation in this genocide. What kind of social processes have taken place that can bring societies to lose the values, restraints, and ethics that under normal circumstances make these actions impossible and abhorrent to contemplate?

Political scientists, sociologists, and psychologists have explained genocides by referring to the fact that certain social groups—Jews and Gypsies in Nazi Germany, Armenians in Turkey at the beginning of the century—are outside the “scope of justice” or the “universe of obligation” of society, meaning that the moral values that apply to other people do not apply to them and that harm to them is of no concern or even desirable (Opotow 1995; Gamson 1995; Fein 1993; Staub 1989). In the case of Rwanda, it is clear that, by 1994, Tutsi were morally excluded from the Rwandan Hutu community and that killing them was morally and socially allowed. However, this is not so much an explanation as a description of the problem. It still begs the questions: Why were people willing to morally exclude a large segment of society? And why did it take this extreme genocidal form in 1994? The rest of this chapter provides some answers to these questions.

Political Science and Sociological Explanations

Probably the most common political science explanation for ethnic conflict is that past discrimination and oppression lead to violence; if that discrimination took place along ethnic lines (or lines that can be perceived or construed as being ethnic), the conflict will be ethnic (Gurr 1993, 59, 82, 126; Stavenhagen 1990, 16; Fein 1995; Ennals 1988, 12–13). Ted Gurr's key indicator for the risk of genocide is "the existence of systematic differential treatment by the larger society." It is a basic social science assumption that violent conflict is likely to emerge if the differences between social groups overlap rather than crosscut the superimposition of inequalities (Fein 1993; Horowitz 1985). Stavenhagen (1990, 77) synthesizes this strand of thought nicely:

Conflicts between ethnic groups arise from a number of causes. A subordinate minority (or majority) may react to years, decades, or centuries of discrimination and oppression, and stand up to say "enough!" or it may demand rights that it has been denied by others who enjoy them. Or a dominant ethnic (whether majority or minority) may attempt to impose its own norms and standards or its own model of society on a weaker, underprivileged minority (or majority) and encounter resistance when it does so. Or the dominant majority may feel that the minority has been granted or is demanding "too much" and must be kept "in place."

A Marxist-radical variant of this model is that racial and ethnic divisions are merely smoke screens, forms of false consciousness kept alive by the elites to mask their economic and political power and to divide the forces of resistance. The true interests of the working class are in fighting the owners of the means of production, but false consciousness along ethnic or religious lines hinders it from doing so (Wetherell and Potter 1992, chap. 1; Stavenhagen 1990, 16). These theories highlight the role of the elites and the benefits of ethnicity to them; however, the general notion that below ethnic conflict lies economic and political inequality remains more or less the same. Both schools agree that more or less objective, real-world socioeconomic and political differences are ultimately responsible for ethnic conflict, while ethnicity per se is only a symptom of the problem, although a powerful one, for it is so eminently mobilizable. What are, in essence, class or economic conflicts tend to take ethnic forms because of the salience of these primordial attachments to people and the presence of ready-made institutions, symbols,

leaders, and images; however, the core of the conflict is really economic or political imbalance. In its most extreme, this leads to statements such as Rupesinghe's (1988, 17, 20):

Ethnic conflict as such does not exist. What does exist is social, political and economic conflict between groups of people who identify each other in ethnic terms: color, race, religion, language, national origin. Very often such ethnic characteristics may mask other distinguishing features, such as class interests and political power, which on analysis may turn out to be the more important elements in the conflict.

The latter statement, although popular among progressive people throughout the world, is reductionist, for it takes away the possibility of ethnicity and, more generally, identity being an independent variable. Rupesinghe acknowledges as much when he adds: "when ethnic differences are used consciously or unconsciously to distinguish the opposing actors in a conflict situation—particularly when they become powerful mobilizing symbols, as is so often the case—then ethnicity does become a determining factor in the nature and the dynamic of the conflict" (Rupesinghe 1988, 17, 39; Stavenhagen 1990, 76). Hence, the root cause of a given conflict may be economic, but ethnicity can become, over time, an independent factor in it, taking on independent dynamics and complicating its resolution.

