A State of Horror: the Rwandan Genocide

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'There may be dehumanization without massacre...and presumably massacre without dehumanization.'

Comparatively evaluate three historians of the Rwandan Genocide using Kuper’s theory of dehumanisation.

Synopsis
I was inspired to investigate the Rwandan Genocide by my interest in the relationship between human rights and historical debate. Little did I anticipate the complexity and depth of the issues faced by genocide historians that I would eventually confront: questions of evil, cultural and political power, and variable "truth". Yet my research led me still further, beyond analysing individual historians, to examining how they are influenced by the beliefs and values that define historical practice within and outside their field of study. Genocide studies in particular are characterised by the dominant philosophy of preventionism – the aim of preventing future genocides, which I found to have a limiting effect on the level of analysis and engagement with anthropological principles. The “horror” or emotional impact of genocide must not be allowed to obscure a balanced and comprehensive scrutiny of it for the very reason that preventionism exists: our shared moral imperative to preserve lives.

However, preventionism is only one of the many aims and purposes of historians; moreover, it is complicated by its interdependency with their contexts and philosophies of history. By using Kuper’s sociological theory of dehumanisation to evaluate the histories written by a journalist, political scientist and anthropologist (Melvern, Mamdani and Taylor respectively), I not only learned to appreciate the scope and influence of history and historians’ identities, but also the capacity of other disciplines to enrich and challenge traditional history. In addition, I discovered the powerful impact of contexts and philosophies of history on historians’ conceptions of the human subject, which, in turn, influence the nature of the histories written and the insights they provide. Ultimately, I learned how constructions of history are influenced by both changing interpretations and perspectives, and by the individual contexts, aims and philosophies of historians.

Essay
It is usually assumed that the “horror” of genocide lies in its deviation from normal human behaviour; the ‘intent to destroy’ an entire group of human beings is deemed incomprehensible by genocide witnesses, historians, and the general public. From this point of view, the Rwandan Genocide embodies and epitomises this instinctive fear of human evil in its ‘popular’ nature: unlike the Holocaust, it was performed in the streets, neighbour to neighbour, with machetes and other implements which made killing hard, physical, time-consuming work. The reaction of contemporary genocide scholarship to such “horror” has generally been to assign responsibility to the state.

This response disregards Kuper’s sociological theory of dehumanisation, originally applied to the Holocaust, which comprises two contentious ideas. The first is the theory of ‘dehumanization without massacre’, which underlines the complexity of the causes of genocide, prioritising human agency over meta-historical typologies. The second is the theory of ‘massacre without dehumanization’, which posits genocide as a fundamentally human phenomenon, and thus subverts the assumption of a universalistic norm that resists
collective violence. Kuper’s implicit argument that genocide is a part of human nature challenges not only the interpretation of genocide as necessarily state-driven, but also the underpinning anthropodicy of genocide studies itself.

In this essay, by polarising debate over the causes and motives of genocide, Kuper’s theory will be used to show how constructions of history are shaped by the different contexts, philosophies and aims of individual historians. In this way, a comparative historiographical analysis of the work of Linda Melvern, Mahmood Mamdani, and Christopher C. Taylor, with regard to the Rwandan Genocide, will uncover each historian’s understanding of humanity, and thus the contingency of historical “truth” even where genocide is considered.

The principal distinction made by the cross-evaluation of Kuper’s theory between the histories written by Melvern, Mamdani and Taylor is their approaches to the role of human agency and the state in causing the Rwandan Genocide. The dominant contemporary paradigm within Rwanda studies is exemplified by Melvern in her book ‘Conspiracy to Murder’ where she implies that state-controlled dehumanisation was the primary factor causing genocide in Rwanda: the ‘incitement to ethnic hatred and violence’ by journal Kangura and radio channel Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines, together with an intensification of civil war-related violence, created a sense of ‘impending doom’, only preventable by effective UN intervention. Melvern thus disagrees with both parts of Kuper’s theory.

