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The Banality of Economic Evil: Gender & Economics in the Rwandan Genocide*

Sofia Stechschulte

In 1963, Hannah Arendt taught the world about her perception of the "banality of evil," the idea that it is not always an evil person that perpetuates evil, but rather other factors and blind obedience that pushes people to commit unspeakable atrocities. 1 She received a cold reception; critics could not fathom anything other than evil perpetuating evil, adamant about the fact that even mechanical, unthinking obedience would constitute a monster. Arendt wrote of this banality in reference to Adolf Eichmann, a Nazi operative who she deemed extraordinarily ordinary— a bureaucrat caught up in the Final Solution, lacking commitment to the genocidal ideology but instead committed to career advancement. While it became evident later that Eichmann did hold deep anti-semitic beliefs, Arendt's underlying question still remained: is the presence of pure evil the only explanation for people who commit evil acts? If we are resigned to the idea of evil as the singular motivator, does this not ignore the systematic process of genocide? If we are resigned to this fact, are we not also resigned to inaction? The purpose of this paper is not to debate Arendt's analysis of Eichmann or silence her critics; instead, this paper attempts to elucidate an answer to this question in the context of the 1994 Rwandan genocide.

It is well understood that the Rwandan genocide did not occur primarily due to differences in culture, race, language or religion. Notably, the Hutus and the Tutsis shared the same language, religion and traditions, and often lived next door to one another. Some have attempted to construct a false narrative of the Rwandan genocide,

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¹ Hannah Arendt and Amos Elon, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (London: Penguin Books, 2006).

portraying it as the boiling over of long-standing tribal hatred, characterized by a chaotic and disorganized period of violence; however, new scholarship has provided a more accurate account of the genocide, characterized not by chaos "from below," but by methodical manipulation of colonial ethnic ideology from above.² Still, even this accepted narrative falls short. It touches on human suffering and ethnic conflict but fails to acknowledge the socioeconomic context that brought Rwanda to the brink. The country's colonial history, which cemented the racial divide between Hutu and Tutsi, cannot be changed—much less ignored—but understanding the economic origins and transformation of these prescribed identities can provide some clarity. The Rwandan genocide of 1994 was preceded by a period of intense economic turmoil; this turmoil, as well as its gendered implications, requires further investigation in order to assess its role in the genocide and the nature of its transformation in the post-genocidal period. How did economic conditions facilitate the success of mass manipulation and genocide campaigns? By exploring the gendered dimensions of Rwanda's racialized economic struggles and inequality, this paper illustrates that it was not just the shadow of Belgian colonialism or the presence of pure evil that led the average civilian to kill their neighborsit was also the economy.

While the Rwanda genocide is often characterized as the product of ethnic tension between the Hutu and Tutsi, at its core, it was the product of pervasive and sustained inequality between the elite and the peasantry. Colonialism was critical in the construction of the Hutu and Tutsi racialized identities. Prior to Belgian occupation, Tutsi and Hutu designation was not necessarily received on the basis of ethnicity. There existed a Tutsi kingdom which reigned over Rwanda, and as this kingdom expanded, they absorbed groups of agriculturalists as Hutu and cattle-herders as Tutsi.³ At this time, Tutsi dominance was not overtly oppressive.⁴ There is evidence that some form of mutually beneficial—or

⁴ Ibid.

² Lisa Pine, *Debating Genocide* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 120.

³ Villia Jefremovas, *Brickyards to Graveyards: From Production to Genocide in Rwanda* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2002), 60.

at the very least, acceptable—relationship was present. This took the form of clientage systems like ubuhake, a land clientage system where Tutsi could provide Hutu with cattle in exchange for land, or labor, and uburetwa, a clientage system where Hutu received land from Tutsi chiefs in return for labor. Over time, the Tutsi minority consolidated much of the cattle and land, simultaneously consolidating power, constricting Hutu mobility and creating an economic divide between farmers and cattle-herders. Belgian colonizers, upon their arrival, cemented this economic divide and disguised it as an ethnic one.

