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Scott Straus, Lars Waldorf, eds. *Remaking Rwanda: State Building and Human Rights after Mass Violence*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011. xxxix + 382 pp. \$26.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-299-28264-6.

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Uvin on des Forges Festschrift

This edited volume was born out of a conference dedicated to Alison des Forges, a scholar and human rights activist who is legendary among Great Lakes of Africa specialists for her intellect, her commitment to the people of the region, and her dedication to justice and human rights. She influenced many of the scholars collected here (as well as myself), and this is a fitting tribute to her enormous legacy. This is a mandatory book on current Rwanda—by far the best informed treatment written so far. It is a book that nobody who works in Rwanda—in development, diplomacy, information technology, health, education, etc.—should neglect: it will allow them to understand far more about this fascinating country than they could get from any other source. In short, it is a must-read for all. Note that it is also a *can-read* for all: it is written in very short, clear, accessible chapters, with most chapters in the ten- to fifteen-page range.

Many of the contributions here are by a new generation of scholars—political scientists, lawyers, anthropologists, and historians—who have done lengthy fieldwork in post-genocide Rwanda. The main interest of this book is to read these new authors, as they have spent far more time on the ground in post-genocide Rwanda than the older generation, and many of their chapters are truly excellent. It is refreshing to have an abundance of studies that are based on solid field research and that provide a perspective on Rwanda that is not based on elites or in

the capital only.

I particularly liked Timothy Longman's synthesis of the real nature of Rwanda's democracy, Lars Waldorf's discussion of the uses of the genocide ideology laws, Bert Ingelaere's analysis of decentralization, Carina Tertsakian's touching discussion of the plight of the prisoners, and An Ansom's analysis of the high modernist rural ambitions of the Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF). Each of these chapters is concise, well informed, empirically rich, and nuanced. But many other chapters are excellent as well—there are simply too many good ones, in a book with twenty-six contributions, to be individually mentioned. With few exceptions, the tone of the book is painstakingly neutral and nuanced, paying at least lip service to government positions in almost every essay and every conclusion.

The picture that emerges from these chapters is one of a country ruled with an iron fist by a deeply authoritarian and visionary man, President Paul Kagame. He and the people around him faced massive challenges when they came to power: rebuilding the state and extending control over the territory when the entire machinery of the state had been destroyed; assuring security and judging the crimes of the past when massive heinous crimes had been committed; restarting the economy and creating sustainable economic growth in a country that was one of the world's poorest even before its self-destruction; dealing with land pressure in Africa's most densely popu-

lated country; reviving health, education, and other public services in a context of poverty and chaos; and creating a community of people that can live together, even after the murder of up to one million people and the fleeing of millions more. One cannot begin to imagine being in charge of these tasks. Indeed, during the years I have worked in and on Rwanda, I have almost daily asked myself this question: What would I do if I were in charge? What realistic alternatives can I think of, should I be in their shoes? Mostly, no brilliant answers came to me.

Over the last fifteen years, the regime has developed answers to all of these challenges. Obviously, the verdict is still out on whether these policies are achieving the intended results or not, or if the cost is worth it—these are tough questions to answer anywhere, and all the more so in a country where any serious public debate is nearly impossible. One thing about which there is no doubt—and it is the reason why there are so many admirers of President Kagame—is that the regime has been amazingly visionary and active in addressing the profound challenges it faced. Especially from the 2000s onward, it has developed and implemented frequently highly original policies in each of these areas, the most widely known and discussed of which probably are the famous *gacaca* in the justice area and more recently a set of creative policies in health care and insurance.^[1] As this book makes clear, transformative policies are also currently being undertaken in the field of resettlement, land reform, education, citizenship, decentralization, environmental protection, and so on. All these policies are implemented in an extremely heavy-handed and top-down manner, riding roughshod over local resistance and frequently imposing enormous immediate social costs; yet all public criticism or even debate of these policies is impossible.

The picture of Rwanda that emerges from this book is far less rosy than the one the Rwandan government likes to present to the world, or indeed than the one many journalists and development practitioners have come to describe. As such, the book is a welcome corrective to overly positive versions of the Rwanda story that still dominate the popular press, although it can be argued that in their attempt to show the darker side of the country, many chapters neglect the brighter side of what has been done. It would have been nice to have some chapters on, for example, the development of Rwanda's education system, or its health care and insurance system: this, too, is part of the legacy of Kagame and the RPF regime he controls. In addition, the frequent ominous references to the possibility of future violence seem a tad too easy to me. None of us is particularly good at pre-

dicting the future, and it sounds just too facile to predict violence because a country fails to live up to our lofty expectations in terms of free press, human rights, democracy, reconciliation, etc.