In his book ‘When Victims Become Killers’ (2001), Mamdani takes a more complex view of the role of human agency, addressing the multiplicity of the causes of genocide by stressing phenomenological aspects of “human consciousness and human capacities”. Although he acknowledges that the basis for dehumanisation was established by the Belgian colonial state in the 1920s and 1930s, creating ‘Hutu as indigenous Bantu and Tutsi as alien Hamite’ with the Hamitic Hypothesis, his emphasis is on the ‘inability (of the 1959 revolution) to transform Hutu and Tutsi as political identities’. He also highlights human agency in the ‘popularity’ of the genocide, and the importance of the Rwandan civil war and Uganda’s ‘armed repatriation of Banyarwanda refugees...to Rwanda’ in creating the conditions for genocide. Mamdani thus agrees with the first part of Kuper’s theory. However, he disagrees with the second, arguing that the transition of Hutu ‘victims’ to Hutu ‘killers’ took place within the colonial logic of a ‘natives’ genocide’, and thus accentuating the role of state dehumanisation in inciting genocide.

In his article ‘The Cultural Face of Terror in the Rwandan Genocide’, Taylor explicitly focuses on the social and cultural aspects of the genocide. This builds upon Mamdani’s key argument of the importance of political identities in provoking genocide: Taylor states that ‘individual Rwandans’ acted against ‘a perceived internal other’ as part of a ‘massive ritual of purification...of “obstructing beings”’. Nonetheless, Taylor also believes that historical, political and socioeconomic elements were necessary to the creation of a climate conducive to genocide; thus asserting that state-run dehumanisation did not inevitably lead to ‘massacre’. Notably, Taylor contests Mamdani’s assumption of the need for a geographically external cause (Uganda and Eastern Congo) to explain the genocide; rather, his very aim is to demonstrate ‘how the forms of collective violence constitute the social’ by analysing the symbolic and cultural patterns structuring violence of the genocide. Taylor thus agrees with the second part of Kuper’s theory.

The diversity of approaches concerning the history of the Rwandan Genocide shows how perspective is often influenced by differences in personal, social and political context. Melvern’s perspective on the Rwandan Genocide is shaped by her experience as a British investigative journalist who acted as a Consultant to the Military One prosecution team at the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR). Unlike Mamdani and Taylor, she is far more focused on “facts” and testimonies than theory or interpretation. Her occupational background also leads her to ignore the popular nature of the genocide and pin responsibility on international forces as the sole obstacle to the translation of dehumanisation to massacre. Imposing her values on her subjects, she emphasises the need for a media hate campaign dehumanising Tutsis to facilitate their massacre, hence rejecting both parts of Kuper’s theory.

Mamdani’s inculpation of Belgian colonisers and belief in human agency stems from his own experience
Taylor’s professional context as an American professor of anthropology at the University of Alabama, specialising in symbolic and medical anthropology, explains his recognition of the notion of the subject as a ‘culture-bound one’. His belief that an understanding of the subject ‘from the inside out’ – through anthropological studies of symbolism – is necessary to ‘understand power in its fullest dimensions’ leads him to reject Melvern’s conception of the Rwandan Genocide as a purely political power struggle. Taylor’s personal experience of living in Rwanda for extended periods, right up to the start of the genocide, accorded him the same understanding of the Rwandan people as individual subjects as Mamdani, demonstrated for example by his inclusion of the perspectives of ordinary Rwandan refugees in contrast to Melvern, who relies mainly on military leaders or perpetrators for Rwandan accounts. At the same time, as an American anthropologist, he inevitably constructs the Rwandan people as an epistemological Other. He is hence able to assume a more balanced view of the genocide and reject a normative repulsion against violence, leading him to concur with the second part of Kuper’s theory simultaneously.

Each of the three approaches is also shaped by various aims and purposes, which influence the scope and depth of historical investigation into different aspects of the Rwandan Genocide, and are shaped themselves by context. In ‘Conspiracy to Murder’, Melvern’s purpose – to incriminate France, the UK and the US in allowing the Rwandan genocide to occur – causes him to simplify the social dimensions of the causes of genocide and a simplification of causal processes: the ‘horror’ of the genocide leads to a reductive leap from dehumanisation to massacre. Her underlying goal of preventing another genocide depends on the Western meta-narrative of social progress, underpinned by positivistic and deterministic state-run algorithms of genocide; this contributes to a reductive approach to causation that neglects the role of human agency in causing genocide. Melvern’s narrow preventionist approach, although well intentioned, may therefore prove ineffective in achieving its own goal.

