

3-4-2012

Contextualizing Fanon in the 1994 Rwandan Genocide

Justin Pottle

Wesleyan University, jpottle@wesleyan.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://wescholar.wesleyan.edu/ujss>

 Part of the [African Studies Commons](#), and the [Race and Ethnicity Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Pottle, Justin (2012) "Contextualizing Fanon in the 1994 Rwandan Genocide," *The Undergraduate Journal of Social Studies*: Vol. 2: Iss. 1, Article 2.

Available at: <http://wescholar.wesleyan.edu/ujss/vol2/iss1/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Wesleyan Journals and Series at WesScholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Undergraduate Journal of Social Studies by an authorized administrator of WesScholar. For more information, please contact dschnaidt@wesleyan.edu, ljohnson@wesleyan.edu.

Contextualizing Fanon in the 1994 Rwandan Genocide
Justin Pottle

Writing in the midst of the Algerian War, psychiatrist and philosopher Frantz Fanon faced an African continent divided. Since the imperialist explosion of the mid-nineteenth century, the antagonism between the will of colonized native populations and their European colonizers had intensified, coming to a violent peak during the anti-colonial movements of the 1950s and 60s. In 1961, with the publication of his most famous work, *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon delivered his ultimate prescription for the decolonization movement: true liberation could only come about through the violent overthrow of the colonial oppressor and the existing racial order. Fanon argued that such elimination of the colonial other was the path to the true and absolute decolonization and self-determination for the colonized masses. His work has since inspired countless anti-colonial movements, each empowered by his notion of liberation through violence. Yet, the situation in the lead up to the 1994 Rwandan Genocide nearly three decades after Fanon's death provides a stark parallel to his revolutionary ambitions. On the surface, the perspectives of many Rwandans reflected the circumstances described by Fanon: confronted by a historical racial minority threatening native freedom, violent eradication of the racial other was the only solution. However, unlike Fanon's vision, these "colonizers" were fellow Rwandans—members of the Batutsi ethnic group, who comprised roughly 15% of the national population—and, even more disturbing, the conflict was almost entirely constructed by a faltering political regime. Whereas Fanon envisioned a disenfranchised African proletariat rising against their political and racial oppressors, the reverse occurred in Rwanda: the primarily Bahutu government, seeing its

grip on power loosen in the midst of war and economic crisis, constructed an oppressive, colonial racial other out of the Batutsi minority for its own gain. Framed in terms akin to Fanon's, the government and Bahutu supremacists advocated vicious and unrepentant slaughter of the Batutsi, turning countryman against countryman, neighbor against neighbor. Like Fanon, the end of the violence was the formation of a national, collective identity—however, its instrumental application was to reinforce the status quo, not subvert it. In their rhetoric and execution, the Rwandan government and Bahutu extremists justified genocide in a brutal cooption and perversion of Fanon's anti-colonial framework. The result was catastrophic: in 100 days, nearly 800,000 were dead.¹

“Decolonization is the veritable creation of new men. But this creation owes nothing of its legitimacy to any supernatural power; the ‘thing’ which has been colonized becomes man during the same process by which it frees itself.”² So writes Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth*, setting forth the fundamental maxim of his argument. The colonial system institutionalized divides between native and colonizer, forcing natives into constant socioeconomic inequality and oppression. Obvious economic inequalities between European colonists and native Africans were a simple testament to this: clean, orderly towns of the settlers contrasted sharply with the squalid, starved conditions of African villages.³ The differences between the two groups were absolute and insurmountable, “two forces, opposed to each other by their very nature.”⁴ Thus, the same violence through which the colonist came to power and imposed order in the colonial world would be used to overcome this divide, to utterly eliminate the oppressor.

¹ Samantha Power, “Bystanders to Genocide,” *Atlantic Monthly*, September 2001, <http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/200109/power-genocide>.

² Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 36.

³ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 36.