Predictably, the government of Rwanda does not like this book at all, and has set out to discredit it. This has yielded some rather crude and ad hominem attacks against the editors and some of the authors on various official and not so official Web sites. The critiques will have little impact on the book's reception, except for strengthening its reputation and visibility—the opposite of the effect intended. As a matter of fact, this disproportionate reaction by the Rwandan government to what is a nuanced and very well-informed book perfectly proves the core issue discussed in this book: the deeply authoritarian nature of the regime—increasingly just one single man—and the total absence of space for any critical discussion in or on Rwanda.

For a book dedicated to a politically engaged historian, this collection is surprisingly ahistorical and apolitical. In part, this is, I believe, because of the human rights focus that underlies many of the essays. In many ways, the authors are to be commended on their investment in this area, and some of them—Longman, Waldorf, and Chris Huggins, to mention just some—have spent years of their lives professionally working in this area, often directly with des Forges. This slowed down their academic careers, and testifies to the fact that a new generation of ethically engaged and methodologically competent scholars is working on this area. Yet it also creates a certain bias, as the normative human rights starting point makes it harder to ask certain scholarly questions.

The genocide is actually oddly underplayed in this book. It is not that the authors do not refer to it and even less that they try to deny it (the standard accusation by the regime against all its critics)—every essay mentions the genocide, typically both in the introduction and in the conclusion, and with the appropriate sense of gravity and horror. But it is as if, in the analytical pages in between, the genocide has largely disappeared. The deep cognitive, political, and social dynamics that made it possible for a mass murder of this scale to be executed are undiscussed—and yet, there is a priori no reason to assume that these dynamics are now mysteriously absent from Rwandan society. Similarly undiscussed are the profound social consequences the genocide has left on all people, including the richest and most powerful, and the relations between them. There is also no comparison with other cases where similar situations have prevailed—

Cambodia, for example, or the social and political impact of the Holocaust on Israel. Hence, we get good empirical data on current trends, but little in the way of explanation of what drives these trends, except for, it seems, government policy failure. What do we know about societies that go through such spasms of self-destruction? Do they typically turn into fully fledged democracies soon thereafter? What do we know about the structural and policy variables that explain different postwar outcomes, and where does Rwanda fall in all this? More generally, what are the drivers of social relations, economic reconstruction, identity, and state-citizen relations in countries that come out of massive violence, and how do these factors affect Rwanda? The book tells us little to nothing about these issues.

In short, there is little in the way of analytically connecting long-term Rwandan trends and constraints to the current situation. To be sure, analogies are frequently made, but they are mostly not explanations—just illustrations. Again, there is almost no theorizing and no looking outside of the case of Rwanda, and as a result little linking the data to scientific knowledge about state formation, path dependence, the social psychology of mass violence, and the like. Of the twenty-six contributions, no more than at most a handful have any references to scholarly literature that is not Rwanda specific.

One of the best essays in this collection, Catherine Newbury's analysis of the villagization program, known as *imidugudu* in Kinyarwanda, avoids both the pitfalls I described earlier. It sets up its subject in the context of a broader literature and it has a solid historical focus. She rightly points out that many of the dynamics described here, including the heavy-handed, disempowering, and often divisive rural interventionism, have deep roots dating back to the colonial period.

If this is so—and many other essays hint at this—then this poses a number of rather big questions for anyone who cares about Rwanda's present and future: Why would current reality in Rwanda be any different from

what it is? Are not all societies characterized by deep path dependencies, created out of relations of power, cognitive mental maps, and the sheer difficulty of changing macro-social patterns? And what about the dynamics of genocide—both those that led to it and those that followed from it? Why would they not reinforce the controlling and top-down features of Rwandan society? Taking all of this into account, the crucial question then is not can we judge current Rwanda policies and realities to fail by human rights standards? But rather, in light of the past, what are the realistic margins for maneuver in modern Rwanda? How can Rwanda achieve progress within a system that, like all other systems, has its own logic, deep roots, and habits of power? Politically, who will make the necessary changes? What is the realistic capability—and right—of the international community to affect these dynamics?

My reflections here are not personal critiques against the authors of these chapters; indeed, they may not even be solvable. During the fifteen years that I worked on Rwanda, I never found the right solution to these conundrums either—between engagement and criticism, history and change, modesty and vision, and rights and reason. That is why I ended my work on the country. This is also not a whitewashing of the crimes committed by the current regime, especially its brutal interventions in the Democratic Republic of Congo, which will go down in history as some of the most callous, disrespectful of human life, cynical, and amoral acts ever committed by Africans against other Africans. Finally, it is also not a suggestion that human rights work is not important in Rwanda or elsewhere: we need powerful and principled voices that speak for those who are silenced everywhere, including in Rwanda.

Note

[1]. *Gacaca* is an experiment in transitional justice undertaken by the government of Rwanda—a mixture of traditional community-based, state-controlled, and state-legislated processes.

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