By 1898, the small group of elite in Rwanda was predominantly Tutsi, who notably viewed themselves as superior to both poor Hutu and poor Tutsi; by 1929, Belgian occupation had constructed and implemented an ethnic hierarchy declaring the Tutsi as the born rulers of Rwanda, heralding their intelligence, European beauty and "capacity for assimilation."6 Consequently, the Belgians restricted Hutus in many ways: they were not allowed to receive an education, hold membership in the clergy, participate in the economy or work for the government.⁷ The Belgians also fervently implemented policies of compulsory crop cultivation, especially for the production of coffee, further corrupting the uburetwa system to extract what essentially became Hutu slave labor.8 Still, the Belgian narrative of Tutsi domination did not extend to all Tutsis: both Hutu and Tutsi commoners alike were oppressed based on their socioeconomic status. The Tutsi elite were the primary benefactors of colonial occupation, which not only exacerbated the Rwandan economic divide, but through the extension of the perverted colonial racial logic, it also placed a target on the backs of all Tutsis, regardless of economic position.

The 1950s came with an aggressive emergence of anti-Tutsi and pro-Hutu rhetoric, and a movement to overthrow the oppressive Tutsi elite. As Rwanda moved towards independence, Gregoire Kayibanda

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid, 69.

⁷ Isaac A. Kamola, "Coffee and Genocide" *Transition*, no. 99 (2008): 54–72. http://www.jstor.org/stable/20204261.

⁸ Ibid.

capitalized on the ethnic turmoil and began advancing his "Hutu Power" agenda. In 1962, Kayibanda was elected president on the platform of working for the equality of the Hutu people; however, under his regime, the government grew increasingly corrupt, economic inequality deepened, and Kayibanda faced criticism from northern Hutus for favoring the southern Hutu elite. In an attempt to maintain power, Kayibanda drew again on anti-Tutsi rhetoric in an effort to incite ethnic violence and silence Hutu criticism but was unsuccessful. He lost power to Habyarimana through a coup in 1973.

Habyarimana's regime managed to calm ethnic tensions and reduce government corruption, but it did little for the ever-increasing economic crisis. Notably, Hutu-Tutsi relations were actually quite amicable early in his tenure; class relations, on the other hand, intensified, and so did the problem of the rapidly increasing Rwandan population without land. 13 Habyarimana instead focused on attracting foreign aid for development projects and increasing coffee production and exports. He was successful in attracting foreign investment, but the simultaneous move towards privatization only deepened the trench of economic inequality. The money went straight into the pockets of Hutu elites, who bought up rural businesses and land, leaving many rural peasants landless and far removed from the benefits of development programs.¹⁴ Habyarimana was also successful in increasing coffee output and revenue, but this, too, had its downfalls: the majority of the profits from coffee exports still went directly into the hands of a select few Hutu elites, exacerbating the economic divide; coffee policy reallocated subsistence farmland to coffee production, leaving peasant farmers more dependent on coffee profits to purchase food instead of growing it; and coffee profits were put towards the military, tourism and the material whims of the Hutu elite instead of being put toward the

⁹ Kamola, "Coffee and Genocide."

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Villia Jefremovas, *Brickyards to Graveyards: From Production to Genocide in Rwanda* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2002).

¹² Kamola, "Coffee and Genocide."

¹³ Jefremovas, *Brickyards to Graveyards*.

¹⁴ Kamola, "Coffee and Genocide."

insulation of the Rwandan economy.¹⁵ From the outside, these things did not seem to matter. The Rwandan economy was booming—there was both economic and social progress, as evidenced by a rising GDP, increased school enrollment and low inflation—until international coffee prices plummeted, and the whole system collapsed.