This explanation seems to have little relevance to the Rwandan genocide. Rwanda was not a case of a small minority exploiting the masses, nor one of an exploited majority rising up to throw off the bonds of exploitation. If anything, the violence was committed by the numerically, politically, militarily, and economically dominant group against the minority.

To be sure, the historical origins of ethnicity in Rwanda are related to socioeconomic differences, and economic and social discrimination along ethnic lines in favor of Tutsi was an undisputed presence during colonization and possibly much earlier. A big part of the genocidal rhetoric consisted precisely of more or less historically accurate reminders of this past inequality and oppression. But, as stated earlier, this inequality and supposed exploitation ended decades ago—long before most of the people who did the killing were born. It hardly seems sufficient to explain why people would be willing to torture and kill their neighbors now—neighbors who, in many cases, were every bit as poor and powerless as the killers.

The Marxist-radical argument that stresses the benefits of racist and

ethnic prejudice to the elites does have relevance for understanding Rwanda if one drops its overly econocentric assumptions. In line with many postmodernist authors who stress the relation between ideas and power, one can see how, in Rwanda, the ethnic ideology served as a tool for the powers that be to legitimize their dominance and to hide from the poor the injustices they were subjected to. I explained how the ideology of Hutu power, and its corollary, the ideology of the evil and foreignness of Tutsi, had served this function since independence. What is still unclear is why people were so willing to believe it and why, at some point, they were willing to set aside their human values and slaughter their neighbors.

Another basic political science explanation of ethnic conflict posits that extreme violence is likely to happen during periods of transition—from so-called traditionalism to modernization, or from poverty to development, or from authoritarianism to democracy (Fein 1995; Horowitz 1985; Moore 1987). This argument can take different forms. One version is that those who benefit from the status quo will be tempted to revert to violence to defend their privileges, while those who seek change will consequently be tempted to do the same. Another version looks at societywide processes of unfulfilled (rising) expectations, frustration, and aggression. The latter is exemplified in the following quote from Ralph Dahrendorf (1995, 2; see also Tedeschi and Nesler 1993; Gurr 1970):

When opportunities are held out for people but are not yet there to grasp, when economic development accelerates but social and political development lags behind, a mixture of frustration and irresponsibility develops which breeds violence. Such violence can be individual and undirected, but it can also become collective and directed against apparently happier neighbours or more successful strangers in one's midst, or both.

At first, this explanation, too, seems of little relevance to Rwanda, where there has been precious little modernization, either economic or political, over the last decades. Surely, Rwanda was in the midst of a process of change, both economic and political. However, I argued that little development ever impacted most of the poor people and that the political agitation for or against democracy in the capital was rather remote to most farmers' daily concerns.

But there was certainly an element of rising expectations and associated frustration in Rwanda. It can be argued that the whole development enterprise, with its ideas of material progress, its well-paid employees (whatever the color of their skin) with their four-wheel-drive

vehicles, villas, foreign travel, and hundreds of small, daily status symbols, created a permanent reminder of the life that could be but that never would be for the majority of the population. Because of their exclusion from political and military jobs, educated Tutsi were highly represented in the development enterprise, whether in the bilateral aid system or in nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Hence, even though many of them were in the business of development and, as such, at least rhetorically committed to improving the well-being of the Hutu masses, given the great social differences between them and the masses to be developed and given the continued nonexistence of the promised development, it seems eminently reasonable to suppose that frustration among ordinary people was high and that people of Tutsi origin were considered at least part of the problem. However, closing the explanation at this point would result in only a partial view, leaving many questions unanswered. Why was the violence directed only against Tutsi, and not also against Hutu, who constituted a much larger proportion of the development enterprise? Why did people not kill those who were much more directly responsible for their poverty—corrupt politicians, land-grabbing civil servants, patronizing local party cadres, and unjust police officials—rather than their often equally poor Tutsi neighbors? And why did the genocide take place the moment it did, and with such extreme intensity and cruelty? The presence of rising but unfulfilled expectations and the frustration this engendered were necessary, but they were not sufficient to explain the genocide. Still unanswered is what determined the choice of the targets of the violence—a choice that was rather counterintuitive—and the moment of the explosion.