Mamdani’s purpose is based on a desire to understand, ‘to make the popular agency in the Rwandan genocide thinkable’. As such, he shifts the focus of the genocide from the political elite examined by Melvern to civilians, including educated civic leaders. To explicate this popular impulse, he turns to the power of ideology and political identities. His determination to explore the causes of the Rwandan Genocide beyond the country’s borders in his critique of ‘area studies’ also leads him to posit external causes, which support his agreement with ‘dehumanization without massacre’. However, Mamdani’s overarching aim is to draw some conclusion from ‘the study of Africa’ about ‘late modern life’. Underpinning this conclusion is the ideology of preventionism: invoking the ‘regional and international community’ Mamdani calls for the post-genocide repoliticisation or depoliticisation of Rwanda to eliminate the dehumanising impact of political identities. Again the reductive tendency encouraged by preventionism becomes apparent: Mamdani fails to take into account the concrete economic and social realities of Rwanda. This brings into question the types of aims employed by genocide studies and their practical utility.

The driving force behind Taylor’s work is not preventionism but a fascination with Rwandan cultural power. As an anthropologist, he seeks to expose the importance of cultural factors in shaping forms of genocidal violence; this purpose is part of a wider aim to ‘understand power in its fullest dimensions’ beyond conventional politics. Although Taylor emphasises that the cultural positioning of Tutsi as ‘obstructing bodies’ did not cause the genocide, which underpins his acceptance of ‘dehumanization without massacre’, his aim leads him to argue that these ‘generative schemes’ were internalised by Rwandans as part of the process of socialisation. As such, the symbolic rejection of
Tutsi through culturally specific violence was more an assertion of power than dehumanisation; it was an "ontological predisposition" that characterised the attempt to restore Hutu political hegemony, an ingrained conception of social relations prior to "dehumanisation". This distinction causes Taylor to reject 'massacre without dehumanization' in favour of a more nuanced view of Rwandan culture, showing how different aims can result in different conclusions on the same subject.

Each historian’s philosophy of history also shapes the way in which they see and arrive at the "truth". By way of illustration, Mamdani’s interdisciplinary philosophy, combining 'history, geography and politics', allows him to explore the intersection between the 'legacy of colonialism and postcolonial politics' and thus historicise the essentialisation of difference. At the same time, his perspective from within Africa and his experience in the United States leads him to believe in a "universal" human nature and thus apply rational choice theory to social behaviour. This is shown by his treatment of Rwandan social actors, divided into Hutu and Tutsi, as quasi-uniform categories with particular characteristics; indeed, he restricts his analysis of the Rwandan Genocide to Hutu killings of Tutsi, neglecting to address the significant number of Hutu killings of Hutu, and Tutsi killings of Hutu. As such, 'massacre without dehumanization' does not fit into Mamdani’s philosophy of the human subject or his historical explanation.

Unlike Mamdani, Taylor’s philosophy of history is culture-based. His hermeneutic exegesis of the genocidal violence is based upon an analysis of Rwandan rituals and practice as bound up with politics and history, as 'the body is the ultimate tablet upon which the dictates of the nation-state are inscribed'. His adoption of Pierre Clastres’ theory that "the body is a memory" shows that Taylor’s philosophy centres on the individual subject, unconsciously conditioned by the state to exist within a cultural structure of ethnic relations. Combined with his anthropological belief in cultural relativism, this allows him to support ‘massacre without dehumanisation’ by implicitly arguing that the Enlightenment ideal of universal human rights is not one shared by Rwandans. Therefore, perceiving Tutsi as “Other” does not conform to the definition of dehumanisation because it does not strip the “Other” of the characteristics of Tutsi as human beings. This highlights the fact that the concept of genocide in itself is inseparably tied to modernity, being predicated on a human subject “naturally” endowed with rights such as that to life.

Melvern’s philosophy of history is based upon the evaluation of recently produced documentary records, rather than the history of pre-colonial and colonial Rwanda, used by Mamdani and Taylor to support their analyses. This empiricist reliance on primary archival sources is supplemented only by interviews with the Rwandan political elite and UN Commander Romeo Dallaire44, limiting the scope of the book to diplomatic, military and political history. Her ultimate goal is partially Rankean: to uncover "what really happened" in order to blame the West; as such, she uses a narrativist account that subscribes to the teleological meta-narrative of "progress" in its preventionism. Her philosophy is a reaction to the "horror" of the genocide that can be explained using Friedrich von Schiller’s theory of the ‘naïve’, applied to postmodernism: the fluctuation between our need to ignore and recognise the presence of historical representation can be transferred to our yearning to escape the "horror", characterised by competing impulses to accept its multifaceted nature and reduce it to fit into our lens of comprehension. Accordingly, the historicisation of both our modes of comprehension and representation is vital to an understanding of the gap between subject and its history; just as the epistemological limits of language and fictive nature of causal analysis or historical object should be acknowledged, so too must the complexity of the causes and motivations of genocide be recognised.