When coffee prices fell in 1989, Habyarimanas's regime was already facing intense scrutiny from sectors of the Hutu population, and the resultant recession required a simultaneous restructuring of the economy. 16 The International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank played critical roles in this, both providing loans and requiring Rwanda to implement a number of policies and austerity measures to help maintain its export economy and cover the national debt; this program, however, had the opposite effect.¹⁷ Inflation skyrocketed, the food prices rose, salaries and wages decreased substantially, health, education and other public service systems collapsed and the Rwandan franc was hit by a 40% devaluation. 18 Then, adding to the chaos, the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) invaded, and the growing population problem came to a head, drastically intensifying the economic and political atmosphere.¹⁹ Even as the civil war took shape, the IMF and the World Bank, operating under the assumption that it would be short-lived, continued funneling millions of dollars in loans to the Rwandan National Bank in an effort to stabilize the economy; however, this money went straight into the purchasing of weapons.²⁰ Rwanda was preparing for genocide. The evidence is overwhelming: these institutions were not only pivotal in the collapse of the Rwandan economy, they also directly contributed to the genocide. The actions of these institutions resulted in what has been described as "criminal collusion"—the development and implementation of policies that supposedly center human rights, but in practice, focus more on returns to investment with little regard for

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶ Jefremovas, *Brickyards to Graveyards*.

¹⁷ Chossudovsky, Michel. "Economic Genocide in Rwanda." *Economic and Political Weekly* 31, no. 15 (1996): 938. http://www.jstor.org/stable/4404024.

¹⁸ Villia Jefremovas, *Brickvards to Gravevards*.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Kamola, "Coffee and Genocide."

human life.²¹ This is not to say that the collapse of the coffee market or the actions of these institutions caused the Rwandan genocide; rather, their detrimental effects on the Rwandan economy left some people hopeless, afraid and desperate enough to be willing to perpetrate genocidal violence.

In the early 1990s, a host of other economic factors paved the way for a genocidal storm: landlessness, the population problem and economic inequality and corruption. Since the pre-colonial era, the distribution of land had been a primary concern. Rwanda is one of the most densely populated countries in Africa, with over 90% of its people residing in rural areas.²² Subsistence agriculture was central to Rwandan culture and considered a vital economic and social activity for the majority of the population, and this practice requires land.²³ Prior to the civil war, 93% of the population worked in agriculture, which also requires land.²⁴ It is important to note that agriculture is part of the formal economy, but most men also worked in the informal sector to make ends meet due to the pervasive economic inequality; a 1990 government assessment estimated that 81% of households were also involved in brick-making, carpentry, sewing and pottery.²⁵ Leading up to 1994, land had been consolidated and reallocated into the hands of the minority ruling elite, leaving little for most of the peasant population. In 1993, 70% of households in some regions of Rwanda had less than half a hectare of land; 45% had less than one fourth of a hectare.²⁶ Government policy in the pre-genocidal period was also explicitly antiurban, restricting much of the population to rural areas with few options for employment and income. It was evident that the economic conditions of most rural households were precarious, as land disputes and poverty were widespread. This was made more precarious by the fact that most

²¹ Rothe, Dawn L., Christopher W. Mullins, and Kent Sandstrom. "The Rwandan Genocide: International Finance Policies and Human Rights." *Social Justice* 35, no. 3 (113) (2008): 66–86. ²² Ibid.

²³Rothe, et al "The Rwandan Genocide."

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

economic options available to men were inextricably linked to land.²⁷ Land was wealth, and the scarcity of it had gendered economic implications. Rwanda was a patriarchal society, where men were in charge of finances, and responsible for the cultivation and marketing of cash crops, house building, and cattle-herding; women were responsible for taking care of the household, which included the management of subsistence crops, food preparation and taking care of the children.²⁸ Rwanda's dependency on the coffee market and the mandatory allocation of resources to coffee production, however, caused many people to leave subsistence agriculture behind. When the coffee market collapsed, people could not transition quickly enough to grow food themselves again and were instead forced to buy it. This was incredibly problematic, as Rwandan society, and particularly Rwandan women, found that buying food, rather than cultivating it yourself, was shameful and a "public admission of poverty." When the IMF program resulted in high food prices, they could not afford to buy food either, further compounding this problem.