A different social science argument holds that ethnic violence takes place primarily in times of economic recession. Competition over scarce resources and general levels of frustration increase during economic downturns, thus causing intergroup hostilities. This argument is widely accepted in policymaking and academic circles and is used to explain communal violence almost everywhere in the world. It has also been used for the case of Rwanda and I documented, from 1985 onward, a major economic crisis did hit Rwanda, hurting almost all social groups. However, there is little strong evidence to back the argument up. Donald Green and his colleagues at Yale University's Institution for Social and Policy Studies thoroughly analyzed the data on which famous studies of hate crimes in the United States are based and added their own data on New York hate crimes. They found virtually no statistical correlations between economic indicators and racist crimes. According

to them (Green, Glaser, and Rich 1996, 20; see also Green, Wong, and Strolovitch 1996), the reasons are, first, that “hate crime seems to follow in the wake of economic setbacks only when target groups are widely blamed for deteriorating economic conditions”; and second, that hate crime is primarily about “maintaining social boundaries and the relative power of one’s social group.” Economic insecurities play a role in this, but as Allport (1954, 60) stated decades ago, “there must also be a previous sense of in-group and out-group rivalry before the lines of competition can be perceived as ethnic, rather than individual, rivalry.” Hence, we can conclude that while economic recession may play a role in increasing the frustration and alienation required for committing racist and violent acts, it is by itself an insufficient explanation of the genocide. Most notably, it begs the question of why certain groups are blamed and marginalized and others are not.

In summation, the usual political science and sociological explanations of communal violence are only partly relevant to the Rwandan genocide. Frustration with the kind of development that benefits primarily those promoting it certainly existed; elites were undoubtedly attached to their privileges and willing to use ethnicity as a tool in that struggle; the economic crisis surely exposed the fault lines in society more and increased despair. A more encompassing explanation is needed, however, that manages to bring these elements together without being reduced to them and that can ultimately account for the question: why were so many Rwandans capable of putting aside their moral principles and killing innocent people? It seems imperative to turn to (social) psychology for further illumination.

Psychological Explanations

Psychological explanations of conflict and violence have been developed since the nineteenth century. Many psychologists believe that people have invariable psychological, if not genetic, propensities that promote conflict (Staub 1989, 52–53). In this view, people need to identify with groups and naturally tend to feel hostility toward other groups and discriminate against them. Other psychologists, such as some Freudian theorists, argue that there is a certain amount of “free-floating” aggression in people that can become activated as a result of “social permission to attack a certain group,” especially if that group is defenseless (Banton 1983, 82–83; Hoffmann and McKendrick 1990, 16–17). Still others

develop a “state of consciousness” argument that describes the processes by which individuals exhibit more norm-violating, irrational, and violent behavior in group situations (Mummendeny and Otten 1993). In other words, violent tendencies exist in all people, and they “break through” when the social norms that keep group hostility in check break down (Stavenhagen 1988, 17–18). What unites all these theories is that they explain actual conflict by reference to the existence of aggressive tendencies in all people, especially when in groups.

The problem with this type of explanation is that it applies to everyone and thus fails to account for variations in people’s behavior (Wetherell and Potter 1992, chap. 2). Although these psychological theories may provide valuable insights into the potential for out-group violence that exists in all people, they tell us little about the actual processes that make that violence happen. Again, they are more descriptive than explanatory. As a result, most psychologists and psychoanalysts have abandoned these views (Marmor 1992). We need more than general statements about human dispositions.

Another psychologically inspired school of thought seeks to explain the genocide by referring to primitive, irrational forces that are typical to Rwandans, to Africans, or to humankind. Jerome Bernstein (1995, 11), a Jungian psychoanalyst, believes that the Rwandan genocide “has deep roots in the irrational, in the collective unconscious of society”—a “psychotic force.” Marc Sommers (1996) documents that, in the refugee camps around Rwanda, such explanations are common within many churches. Essentially, the explanation is that the forces of evil exist in all of us and somehow took over the Rwandan collective soul for some months. In my talks to Rwandans, many of them invoked similar arguments, often with the purpose of moving on with life after the genocide. The problem with these explanations is that they are very general and do not explain why genocide occurred at a specific time (if these dispositions are ancient and universal, why does genocide not erupt more often?). Such explanations use the mantle of irrationality to cover up the concrete, well-planned, freely chosen actions of leaders and ordinary people alike. Most scholars of the Holocaust, for example, have refused to enter such paths of reasoning and have observed that “Nazism cannot be explained as a reversion to an uncivilized or barbarian state” (Kressel 1993, 185).