The destruction of the colonial world was not the establishment of racial equality, it was “no more and no less that the abolition of one zone, its burial in the depths of the earth or its expulsion from the country.”⁵ Fanon’s theory, in this sense, predicates genocide: it “involve[d] ‘cleansing’ or ‘purifying’ the area of the presence of another, who is deemed undesirable or dangerous.”⁶ Fanon’s native liberated his or herself from the constraints of social order and race, becoming “man” capable of self-determination, by way of systematic violence and the virtually genocidal elimination of the racial other.

The power of Fanon’s argument stemmed from the transcending of the insurmountable difference between the racially-defined oppressed and oppressor. Only by eliminating this racial other could the oppressed subject overcome the inequality imposed by its presence and power. Through such violence, the native not only recognized him or herself as a liberated, self-sufficient individual, but also as part of a broader community. Each was attuned to a collective racial consciousness, the basis of the decolonized state. The development of this sort of national identity was the goal of the Rwandan government in the years leading up to the 1994 genocide. It required the creation of a racial other, a force opposed to the majority by its very nature. Long-standing ethnic tensions between the Bahutu and the Batutsi held such latent potential.

Prior to Rwandan independence from Belgium in 1962, the nation was ruled by a Batutsi monarchy, yet the delineation between the two ethnic groups was ambiguous. It was only in 1933 that Belgian colonizers introduced the notion of fixed ethnic identities

⁵ Ibid., 41.

⁶ Jacques Sémelin, “From Massacre to Genocidal Process” *International Journal of Social Studies* 54, no. 107 (2002), 439.

out of bureaucratic convenience.⁷ Before then, Bahutu and Batutsi were contingent mostly upon status, not race: Batutsi comprised the pre-colonial aristocracy, and, up until the 1920s, though infrequent, a Bahutu could be appointed a lord, thus losing his Bahutu identity and gaining that of the Batutsi.⁸ Similarly, as the Belgian's bureaucratized ethnic identity in the 30s, assigned ethnicity was dependent not on ancestry, but head of cattle owned; those with more than ten were Tutsi, less, Hutu or Twa.⁹ Before and after independence, intermarriage between the two groups was common, and many Rwandans fit neither physical stereotype—historically, most accounts by missionaries and explorers greatly exaggerated distinctions in appearance in the first place.¹⁰ After independence, furthermore, the Bahutu and Batutsi were socioeconomically, culturally, and linguistically identical.¹¹ Though politically marginalized after independence, the Batutsi were more or less left at peace, living and working amongst their Bahutu neighbors.¹² Yet, the political inequality between Bahutu and Batutsi after independence “illustrates the danger of... [a] state that ‘does not embrace the entire *polis*’, but only ‘that part which members of the hegemonic elite think it should embrace.’”¹³ Such was the brutal irony of the Rwandan genocide: the differences between Bahutu and Batutsi were almost entirely fabricated, the mass violence an instrument of a “hegemonic elite” who viewed Batutsi as lesser citizens.

The role of the racial other was not new in Rwanda; in fact, it defined much of its modern history, including the 1959 Rwandan Revolution that established independence

⁷ Helen M. Hintjens, “Explaining the 1994 Genocide in Rwanda,” *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 37, no. 2 (1999): 249.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 250.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 253.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 252.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 247.

¹² *Ibid.*, 247-248.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 245.

and the Bahutu government. However, the political use and Fanonian framing of the Bahutu-Batutsi divide most fully materialized as the country destabilized in the late 1980s and early 90s. When the Rwandan trade deficit began to skyrocket at the end of the 80s, due mostly to external economic conditions, government stability began to falter. War with the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), a Batutsi political party and rebel group, had exacerbated ethnic and political tensions. The World Bank and IMF pressured the existing government to make major structural reforms, while commodity prices continued to plummet.¹⁴ The 1993 Arusha Accords, which put an end to the violence with the RPF, only further jeopardized the current regime's stability by seeking shared power between the rebels and the government.¹⁵ In response, rhetoric shifted markedly during these volatile years. Rwandan president Juvénal Habyarimana sought to consolidate support by rallying the Bahutu majority against a collective racial enemy, the Batutsi, now synonymous with the RPF.¹⁶ Instead of targeting external policymakers, politicians began attributing the financial crisis to predominantly Batutsi economic elites, intellectuals, and merchants,¹⁷ while continuing conflict with the RPF painted the group as an enemy of the status quo. As the situation worsened, Bahutu extremism grew and politicians turned towards a "final solution" to the nation's rapidly deteriorating conditions: genocide.