Thus, using Kuper’s theory, we discover the multiplicity of historical truth, and its status as an organic entity constantly reshaped by historians according to their contexts, aims and philosophies. By differentiating between the perspectives of Melvern, Mamdani and Taylor, Kuper’s theory shows how contributions from scholars in disciplines other than history, such as political science and anthropology, can lead to a more comprehensive understanding of genocide. Further, it highlights the reductive effect of "horror" on genocide studies, since this is the factor that encourages the incrimination of the state, and perpetuates the ideology of preventionism. These consequences are underpinned by a particular conception of the human subject created by the interrelated factors of context and philosophies of history, which influence each historian’s interpretation of the causes of genocide. Kuper’s theory therefore underlines the need for genocide studies to engage with
the metaphysical problem of evil on philosophical, anthropological and personal bases, in order to pioneer a new, more complex epistemology of genocide.

Endnotes


5. For example, Frank Chalk and Kurt Jonassohn, The History and Sociology of Genocide: Analyses and Case Studies (London, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), pp. 23-28. Chalk and Jonassohn rationalise their popular view of genocide as a crime of state through the assertion that “the performance of genocide has always required a high degree of centralized authority and quasi-bureaucratic organization. The only exceptions probably occur when the victim group is numerically small, such as the indigenous tribes wiped out by colonizing settlers.” This description fails to account for the later Rwandan Genocide, which was a comparatively decentralised operation.


7. Ibid., p. 49.

8. Ibid., p. 109.


10. Ibid., p. 198.

11. Mamdani, When Victims Become Killers, p. 75.

12. Ibid., p. 233. The significance of this idea can be seen in the title of Mamdani’s book.

13. Ibid., p. 14. Mamdani defines a natives’ genocide as “a genocide by those who saw themselves as sons - and daughters - of the soil, and their mission as one of clearing the soil of a threatening alien presence... violence against one who is seen...against one who is seen as a foreigner...that seeks to eliminate a foreign presence from home soil.”


17. Ibid. The jacket of the book states that “Conspiracy to Murder is a shocking indictment of those who knew what was happening and chose not to intervene. It makes the case for an urgent enquiry into the scandalous behaviour of both the US and UK in a crime that could and should have been prevented”.


19. Mamdani, When Victims Become Killers. In “Chapter Six: The Politics of Indigeneity in Uganda: Background to the RPF Invasion” pp. 160-184, Mamdani argues that the RPF invasion of Rwanda “did not only constitute an armed invasion of Rwanda; it was also an armed repatriation of refugees from Uganda” following the flight of many Tutsi to Rwanda in the wake of political crises in postcolonial Rwanda.


21. Ibid., pp. 144-145.

22. Ibid., pp. 161.


26. Ibid., pp. XII-XV.

27. Ibid., p. XV.

28. Ibid., p. 280.
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29. Ibid., pp.265-267.

30. His solution to ethnic antagonisms in post-genocide Rwanda is to reject the link between memory and identity by advocating a “collective forgetting” of political identities that will “dissolv[e] them in the crucible of a larger Banyrwanda identity”, with no mention of economic obstacles to this political resolution - Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers*, pp.262-282.


32. Ibid., p. 139.

33. Ibid., p. 173.

34. Linda, Melvem, *Conspiracy to Murder: The Rwandan Genocide*. The bibliography in pp. 265-301 is drawn mostly from files on UN peacekeeping, the UN mission in the former Yugoslavia, UNPROFOR and Somalia, UNOSOM II, as well as from the United Nations Department of Peacekeeping Operations, Rwanda, October 1993-July 1994 and the Force Commander’s Papers in the UN Archives and Records Management Section. Interviews only with “key” figures.


Bibliography


Desforges, Alison, *Leave None to Tell the Story: Genocide in Rwanda* (Human Rights Watch, June 1999).