Another important psychological explanation of people’s participation in violence states that, with the right justification, nearly all people would be willing to obey orders to severely harm other people. This has been called the “normality thesis,” for it argues that “people who would

not ordinarily be described as unusual, deviant, sick, mentally ill, or pathological are capable of committing acts of unrestrained violence and evil" if told to do so by legitimate authorities (Miller 1986, 185). It is the almost exact opposite of the previous explanation, which attributed mass participation in violence to irrational, primitive, dark forces. The experiments on obedience by Stanley Milgram (1974; for an excellent analysis of the impact of his work, see Miller 1986) are the most famous in this area. This approach, which stresses the importance of situational factors such as social pressure, obedience to authority, compliance, and social organization, is similar to Hannah Arendt's famous "banality of evil" theory in which ordinary people participate in genocides because they are small parts in the machine controlled and organized from above (Arendt 1963; see also Kressel 1993, 29, 187; Kelman and Hamilton 1993; Miller 1986, chap. 7). Du Preez (1994, 86, 90) stated it eloquently:

Perhaps the most extraordinary fact about the psychology of genocide is that there is no need to search for abnormality. Genocide is the work of perfectly normal and ordinary people. . . . It has never been necessary to empty the lunatic asylums in order to recruit people for pogroms or genocides or holy wars.

Arguments along these lines have often been applied to Rwanda, usually in conjunction with explanation based on elite manipulation. It is said that the monarchist, unquestioning, obedient, or conformist nature of the Rwandan traditional mentality made Rwandans especially inclined to follow orders from above, including to slaughter their neighbors (Cart 1995, 468, 473; Voyame and others 1996, 99–100). A slightly different argument states that Rwanda's farmers have not changed much over the generations, and they still crave the sense of order and security that strict vertical structures of authority have always provided. For that reason, they killed when told to do so (Erny 1994, 91, 109, 165 ff.; Gourevitch 1995, 84, 93; Prunier 1995, 57). A Human Rights Watch (1995, 17–18) study described the killings in exactly these terms: "In Kibirira they [the officials] told Hutu to kill their Tutsi neighbors to fulfill their *umuganda* obligation for the month. . . . Just as authorities began the violence, so they could stop it. In Kibirira they sent two policemen who halted the killings just by blowing their whistles and giving orders to disperse."

This explanation is popular, for it combines generality with expediency. It was equally popular, it should be noted, for explaining (away)

the Holocaust (Goldhagen 1996, 11, 116 ff., 383). At first sight, and as seen by an outsider, the facts seem to bear this vision out: most Rwandans *do* act in a less forthright and extroverted manner than, say, most Americans; the public administration structure *is* built in a vertical and all-encompassing mold; obedience and respect for authority *do* seem to be crucial parts of Rwandans' daily lives. This allows people to present these similarities as proofs of the hypothesis that centuries-old mentalities of obedience underlay the genocide.

Yet, explaining the genocide by arguing that Rwandans are traditionally inclined to great obedience is fundamentally wrong. To begin with, in the context of the genocide—which was executed largely by Hutu people—this presentation of Rwandans as obedient and docile bears a dangerously close resemblance to one of the crucial elements of the mythical imagery of racism: the old myths of the Hutu as obedient and docile and the Tutsi as commandeering and cunning (Malkki 1995, 99; Chrétien and others 1995). Moreover, this type of explanation is vague and contradictory: anybody can “discover” any supposed traditional character trait to “explain” the genocide. Thus, at the same time that Rwandans are described as obedient and docile, they are also described as distrustful, lying, and dissimulating (see Cart 1995, 468, for examples)—features that seem quite contradictory. In my discussions with Rwandans, I have heard many similar, and always contradictory, explanations: the Rwandans have a tradition of brutal regulation of conflict, there is a centuries-old tradition of father killing, and so forth. The vagueness and generality of these explanations tend to make them tantamount to absolutions, rather than explanations, of the genocide—and that is the context in which they are often used.