It is also imperative to understand the interconnectedness of land and gender. In the pre-colonial period, women had greater power in Rwandan society and were central to the success of agriculture practices of the nations. They had access to land and land rights; if they never married or left a marriage, women could return to their family and be given a portion of land to cultivate. Colonialism changed this significantly, monetizing the economy and forcing men into cash cropping. The Belgians dictated that all land in Rwanda was to be controlled by men, regardless of economic status. Women could only acquire land rights if they were widowed or unmarried, and even then, it

²⁷ Nicole Fox, "Memory in Interaction: Gender-Based Violence, Genocide, and Commemoration," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* Volume 45, Number 1, 123-148

²⁸ Jefremovas, *Brickyards to Graveyards*.

²⁹ Jefremovas, *Brickyards to Graveyards*.

³⁰ Jennie E. Burnet, "Rape as a Weapon of Genocide: Gender, Patriarchy, and Sexual Violence in the Rwandan Genocide" (2015), in A. Randall (Ed.). *Genocide and Gender in the Twentieth Century: A Comparative Survey* (London: Bloomsbury Academic), pp. 140–161.

³¹ Ibid.

had to be endorsed and approved by her father or brother.³² If a woman did have land rights, she would lose them when she got married, as they transfer to her husband. She would also then be expected to tend to this land as a laborer. In this way, women played a critical role in the economic success of men, as men profited off of their practically free labor and the revenue from agriculture. Women had little to no control over the cash surplus, as all income was controlled by her husband.³³ This could vary based on economic status, though: wealthy women did live more comfortable lives because their husbands could afford to hire outside labor.³⁴ Generally, women were expected to be "virtuous" and submissive to men, and if they were not, the limited power they had would be stripped away.³⁵ In this system, they were viewed and treated as property, an economic asset, and if productive and obedient, a great source of pride. These attitudes increased women's vulnerability to sexual violence as well, and this vulnerability increased even more during the genocide.³⁶ Since Tutsi women were seen as an extension of their husbands, they were specifically targeted for genocidal rape. Alice, a survivor of the genocide, vividly remembers the brutal sexual violence she and many other women faced. Alice was raped every day for 60 days; as a result, she contracted HIV/AIDS.³⁷ Tragically, this type of violence was widespread. Rwandan culture viewed wife-beating as a sign of power, and it had the ability to bolster a husband's reputation; sexual violence in genocide was used as a tactic to symbolically overpower and emasculate Tutsi men and rip apart the Tutsi community.³⁸ Prior to the genocide, women could not escape domestic sexual violence; there was no option to leave an abusive situation and return to their families, as the violence was so normalized.³⁹ They would rarely be welcomed back by their families, instead being forced to

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³² Jefremovas, *Brickyards to Graveyards*.

³³ Ibid, 84.

³⁴ Jefremovas, *Brickyards to Graveyards*.

³⁵ Ibid, 88.

³⁶ Burnet, "Rape as a Weapon of Genocide," 13.

³⁷ This Is the Testimony of Alice, a Survivor of the ... - UN.

³⁸ Burnet, "Rape as a Weapon of Genocide."

³⁹ Jefremovas, *Brickyards to Graveyards*.

endure and accept this treatment.⁴⁰ In many ways, genocidal rape draws upon this, but instead of being shut out from their families, survivors are rejected from their communities entirely.⁴¹

In the years before 1994, landlessness heightened tensions in the household and throughout the country. When men were not capable of marrying a woman due to their lack of land and wealth, or simply not able to acquire land at all, it detrimentally impacted their outlook and masculine identity. Landlessness, combined with a crumbling economy, also meant that many men were out of jobs and experiencing the effects of poverty. As women were also deeply involved in the cultivation of agriculture, this took a toll on them as well. Both derived a sense of identity and purpose from the land and their prescribed roles in the household, and the loss of that resulted in a large population of aimless, desperate, and poor people, willing to do practically anything to survive.