Mamdani, Mahmood, *When Victims Become Killers*: Colonialism, Nativism, and the Genocide in Rwanda (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001). This source is Mahmood Mamdani’s analysis of the Rwandan Genocide and the historical development of Hutu and Tutsi political identities in postcolonial Africa. It was very useful to my investigation of the genocide’s historiography, particularly in providing insights into Mamdani’s views on the political aspects of genocide and identity politics within the Rwandan social and cultural framework. In addition, it contains Mamdani’s aims and purposes, and evidences his interdisciplinary approach that combines ‘history, geography and politics’ to break out of the constraints of area studies. The source is quite reliable as it draws on a vast number and variety of primary sources, such as interviews with those directly involved in the genocide, and secondary sources, such as reports from non-governmental organisations and books on Rwanda by established genocide scholars. However, it is biased for a number of reasons, notably in its overwhelming concentration on ‘history, geography and politics’ rather than social, cultural or economic analyses; this renders it less reliable as the well-rounded interdisciplinary view of the genocide it promotes itself as. This work has contributed to the breadth of my investigation in its political focus and its depth through providing me with historical detail and analysis, and demonstrates the complexity of historical approaches in its multilayered response to the application of Kuper’s theory.

Melvern, Linda, *Conspiracy to Murder: The Rwandan Genocide* (London; New York: Verso, 2004). Linda Melvern’s book on the failure of the international community to prevent the Rwandan Genocide was extremely useful as it formed the base of my argument against a simplistic, preventionist approach to history. It was also a useful illustration of the impact of the “horror” on historical writing. By disagreeing with Kuper’s theory, the source demonstrated how empiricist epistemology can limit the analysis of less tangible concepts, such as society and culture. The book is rigorously cross-referenced from primary archives and so is factually reliable; however, the reliability of the source is diminished by Melvern’s preventionism and aim of denouncing the West, which caused her to produce a reductive, politicised analysis of the genocide that did not explore its full complexity. Moreover, she makes vague appeals to generalities such as the ‘civilized world’ and frequently uses anecdotal evidence from key planners of the genocide, further weakening its
reliability. This narrow, biased approach allowed me to contrast this source with the work of Mamdani and Taylor to highlight Melvem's imposition of values onto her historical subjects and limited view of 'dehumanisation', supporting my thesis.


Christopher Taylor's article, exploring the ontological and cultural dimensions of the Rwandan Genocide, was extremely useful in broadening the scope of my historical investigation, supporting and challenging aspects of my other two historians. In agreeing with both parts of Kuper's theory, his perspective allowed me to show the benefits of a complex, multifaceted approach to causation in terms of a more realistic, sophisticated conception of the human subject and recognition of the actual social and physical aspects of genocide. His exploration of cultural power provided an important point of difference to the political approach taken by Melvem and Mamdani. As part of an anthology of work selected and edited by a prominent genocide anthropologist, and the product of both primary source fieldwork and secondary source historical research, Taylor's work is quite reliable. This reliability is bolstered by its interdisciplinary approach: Taylor supports anthropology with history and politics to create a relatively balanced exegesis of Rwandan cultural symbols, applicable to contemporary phenomena. The evaluation of his work was essential to my understanding of the cultural aspects of the genocide, permitting me to support a more nuanced and complex view of humanity and 'dehumanisation' in the face of the "horror" of the genocide.


**Extension History Prizes 2012**

We continue to enhance about the quality of essays submitted as entries for the prizes, qualities that have been apparent in previous years, but the overall quality seemed much higher this year. There were fewer essays entered this year (74 compared to over 100 last year), but it seems this may reflect an awareness by teachers of the standard of excellence required. This meant that essays awarded Certificates of Excellence would have possibly won a prize in previous years. The purpose of awarding such Certificates has been to reward entries for high quality work and this year it was essential that products of such first-class research were given some reward. Well done to all students who entered the competition this year!

Looking at the essay titles (in some cases abbreviated for the Certificates) it is clear that there was much ingenuity by students in conducting the research. However, a couple of students who did excellent research were let down by a failure to ask a valid question, making the work a general research topic rather than an essay. The title of the winner's essay suggests that this could have happened, but the student did present a valid essay in spite of the abbreviated title presented. What continues to amaze and delight the judges is the elevated language and the historical judgements involved in some of these essays, not exclusively in the essays of the winners. We are getting favourable comments from contacts in university departments about the greater ability of many students to come to tertiary studies well-equipped to handle the demands of university life. The improving sophistication of thinking, allied to the excellence of language, indicates how successful this Extension History course has become. Students receiving a Certificate of Excellence have been listed on HTA’s website: www.htansw.asn.au

Alf Pickard
Coordinator, HTA Extension Essay Prize