The Rwandan culture, like many other cultures in the world, values the nonexpression of disagreement, but that is not the same as saying that all Rwandans are obedient by nature, and it certainly does not explain mass murder. Rwandans are perfectly capable of not following orders, as the many rooted-out coffee plants, the not-adopted agricultural techniques, and the nonattended communal meetings attest. They are capable of protesting authority, as the rapidly growing opposition to the Habyarimana regime by the 1990s indicates. Rwandans are also capable of judging their acts and possess moral systems; they are not devoid of moral values.

The main problem with all the psychological explanations presented—the banality of evil thesis, or its opposite, the irrationality, pathological one—is that they are overly general and undetermined,

with little explanatory power. For these reasons, most social scientists have concluded that psychological factors play no role in the explanation of large-scale phenomena such as genocides (Jonassohn 1992)—a tradition dating back at least to Emile Durkheim's injunction a century ago that social facts must be explained by other social facts, not psychological ones (Ross 1993, 52, 180). Moreover, in the specific context of discussions on the genocide in Rwanda, many of these explanations have the side effect of removing all blame from the organizers and the perpetrators, for either uncontrollable, irrational forces overtook Rwanda like a dark storm, sweeping away all resistance, or all people in general are capable of engaging in genocide if told to do so, especially if they have an obedient traditional culture (which could be said of many of the world's peoples).

Yet, while asserting that explanations that rely solely on general statements about people's psychological attributes are reductionist and simplistic, it seems wrong to exclude psychological factors entirely from the analysis. The motivations and emotions of people engaged in genocides must be of a particular nature. In other words, there is a social-psychological component in answering the question why ordinary people—individuals with families, religious beliefs, values, and ideals—are willing to set aside the norms against cruelty and murder and to slaughter innocent, unarmed children, women, and men. I believe that these factors need to be sought in the level of frustration and alienation in a society in which structural violence is widespread and in the sociopsychological racist imagery already discussed in Chapter 2.

We saw how, in Rwanda, basic psychocultural images of the Tutsi and the Hutu have been a prime element of society for decades. These profound images treat Hutu and Tutsi as radically and unchangeably different, in their history as well as in their character and their moral, intellectual, and social attributes and roles. Even those who deliberately seek to avoid racism, those who advocate power sharing, those who are opposed to violence, have to position themselves in relation to these basic images, deal with them, and refer to them.

This racism lay dormant for more than a decade, meaning that it was less visible, less of a priority to people, less needed by both those in power and the masses—but not that it was abandoned. Prejudice toward a group can exist without showing itself in day-to-day behavior toward all members of that group; it can even exist while allowing exceptions for specific people (Duckitt 1992–93; Gamson 1995, 11; this is also Goldhagen's controversial 1996 argument). It was reactivated in

the 1990s through hate speech and sporadic violence against Tutsi, rendering the Tutsi “socially dead.” Its rapid reactivation is testimony to its widespread and profoundly ingrained nature, even during the first fifteen years of the Habyarimana regime.

In the 1990s, this ideology radicalized, leading to the genocide that began on April 7, 1994. This process of radicalization fed on two basic forces: one emanating from government and the elites, and one from the needs of ordinary people. Both these processes were necessary to create genocide. For decades, anti-Tutsi racism had served as a deliberately maintained strategy of legitimization of the powers that be and was kept alive through a systematic public structure of discrimination and education, in which the different and problematic identity of all Tutsi was constantly being referred to. Under threat by political and economic processes, parts of the elite increased their use of the old strategy and effectively spread it throughout society. This had been done before (in 1959 and 1973), and it still worked because so little had changed in Rwanda.

At the same time, racist prejudice was a means for ordinary people, subject to structural violence and humiliation, to make sense of their predicament, to explain their ever-growing misery through projection and scapegoating. The state-supplied racism provided poor Hutu with a sense of value, as well as an “explanation” for the maldevelopment they faced daily. As Simpson and Yinger (1953, 83) stated in their seminal work on prejudice: “the designation of inferior groups comes from those on top—an expression of their right to rule—as well as from frustrated persons often near the bottom, as an expression of their need for security.”