The problem of landlessness was compounded by the population explosion: there were too many people on too little land. The population had been rising quickly since the pre-colonial period: from 1980 to 1990, the population increased by more than 2 million people. In 1975, Rwanda's fertility rate was also incredibly high, one of the highest in the world, at 8.37 births per woman. In 1981, this had risen to 8.46. Habyarimana's stance against family planning had done little to quell this impending problem—he had repeatedly stated that children were the wealth of the Rwandan family. Unfortunately, these children did not receive the support or education required to be able to contribute to the country's development. Even so, Rwanda's infrastructure could not support more people regardless of age. For a community that revolved

⁴⁰ Burnet, "Rape as a Weapon of Genocide".

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² "Population, Total - Rwanda," Data, accessed December 9, 2021, https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL?locations=RW.

⁴³ "Fertility Rate, Total (Births per Woman) - Rwanda," Data, accessed December 9, 2021, https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.TFRT.IN?locations=RW.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ D. de Walque and P. Verwimp, "The Demographic and Socio-Economic Distribution of Excess Mortality during the 1994 Genocide in Rwanda," Academic.oup.com, accessed December 9, 2021, https://academic.oup.com/jae/article/19/2/141/766324?login=true.

around agriculture but was simultaneously experiencing intense land scarcity, food shortages and unemployment, this spelled disaster. This proved to be particularly problematic in the context of the genocide, as a large population of male and female youth were reaching ages of maturity at the onset of the civil war. Habyarimana's development programs had failed to reach this group—after all, the development aid was being embezzled elsewhere. This left young men and women unemployed and angry with limited mobility and few prospects. Simultaneously, the Anti-Tutsi propaganda campaign was almost impossible to escape. For many disenfranchised people, this narrative provided a scapegoat, and someone else besides the government to blame for their living conditions.⁴⁶ It was yet another component of the economic plague—in many cases, young men on the outskirts of development were prone, or could more easily be brought, to commit evil acts of "extreme violence" due to their social and economic positions.⁴⁷ This made young men particularly susceptible to militia recruitment- not only could they act out their frustration with their situation, but they were promised money, a job and a community of similar people.

This susceptibility was not isolated to the young population, just as no portion of Rwandan society was isolated from economic strife. Even men who were employed in agriculture but did not find the wages or working conditions to be suitable were convinced to join the killing. As one perpetrator explained, participating in the genocidal killing "promised to spare [them] the labor of one harvest, but not two" with the understanding that, come next harvest they would have to return to the farms again with their machetes for "other, more traditional jobs." ⁴⁸ Undoubtedly, this sentiment does not account for the mindsets of each of the countless perpetrators. For example, Jean de Dieu Twarhirwa explained that he did not even know much about the relationship between the Hutu and the Tutsi; he was an orphan with no belongings

⁴⁶ Marc Sommers, "Fearing Africa's Young Men - World Bank." World Bank, Jan. 2006.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 2.

⁴⁸ Jean Hatzfeld, *Machete Season: The Killers in Rwanda Speak: A Report* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006).

who was raised by his grandmother, and all he wanted was a better quality of life. 49 Yet, he was brought into the genocide while working at a hospital in Kiziguro. He described receiving cash from Tutsi in return for not killing them—this was helpful, but the money he had collected did not last long enough for him to escape to Tanzania after the genocide.⁵⁰ Another perpetrator, Charles Ndayisaba, came from a singleparent household of farmers.⁵¹ Charles explained that it was not his business to understand what the killing was about and had assumed it was part of some government program- he claimed his participation was an attempt to save his own life.⁵² This idea of the presence of a government program is notable, considering the results of a study done on perpetrators in Rwanda: it found that households, on average, only had one male perpetrator.⁵³ This is interesting because it may suggest that some Hutu households may have seen participation as a government mandate, which could be indicative of lasting impact of the obligatory labor systems that were established earlier in Rwanda's history. Data from the same study also estimates that a majority of the Hutu perpetrators were educated, and either married or available bachelors.⁵⁴ This may speak to a gendered trend where Hutu men, lacking the ability to provide enough for their wives and families to survive, or the ability to find enough money to marry or survive at all, turn to violent means that promise an escape for a bleak existence. Still, not all perpetrators began killing as a direct result of economic turmoil, but to some degree, the dehumanizing nature of poverty, a desire for a better life, lack of mobility, and a sense of direction in times of national chaos seems to have brought many into the fray- and the dehumanizing nature of the violence seems to have kept them there throughout the genocide.