"For injustice to be acceptable evidently it must resemble justice," wrote political thinker Barrington Moore Jr. in 1978.¹⁸ The "final solution" sought by the Bahutu government required the cementation of anti-Batutsi sentiment. Political rhetoric depicted the Batutsi as the source of Rwanda's socioeconomic woes, and extremist press and

¹⁴ Ibid., 257.

¹⁵ Ibid., 258.

¹⁶ Ibid., 242.

¹⁷ Ibid., 256.

¹⁸ Barrington Moore Jr., *Injustice: The Social Bases of Obedience and Revolt* (Basingstone: Macmillan, 1978), 55.

politicians crafted the image of an ethnic minority hell-bent on domination and re-colonization. The Batutsi elite sought to restore the pre-independence monarchy, reinstate the slavery of the masses, and “return to the unquestionable superiority of the Batutsi overlords over the Bahutu majority.”¹⁹ Extremists both within and outside the government constructed an anti-Batutsi mythology, within which the ethnic minority conspired to commit genocide against the Bahutu and colonize all of eastern and central Africa under Hamitic rule.²⁰ Extreme Bahutu leaders sought to bestow the Batutsi with the oppressive identity of Fanon’s colonialists. The Bahutu were in constant danger of suppression as long as the Batutsi existed, their ethnic differences insurmountable and their history of dominance an ever-present threat. Hutu supremacist magazines called for ‘Bahutu to stop feeling any pity for Batutsi’; as Fanon argued, liberation could only occur from their unrepentant elimination.²¹ This advocacy of individual engagement with violence disturbingly mirrored the prescriptions of Fanon: “At the levels of individuals, violence is a cleansing force. It frees the native from his inferiority complex and from his despair and inaction; it makes him fearless and restores his self-respect.”²² The ultimate tragedy of genocide was its inherent arbitrariness; the roles of native and settler, the perceived oppression and inferiority complex, were entirely fabricated, built by a regime clinging on to power at any cost.

As such, the Rwandan Genocide illustrated the frightening reality of Fanon’s theorized revolution: the divides between colonist and native, in some situations, were merely perceived. There was no oppression to overcome, no inherent inequality, no

¹⁹ Hintjens, “Explaining the 1994 Genocide in Rwanda,” 264.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 263.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 265.

²² Fanon., 94.

fundamental difference between one and the other. Fanon saw violence as a legitimate means of overthrowing entrenched inequalities, embodied in racial domination—yet, the ethnic tensions of Rwanda were far from the institutionalized supremacy of the colonial era. The Rwandan government’s construction of such racial domination revealed an instrumental cooption of Fanon’s theory, something that Fanon himself would utterly reject. In this sense, my argument requires clarification in terms of Fanon himself—the basis of his argument stems from ethnic violence’s philosophical content of self-realization, stemming from its context in the very real power dynamics of colonialism. Without institutionalized oppression, the ethnic cleansing Fanon lays out is simply mass violence, possessing no opportunity for solidarity and collective determination, only death. Officials and extremists, like Fanon, sought to build a national identity among its people. Yet, instead of overcoming such a system of colonial domination, the Bahutu government constructed an imagined one for its own instrumental purposes: to save the crumbling authority of increasingly draconian regime.

Works Cited

Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove Press, 1963.

Hintjens, Helen M. "Explaining the 1994 Genocide in Rwanda." *The Journal of African American Studies* 37, no. 2 (1999): 241-286.

Moore, Barrington. *Injustice: The Social Basis of Obedience and Revolt*. Basingstone: Macmillan, 1978.

Power, Samantha. "Bystanders to Genocide." *Atlantic Monthly*, September 2001.
<http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/200109/power-genocide>.

Sémelin, Jacques. "From Massacre to Genocidal Process." *The International Journal of Social Studies* 54, no. 107 (2002): 433-442.