Psychologists have documented how the designation of inferior groups, and their more or less active exclusion, serves important functions of projection and scapegoating. Marc Ross (1993, 178), who was quoted at length in Chapter 2, adds:

These shared images of the world and plans for action are predicated on a common perception of the differences between one's own group and outsiders. The interpretative processes involved in intense conflict situations emphasizes the homogeneity of each party, often using minor objective differences to mark major social distinctions. Outsiders then can serve as objects for externalization, displacement, and projection of intense negative feelings, which are also present but denied within the group.

Ervin Staub, one the foremost psychologists to have studied “the roots of evil,” similarly describes in detail how devaluation of others and scapegoating are strategies for coping with the stress of persistent

life problems, frustration, and lack of self-esteem (Staub 1989, chap. 3; Staub 1990).

Sociologists use different terms to describe similar processes. At the end of the nineteenth century, Durkheim, studying suicide, coined the term *anomie*, or normlessness, referring to a condition of instability resulting from a breakdown of standards and values or from a lack of purpose or ideals. The concept has remained important in sociology, both at the level of societies and at the level of individuals, referring in the latter case to a personal sense of rootlessness or the breakdown of an individual's sense of attachment to society (Srole 1956). Robert Merton (1968) found that anomie is greatest in the United States in persons who do not have acceptable means of achieving their cultural goals, leading to crime, delinquency, and suicide. Elwin Powell (1970) describes how anomie leads to war and violence against outsiders as a means of reducing anxiety and promoting social cohesion. Among the components of anomie (defined as a breakdown of an individual's sense of attachment to society), sociologist Leo Srole distinguished political powerlessness, social powerlessness, the experience of socioeconomic regression, loss of a sense of life's meaningfulness, and social isolation (Srole 1956; see also Merton 1968, 218). These are precisely the processes discussed earlier.

Additional Factors of Importance

There is a set of other factors that contributed to the genocide in Rwanda. These factors are complementary; that is, they did not by themselves supply sufficient dynamics to cause the genocide, but they added to the previously described processes. I discuss four such factors here: opportunism, the effects of past occurrences of violence, the absence of external constraints, and the colonial legacy.

The first one, quite often discussed in the literature, is opportunism, or the search for personal gain. Whenever violence seems to be a socially acceptable option, some people will join in to appropriate someone else's money, possessions, or land. This argument has often been invoked for the case of Rwanda. In Kigali, during the height of the genocide, massive looting of government offices, international aid agencies, and businesses took place. André and Platteau (1995, 34–35), in their excellent study of a commune in northern Rwanda, demonstrate how all the Hutu who were killed there during the genocide (only one

Tutsi woman lived in the village, and she was murdered too) tended to be either the wealthier ones or social outcasts, suggesting that “the 1994 events provided a unique opportunity to settle scores or to reshuffle land properties.” More generally, quite a few people have mentioned land grabbing as one reason for participation in the genocide, and even as a cause of it, although none supplied any proof of this statement (Kabirigi 1994, 4; Reyntjens 1994, 192). And Claudine Vidal (1985, 168), discussing the 1972–73 violence in Rwanda, mentions “suivisme et opportunisme” and racism as major factors.

The personal gain motive was apparent for militia members, who, in both Burundi and Rwanda, were at the forefront of the radicalization and the killing. The main militia operating in Burundi in 1995, for example, emanated from a number of urban gangs that used to be biethnic but became monoethnic and better equipped after the 1993 unrest (Cros 1995; Dans un maquis hutu 1995). In Rwanda too, it seems that many of the youth gangs that worked with or for the militias, and eventually became one with them, were originally no more than gangs of small-time criminals, young thugs who worked for the highest bidder (Nayigizente 1995, 46). For them, little changed, apart from marching behind a different banner. They were still out to loot and steal and did so with great regularity and impunity.

However, the importance of opportunism and the desire for enrichment should not be overestimated. For opportunism to exist, there must be a process of violence into which opportunists can insert themselves and do their dirty work; opportunism, by definition, cannot be the primary explanation for the process (Goldhagen 1996, 382). As Du Preez (1994, 35) rightly says, “one should not imagine that genocide is purely practical. It requires a great vision to justify a great wrong.” Moreover, it is an explanation that is situated at the level of people’s motives and, as such, is hard to verify or falsify. In the case of Rwanda, with the exception of the studies by André and Platteau (1995) and Longman (1995b), we do not possess the microdata necessary to test it. Thus we run the risk of adopting this explanation simply because it seems plausible and convenient. Indeed, Feagin and Hahn (1973, 127 ff.) point out that urban violence in the 1960s and 1970s in the United States has often been explained by similar factors—they mention the so-called riffraff theory and the wild youngsters theory—without any proof apart from its political convenience. Hence, we can conclude that opportunism played a role but is not the crucial dynamic in the genocide.

Another factor that seems relevant to explaining mass participation in genocide in Rwanda is the dynamics set in motion by past occurrences of violence. As the saying goes, violence begets violence. Once a serious episode of violent conflict occurs, it leaves a persistent residue in people's memories and attitudes. For a long time afterward, it can be invoked by leaders to justify political action (Gurr 1993, 126–27). This works through four mechanisms, involving both the victims and the executors of violence.

Acts of violence have psychological consequences for the people and groups that commit them as well as for those at whom they are directed. The more violent a group has been against another group, the more it needs to justify that violence to itself, seeking to balance those acts with its self-perception of being moral and right.¹ Moreover, on a practical level, perpetrators of violence come to fear revenge and may have to engage in all kinds of behaviors, including so-called preventive attack, to defend themselves.² This explanation is more important if the society is characterized by widespread impunity, as both Burundi and Rwanda are.

Moving to the victims' side, psychologists have observed a strong relation between victimization and the commission of violence. In other words, people who have been victims of violence or close witnesses of it, especially during childhood, tend to repeat the same behavioral patterns throughout their lives (McKendrick and Hoffmann 1990, 471). For adults, victimhood—especially if the perpetrator goes unpunished—weakens the institutions and norms that counter violence. It is easier to justify violence against a person or group who has used violence against oneself—or, taking the October 1990 invasion as the starting point of our story, who has instigated violence. Without the FPR invasion, the Habyarimana regime would in all likelihood have fallen slowly, under a combination of internal and external pressure, and the genocide would not have taken place—which is not to say that Rwanda would have been a democratic, peaceful place. The October 1990 invasion by the FPR was the ideal occasion for the government to recreate its legitimacy, to unite part of the population around itself, and to increase the level of violence, fear, and control in society.

In the case of Rwanda, there is an important twist to the “violence begets violence” argument: namely, the dynamics between Rwanda and Burundi. Indeed, the destructive, mirrorlike situation of these two countries is unique and has dramatic effects. Both countries represent each other's worst fears, and events in one country are interpreted and

used by its (radical) neighbors to confirm their worst suspicions and fears. The rulers in Rwanda have been able to reinforce the “truth” of their racist ideology by pointing to the massacres of Hutu (by the Tutsi-dominated army) in Burundi in 1965, 1972, 1988, 1989, and 1993, “proving” that all Tutsi seek the ruthless oppression of the Hutu. Vice versa, Tutsi rulers in Burundi have pointed since 1960 to Rwanda’s example to demonstrate that, if given the chance, all Hutu are out to kill them. Although these occurrences of violence along ethnic lines may have been no more than part of a strategy of aspiring elites to conquer or maintain power, they became a traumatic part of the culture of prejudice in both countries. In the words of Volkan (1994, xxv; see also Bar-Tal 1990), “the group draws the mental representation of a traumatic event *into its very identity*. It passes the mental representation of the event—along with associated shared feelings of hurt and shame, and defenses against the perceived shared conflicts they initiate—from generation to generation.” Moreover, the most radical elements of both sides tended to seek refuge in the neighboring country (as well as Zaire, Tanzania, Kenya, and Uganda), where they sought to destabilize the neighbor’s government. Hence, more than any other place in the world, these two countries are caught in a mutually reinforcing mirror of violence and prejudice.

A third element that contributed to the genocide is the absence of external constraints. One of the three factors that promote genocide, according to Harff (1987, 43), is the “lack of external constraints on murderous regimes.”³ Helen Fein (1993, 86, 99) has shown that most governments committing mass violence are repeat offenders, partly because they saw that their previous uses of violence were condoned by the international community. Along the same lines, Physicians for Human Rights (1994) argues that “the massacres were used by government officials to settle political scores for which no one has ever been punished: the international community viewed them as an internal affair and the government was never likely to punish that which it had ordered.” What we are talking about, then, is an internationalized form of impunity.

In the case of the Rwandan genocide, this factor was very important. The carnage in Burundi in 1993 had shown the Rwandan leadership that the international community, lip service to democracy and human rights notwithstanding, would not intervene if massive violence were used to reverse democratic change. The recent case of Somalia also demonstrated that the international community would quit any country

immediately if only a few of its peacekeepers were hurt; for that reason, the killing of ten Belgian peacekeepers was one of the first actions on April 7, 1994. And the total absence of any condemnation during the first few days and even weeks of the genocide—including the infamous Clinton administration memo forbidding officials to use the term *genocide*—gave the interim government the clearest possible signal that it could continue the genocide without being bothered.

There is one more factor that needs to be taken into consideration. Although it cannot be said to have caused the genocide or even contributed to it in any direct manner, it is crucial to understanding Rwanda and the dynamics that eventually led to genocide. That factor is the colonial legacy, and it affects our subject matter in many ways. We cannot understand the nature of ethnicity in Rwanda without understanding the practice of indirect rule. The differences between Hutu and Tutsi in all likelihood were not created *ex nihilo* by the colonizer, but indirect rule and the associated ideology of racial superiority have had lasting consequences on the nature of social relations in the postcolonial state.

The nature of Rwanda's political system is also largely a continuation of colonial practice. The centralizing, omnipresent state—with its administrative complexity, its top-down functioning, and its control over the bulk of distributional benefits in the country—as well as the restrictions on the expression of political demands and the lack of democracy, are continuations of colonial practice. In Rwanda, as in so many other colonies, the colonial state served the interests of one ethnic group, the Bazungu, and ethnic division was used by the Bazungu to strengthen their rule (Nevitte and Kennedy 1986).

The colonial legacy also shows up in the economic policies followed by independent Rwanda and the way the interaction between the state and its citizens was structured. In Rwanda's dependence on coffee and tea exports; its top-down, constraining, and condescending extension system; its *umuganda* system; and the specific techniques proposed to fight erosion, contemporary Rwanda bears a close resemblance to colonial Rwanda (World Bank 1987, 4; Willame, 1995a, 113). To a certain extent, this can be explained by arguing that it makes sense, given Rwanda's constraints (that is, one could argue for example that the system of living hedges introduced by the colonizer is the best thing to do and thus needs to be continued). To a larger extent, however, this is the result of the constraints imposed by colonial legacy, which limited the margin for maneuver of the new power holders—all the more so in

countries that were desperately poor, with almost no educated leadership. Like anywhere, the combination of inertia, habit, and the vested interest that some have in the status quo is hard to overcome. It is symptomatic, for that matter, that, over the years, the foreign aid system has not proposed anything radically different from a continuation of colonial policy either. The top-down extension system, the dependence on a few cash crops, did not seem to bother it unduly.

To understand the genocide, then, three elements are necessary: the anomie and frustration caused by the long-standing condition of structural violence; the strategies of manipulation by elites under threat from economic and political processes; and the existence of a sociopsychological, widespread attachment to racist values in society. It is the specific interaction of these three processes that allowed the genocide to occur in Rwanda.

Four other factors are of secondary importance; they contributed to the genocide but did not cause it directly. Foremost among them is the occurrence of past violence, both in Rwanda and in Burundi. The others are opportunism, the absence of external constraints, and the colonial legacy. Virtually all these factors far predate the 1990s. Many of them involve the international community. This is what I turn to in the final chapter.

Notes

1. See Bar-Tal 1990 and Warren 1993, 9, writing about people's "struggles to make sense of their own violence." See also Lauer 1989; Striker 1992, chap. 5 for the case of South Africa.
2. This explanation is very important for understanding the dynamics of current violence in Burundi. (See Uvin forthcoming; Archer n.d.); for the case of the Armenian genocide, Libaridian (1987, 210–11) describes how "previous occurrences of victimization make the Armenians more dangerous in the eyes of the powerholders." In general, see Fein 1993, 99.
3. The other two factors are structural change (a necessary but not sufficient condition) and sharp internal cleavages combined with a history of struggle between groups.