⁴⁹ "A Testimony of Jean De Dieu Twahirwa," Genocide Archive Rwanda, accessed December 9, 2021.

⁵⁰ "A Testimony of Jean De Dieu Twahirwa."

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Philip Verwimp, "An Economic Profile of Peasant Perpetrators of Genocide: Micro-Level Evidence from Rwanda" *Journal of Development Economics*, North-Holland, 5 May 2005. ⁵⁴ Ibid.

Thus far, this paper has illustrated some of the gendered dynamics and genocidal implications of Rwanda's economic upheaval. Almost two years after the RPF invasion and just about a year before the genocidal massacres began, international donors, like the World Bank, threatened to pull their funding from Rwanda if Habyarimana did not sign the Arusha Accords- and so he did, as the country had become entirely dependent on these funds.⁵⁵ But, just two days later, Habyarimana's plane was shot down, and he was killed. The threats from these agencies came too late: the preceding civil war had already consumed most of the available economic resources into the purchasing of weapons and the expansion of the military, the economic insecurity and inequality had already wreaked havoc on the hope and prospects of the Rwandan people, and the insidious propaganda had brought the population to the brink. After Habyarimana's death, Rwanda descended into genocide- but not all regions experienced the same level of violence. There was a regional pattern, linked to economic conditions, that determined the severity of the outcome. For example, Habyarimana's regime had consolidated power in the hands of a small group of elite in the Gisenyi and Ruhengeri region; this area had one of the highest population densities in the country and the highest level of land disparity with an ever-increasing landless population. As the genocide took shape, this region proved to be one of the most explosive: most of the Hutu extremists came from this area, fighting in favor of the Hutu elite.⁵⁶ It was so explosive that many people from this region were sent to other, less violent regions to help facilitate the genocide.⁵⁷ Similarly, Kibungo and Bugesera, with high populations of landless and jobless youth and pre-existing Hutu and Tutsi economic tensions, also saw some of the most widespread and violent killing in the genocidal period.⁵⁸ The case of Gikongoro also provides evidence that economic hardship and immobility contributed to genocide participation: this region was created by combining Tutsi-dominated areas with Hutu-

⁵⁵ Kamola, "Coffee and Genocide."

⁵⁶ Jefremovas, *Brickyards to Graveyards*, 115.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

populated highlands that had previously been under the oppressive control of the Belgians and Tutsi elite.⁵⁹ On top of this, it was one of the poorest regions in an already poverty-stricken nation, lacking cohesiveness and incredibly volatile.⁶⁰ Again, the depth of the economic divides in Rwanda, specifically in these regions, transformed into genocidal violence.

It is evident that the ailing Rwandan economy had disastrous effects on the Rwandan population and facilitated the genocide of almost a million Tutsis. Poverty, land shortages, corruption, and overpopulation tore apart the fabric of the nation and amplified feelings of instability. Placing the Rwandan crisis in its economic context reveals some motivations for the perpetration of the genocide, and it highlights the interactions between money, international players, ethnicity, and class as indicators of genocide, that, if recognized, could be addressed before mass violence ensues. More specifically, is important to see how corrupt government policy forced the population into these economic conditions, characterized by immobility and pervasive poverty. Prior to Belgian colonialism, "Hutu" and "Tutsi" did not even exist, at least not in the way that the Belgians had constructed them; the Belgians perverted their interpretation for the purpose of manipulating the Rwandan people and consolidating economic and social power in a small group of elite. Each following regime perverted them further for the same ends until they were established as truth—a truth that brought Hutu perpetrators to kill one million Tutsi in 100 days. Were each of the killers inherently evil, or were they, too, perverted by a perverted logic, perpetrated by a perverted system? Were they not also exploited by systems that provided limited choices, and limited solutions, to the problems created by a series of corrupt and economically oppressive regimes?

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰Ibid, 116.