THE POLITICS OF KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION IN POST-GENOCIDE RWANDA

Moritz Schuberth¹⁾ Peace Studies University of Bradford, United Kingdom

Abstract

Looking beyond obvious development achievements under Kagame's rule, this article attempts to reveal the political motives behind the government's large-scale campaign to rewrite the country's history and to reshape society. In order to do so, the political practices of the current regime are analysed from a critical approach based on the writings of Foucault and Agamben. The article examines how the survival of the current regime is securitised and what role censorship along with propaganda play in strengthening the current government. Moreover, it exposes what political motives are at the bottom of collective mourning ceremonies and how one part of the population is victimised while the other part is criminalised. In Rwanda, 'peace' equals 'security' which is imposed by an all-powerful state through tight control over all aspects of life — including the production of knowledge and the definition of 'truth'. In such an environment, the renewed politicisation of ethnicity or any other cleavage in society might easily erupt in another wave of violence.

The intellectual's role is first to present alternative narratives and other perspectives on history than those provided by the combatants on behalf of official memory" (Said 2002: 37).

1. The Politics of Knowledge Production in Post-Genocide Rwanda

Without doubt, numerous positive developments have taken place in

post-genocide Rwanda under the strong leadership of the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) government. Investments in the infrastructure are openly visible, most strikingly — though not exclusively — in the capital, Kigali. Outstanding macroeconomic growth rates, low levels of corruption, outstanding achievements in education and health service delivery, clean streets and tight security have seduced The Economist to baptise Rwanda 'Africa's Singapore' (Economist 2012). Looking beyond paved sidewalks and taking into account the broader socio-political context, however, reveals that it is not only the skyline of Kigali that is profoundly reshaped in post-genocide Rwanda. Discussions with numerous high-level government officials, academics, civil society activists and common people during a research trip to Rwanda in early 2012 have left the impression that the modernisation of the capital is but one aspect of a large-scale initiative to substantially alter the image and knowledge about Rwandan history and society. Knowledge production, control and dissemination are at the heart of politics in Rwanda and have a massive impact on the self-conception as well as the external conception of the society. This article intends to look underneath the glittering façade and to reveal the political motives behind the government's large-scale campaign to rewrite the country's history and to reshape society. Therefore, a critical analysis of the political practices of the current regime seems more fruitful than an appeasing study trying to balance positive and negative aspects. For this reason, despite trying to paint an unbiased picture of the current situation, conciliatory studies painting a positive image of the ruling government are given less consideration than more critical investigations. This approach corresponds with choosing a theoretical framework drawn from the work of scholars that are generally associated with the critical school of thought, such as Foucault, Agamben and Benjamin. It is intended to analyse contemporary politics in Rwanda from the point of view of the struggles over varying, often conflicting versions of 'right' and 'truth'. The aim is not to claim or even prove which version is more 'true' than the others, but rather to expose the political motives behind the creation and promotion of particular narratives. In order to do so, it is proposed to give a brief introduction to Foucault's work on knowledge production; to examine the process of re-writing history; to analyse the role of the creation of a state of exception and fear in the securitisation of the regime; to investigate the role that censorship and propaganda play in strengthening the current government; to expose the political motives underpinning ceremonies of collective mourning, and finally to have a closer look at the victimisation of one part and the criminalisation of the other part of the population.

2. Power, Knowledge and Truth in the Work of Michel Foucault

Foucault draws in his theory, on Nietzsche's notion that knowledge is a mere invention, a result of interactions between impulses, desires, instincts and fear. Knowledge is always a fragile compromise, produced by the clash of these conflicting interests and instincts (Nietzsche 1974). Concerning the relation between knowledge and truth, Foucault interprets Nietzsche as follows:

If it professes to be a knowledge of the truth, this is because it produces the truth through the action of a primordial and renewed falsification that establishes the distinction between the true and the untrue. (Foucault 2000c: 14)

Foucault argues in line with Nietzsche that knowledge is the outcome of a battle and functions as a strategic relation between men (Foucault 2000a). Truth and power are interlinked; they are generating and maintaining each other, resulting in a specific 'regime of truth' which differs from society to society (Foucault 2002a: 132). This regime defines which discourses are allowed and accepted as true, and provides the mechanisms to distinguish between 'right' and 'wrong'. Foucault (2002a: 132) observes that "there is a battle 'for truth', or at least 'around truth'". The political battle is fought with the use of the discursive weapons of knowledge and power which determine the formation of a context-specific truth (Foucault 2004: 190). This battle is less about the truth itself than about the status of being accepted as truth, with all its economic and political implications. In the case of Rwanda, it is a struggle for a certain form of power which marks the individual by attaching to him his own identity and truth (Foucault 2002b). The tight control over the political debate helps the RPF government to propagate its own version of truth, "a single vision of Rwanda's future with reference to a particular narrative drawn from its past" (Beswick 2010: 248). In analysing this struggle, Foucault argues that dynamics of power and knowledge create conflicting versions of 'truth' and 'right' which function as tactical weapons:

The 'right' for which prevail is fought for is the outcome of conquest, domination; the right of victors. The 'truth' is a perspectival and strategic truth that enables to win the victory. [...] The right is never an impartial position between the adversaries, it is always dissymmetric and functions as a privilege to be maintained or reestablished, of imposing a truth that functions as a weapon (Foucault 2000a: 61).

Accordingly, Foucault inverts Clausewitz' (1984 [1832]: 87) famous notion that "war is the continuation of politics by other means", asserting that "politics is the continuation of war by other means" (Foucault 2004: 13). In Foucault's thought, war is not only constantly dividing societies, it is rather the foundation of all institutions of power — just as military institutions are at the heart of all political institutions. This can be observed in Rwanda, where — according to the Minister of Defence — the vast majority of the few hundred founding members of the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) now occupy key positions in Rwanda's public and private sector;²⁾ and where the Department of Military Intelligence (DMI) is held responsible for frequent disappearances of dissidents (Beswick 2010). In post-genocide Rwanda, it can be argued in line with Foucault that politics is the continuation of war by other means. After the military victory of Kagame's RPF in 1994 that ended the genocide, the government's policies can be read like a military strategy to strengthen the own position against a common enemy. In that respect, knowledge is nothing but a weapon, a tactical deployment in that war (Foucault 2004). Much effort is put into keeping the image of the very enemy alive that was defeated in 1994, be it through the re-production of history, through the creation of fear and the perpetuation of a state of exception, through propaganda and censorship, through selective commemoration or through conceptions of collective guilt and collective innocence.

3. Rewriting History

According to a director at the National Commission for the Fight against Genocide, 'rewriting history'³⁾ is one of the main task of the Rwandan government and of his Commission, whose Advisory Council is

chaired by President Kagame. This process started immediately in the aftermath of the Rwandan genocide, in which up to one million lost their lives (Reyntjens 2004; Hintjens 2009). Already in 1995, then Home Affairs Minister, Anastase Gasana, announced — reportedly to the surprise of diplomats present at the meeting — that "one of the priorities of the new government was to rewrite the history books" (Pottier 2002: 127). The frankness of these two government officials emphasises the significance that reshaping Rwanda's history has for the RPF regime. This can be explained by Foucault's illustration of the link between historical knowledge and political fights: By decoding the relations between belligerents in a war, history develops into the knowledge of struggles and thus becomes itself an element within these struggles. Turned both into "a description of struggles" and into "a weapon or a tactical deployment in that war", historical knowledge becomes part of and contributes to the continuation of the very war it describes (Foucault 2004: 171). The debate on atrocities committed by RPF/RPA before, during and after the genocide is a textbook example of the use of knowledge as a weapon in the struggle for 'truth'. The RPF committed large-scale massacres and revenge killings when invading Rwanda to end the genocide in 1994 (Silva-Leander 2008). Moreover, the Rwandan Patriotic Army (RPA) executed "a high level of officially authorised ethnic slaughter" (Gowing 1998), which some even labelled as "the other Rwanda genocide", this time committed by the victims of the 1994 genocide (Pottier 2002; Reyntjens 2004; Songolo 2005; Lemarchand 2008b). Lemarchand (1998) speaks in this respect of four interconnected genocides in the Great Lakes region between 1972 and 1997, in which victims and perpetrators changed roles, just as Mamdani (2001) proposes in his book When Victims Become Killers. Having survived the massacre of Hutu refugees in Zaire/Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) herself, Umutesi (2004: 73) concludes that the "Rwandan tragedy is complex. There are not simply victims on one side (Tutsi) and guilty (Hutu) on the other as we have been led to believe". However, the one-sidedness of the juridical prosecution in post-genocide Rwanda is surprising. National prosecutions, gacaca courts and the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) are not prepared to try crimes committed by the RPF/RPA (Gready 2010). The resulting 'moral ambivalence' and impunity on the side of the ruling regime leaves the impression that what is taking place is 'victor's justice' (Silva-Leander

2008: 1612; Uvin & Mironko 2003: 227). With the government unwilling to acknowledge any crimes committed by the RPF/RPA and preventing any independent inquiry, a 'moral vacuum' is created which leads to the evolution of 'historical myths' — such as the 'doublegenocide' thesis — without ever being proven wrong or right (Silva-Leander 2008). In order to create a historical tabula rasa on which the official version of the historical truth can be imprinted, even plausible pre-genocide teachings have been categorically rejected and denounced as colonial propaganda and the teaching of the history of Rwanda was suspended (Zeleza 2002; Pottier 2002; Silva-Leander 2008). At the same time, the imposed 're-education' of the Rwandan society takes more forceful and controversial forms: In 'solidarity', 'regroupement' and 're-education' camps, military training is mixed with ideological indoctrination. The camps bring together returning Tutsi refugees, university students, ex-Interahamwe militias, released prisoners and demobilised soldiers, in order to teach them the latest version of the official historical 'truth' (Reyntjens 2004; Silva-Leander 2008). In the course of reshaping our knowledge about Rwanda, most fundamental geographic and linguistic facts were modified. For instance, names of important cities and districts were changed, provided their name had historical significance or ethnical connotation (Silva-Leander 2008). As part of a long-term strategy to change the language of instruction in the schools and universities, French was dropped in 2008 as third official language after English has been added in 1996 (Samuelson and Freedman 2010). What is more, Rwanda's administrative map was redrawn in order to break cleavages along ethnic or regional lines. But beyond reshaping the country, the Rwandan government attempts to redraw the history and political boundaries of the whole region. In 1996, President Bizimungu and Foreign Affairs Minister, Gasana, aimed at justifying the destruction of refugee camps in then Zaire by RPA troops, by claiming that "Rwanda's real borders included large tracts of Kivu" which the European colonisers had unjustifiably broken away from a fictitious 'Greater Rwanda' (Pottier 2002: 171-173). As Pottier (2002: 46) puts it, "[m]aps can be read and re-read; [...] a small community can be 'ethnicised' to become a larger one. These various interventions demonstrate the close fit between knowledge and power that lies at the root of much about [...] Rwanda that is today taken for granted".

4. State of Exception and the Creation of Fear

According to Buzan, Wæver and De Wilde (1998), securitisation is the use of the notion of a security threat in order to proclaim a state of emergency which justifies extraordinary measures in order to counter the menace. This concept presents securitisation as an extreme type of politicisation. Whereas a non-politicised issue is of little interest for the state or for public debate, a politicised issue is part of state action and requires governmental decisions as well as resources. A securitised issue - presented as a substantial threat for the referent object — legitimises actions beyond the usual political procedures which may even violate accepted norms. For an act of securitisation to be successful, the public has to accept an issue as a real danger for the referent object. Likewise, the referent object must have a legitimate claim to survive (Buzan, Wæver and Wilde 1998). This goes in line with Agamben's (2005: 2) observation that governments are increasingly depending on a strategy consisting of the "voluntary creation of a permanent state of emergency", which seems to be confirmed in the case of Rwanda. What can be observed in postgenocide politics is the "transformation of a provisional and exceptional measure into a technique of government". For instance, this is the case with the extension of the 'transitional period' in 1999 by four more years, interpreted as the unilateral decision of the RPF "to remain in power for four more years".⁴⁾ Beswick (2010: 226) argues that beyond legal mechanisms, the Rwandan government is deploying 'shadow methods' such as intimidation and threats as a political strategy in order to maintain a "culture of fear and self-censorship", aimed at narrowing down political space and preventing criticism. Disappearances are another obscure tactic deployed in order to silence critics of the regime (Reyntjens 2004). Although the involvement of the government is often hard to prove, suspicions are clearly pointing in this direction and the resulting 'fear of politics' and a reluctance to challenge the regime are certainly not against its interests (Beswick 2010: 244). In his Critique of Violence, Benjamin (1996) makes the case for a 'pure', 'divine' or 'revolutionary' violence which operates beyond law and can — because of its very nature — never be perceived as a threat by law. It is likely that the RPF considers its massive human

rights abuses and war crimes committed against alleged *génocidaires* to be part of this category of violence. In order to securitise regime survival, notions of 'pure' violence for a higher cause might still be brought into play in order to justify violent attacks on political opponents and journalists (Silva-Leander 2008). This goes in line with Sylvester's interpretation of Agamben's (1998) notion of 'bare life': in a permanent state of exception, the government can take up "the 'right' to create a range of people that can be killed by the state for a variety of exceptional reasons" (Sylvester 2006: 69).

5. Propaganda and Censorship

We used communication and information warfare better than anyone.⁵⁾

Foucault (2004: 8) differentiates between two types of 'subjugated knowledge'. The first type is 'buried knowledge', referring to "historical contents masked in formal systematizations and functional institutions". Depending on one's point of view, it could be argued that the RPF's project of rewriting history is either revealing buried knowledge, or burying formerly accepted knowledge, or both. The second type of subjugated knowledge, Foucault argues, is 'disqualified knowledge', rejected on the ground of being non-conceptual, naïve, inadequately scrutinised or hierarchically inferior. In the case of Rwanda, one could add knowledge disqualified as promoting 'divisionism', 'genocide ideology' or 'anti-Tutsi ideology' (Pottier 2002; Waldorf 2007; Beswick 2010). The wording of laws prohibiting such disqualified knowledge is vague enough to give the government carte-blanche to use them against any critical voice (Thomson 2011). From a Foucauldian perspective, it seems legitimate to compare the first type of subjugated knowledge to propaganda and the second type to censorship, two interventions in the production of knowledge which Rwandan society has to face today. In the aftermath of the genocide, the RPF government had to make sure that the press will not resurrect to hate speech, which had incited the population to participate in the genocide, as in the case of Radio-Télévision Libre des Milles Collines (RTLM). However, up to today, the RPF government is abusing anti-hate speech laws in order to justify propaganda and censorship in the name of preventing a recurrence to genocide (Waldorf 2007). In this respect,

'preserving peace' and 'preventing genocide' as referent objects have been securitised in the face of a substantial threat deriving from press freedom and freedom of speech, thus legitimising extraordinary means such as censorship and information control. As Waldorf (2007) notes, however, the infamous case of RTLM proves how dangerous government controlled and manipulated media can become. Covered under the objective of "raising the moral standards of the press", a serious censorship evolved, leading to the flight or imprisonment of many journalists and even the Minister of Information (Waldorf 2007: 407). The same faith is shared by political opponents and critical voices in general, who have continuously been delegitimised as spreading divisionism or genocide ideology, that forced them out of the country, brought them into prison or made them "social outcast[s]" (Beswick 2010: 240). Accordingly, Ankut (2005: 21) observes the criminalisation of political opposition and dissent, which is "considered a grave crime by the government".

6. Selective Mourning

The term iustitium, which has been used to describe the state of exception in case of extraordinary circumstances, is in today's academic discourse used to designate public mourning (Agamben 2005). This change of meaning underlines the political dimension attached to ceremonies of commemoration. As Cohen (2001: 241) puts it, "[m]emory is a social product, reflecting the agenda and social location of those who invoke it". Drawing on Primo Levi, Lemarchand (2008: 67) reminds us that the "memory of the offence", no matter how inaccurate or constructed, "is always selective" and hence fundamental for the creation of a "convenient reality". Agamben (2005) evokes Versnel's notion of a correlation between situations of political crisis that lead to a state of exception and the phenomenon of mourning. During periods of both mourning and crisis, social roles and structures break down and social relations are overturned. Accordingly, it can be argued that annual ceremonies of commemoration in Rwanda have the function of a political tool to keep alive the perception of a state of exception even decades after the 1994 genocide. Critics argue that the construction of collective memory, for instance through annual memorial days and media campaigns, allows the RPF regime to gain so-called 'genocide credit' (Reyntjens, 2004); that is the exploitation of geno-

cide memory in order to deter criticism about its human rights abuses or the "gradual Tutsification of the state by the RPF" (Silva-Leander 2008: 1610). Accordingly, the annual genocide commemorations have been described as an instrumentalised symbol of the innocence of the victims and thus of the government (Brauman, Smith and Vidal 2000). Likewise, Vidal (2001: 44-45) notes that the annual memorial "ceremonies organized by the regime reveal an inevitable relation of power" as they hijack the commemorations for political ends by collectivising individual mourning and by imposing a political meaning on it. While recognising that "individual mourning is politicised in that the government only officially recognises it during mourning week" (Thomson 2009: 172), Thomson (2011: 439) elaborates that the government attempts "to depoliticize peasant people by orchestrating public performances", such as gacaca courts. Another account for the instrumentalisation of the genocide by the RPF regime for short-term political gains is the exclusion of Hutu victims from the official collective memory (Lemarchand 2008b). Being barred from the category of genocide survivors, mourning for Hutu could be denounced as pro-genocidal or anti-Tutsi. As a result, youths whose Hutu parents have been killed reportedly feel unable to mourn during the annual commemorations of the genocide "because it was 'for Tutsi" (Beswick 2010: 238). The outcome of this repressive collective memory is the spoiling of the memory of those Hutu who became victims because they were political opponents, human rights activists, journalists or simply because they helped and protected Tutsi neighbours, friends and strangers (Lemarchand 2008b; Reyntjens 2004). Often referred to as 'Hutu moderates', Eltringham (2004: 97) remarks that this term "fails to communicate the pro-active resistance these actors demonstrated".

7. Labelling Victims and Killers

The selective nature of public mourning ceremonies derives from the collective categorisation of whole ethnic groups as 'guilty' or 'innocent'. Foucault (2002b: 328) categorises three "modes of objectification that transform human beings into subjects". One of them, the objectification through 'dividing practices', corresponds to Rwandan history, at least since colonisation. As being 'Rwandan' is the only politically correct identity in contemporary Rwanda, it is no longer explicitly the

Hutu and Tutsi who are the referent objects of the division. Since 1994, the official discourse created instead the division between the génocidaires and the survivors (Thomson 2011). As a result of among other things — the phrasing of the constitution and selective mourning, however, these two imposed identities are inseparably linked to the officially abolished ethnic identities. Just as the colonial administrators are accused of having invented or at least reinforced ethnic divisions and hence tensions between Hutu and Tutsi (Davidson 1992; Mamdani 1996; Hintjens 1997; de Lame 2004), the RPF government has later attributed the notions of perpetrators and victims respectively. Likewise, Silva-Leander (2008: 1609) argues that the "mythology of ethnic conflict", pursued by the Habyarimana regime, has been replaced by a forcefully imposed "official narrative of ethnic unity" by the RPF. Drawing on Foucault's theory of power and resistance, Thomson (2009; 2011) shows how Rwanda's poor peasants engage in different indirect forms of everyday resistance against the official policy of national unity and resistance, which is perceived by many respondents as another unjust and illegitimate tool of population control. Moreover, Eltringham and van Hoyweghen (2000: 221-222) observe that the genocide has been "singled out as an event producing the only politically correct categories for identification". Accordingly, it is this "autocratic nature of identity creation" that provided for the possibility to manipulate ethnicity in Rwanda for political reasons (Silva-Leander 2008: 1609). By labelling all Hutus as génocidaires, actors involved in the production of knowledge attach the burden of collective guilt indifferently to innocent children and civilians (Lemarchand 1998; Eltringham and Van Hoyweghen 2000). What is more, the inconsistency of the government's de-ethnicisation campaign is exposed by the selective nature of its criminalisation: All reference to 'Hutu' or 'Tutsi' is prohibited by law, except when referring to the genocide (Gready 2010). By doing so, the official discourse on ethnicity is limited to the simplified and reduced notion of Hutu perpetrators and Tutsi victims. At the same time, post-genocide developments, such as the increasing "tutsification of power" (Gready 2010: 639) and of the judicial system (Uvin 2001), are excluded from public debate. Consequently, Reyntjens (2004: 187) interprets the elimination of ethnicity as a "tool for the monopolization of power" by the Tutsi military and political elite. These observations match Foucault's (2002c) hypothesis that social groups constitute themselves indirectly, for example through the exclusion of 'others' such as criminals or mad people. The ruling elite in Rwanda has done exactly the same by negatively defining itself as 'victims', the passive product of the crimes of 'others', collectively labelled as 'perpetrators'.

8. Conclusion

Contemporary politics in Rwanda is dominated by struggles over power and over the control of the production and dissemination of knowledge. This corresponds with Michel Foucault's analysis of political battles as the fight over the formation of a context-specific truth by using the discursive weapons of knowledge and power. Drawing on securitisation theory and on the work of Giorgio Agamben, it has been shown that the Rwandan government is keeping the country in a permanent state of exception. By doing so, it is reproducing a state of fear in order to legitimise the use of extraordinary means for shortterm political objectives. This can be observed in both the proactive propagation of an officially approved government line and the reactive censorship and oppression of press freedom. The selective nature of the annual mourning ceremonies is an example of the politicisation of collective memory. Being labelled as perpetrator or victim, ethnic groups are collectively victimised or criminalised, despite the prohibition of the use of ethnic labels as 'divisionism' or 'genocide ideology'. Having focused on the politics of knowledge production pursued by the ruling party, many dimensions worth mentioning remained untouched: For instance, it would be enlightening to compare the findings with the politics of knowledge production under colonial rule or under the Habyarimana regime. Moreover, it would be fruitful to investigate the role of external actors, such as donors, journalists and scholars, who are either proactively shaping our knowledge on Rwanda, or are merely accepting the RPF version. Finally, as outlined above, the various positive developments under RPF rule have been neglected, though there is a plenitude of studies available which focus on aspects that paint a more promising picture of Rwanda's contemporary politics. However, the future of the country remains unpredictable as long as the authoritarian enforcement of negative peace trumps attempts to create positive peace. In Rwanda, 'peace' equals 'security' imposed by an all-powerful state through tight control over all aspects of life — including the production of knowledge and

the definition of 'truth'. In such an environment, any unexpected weakening of the state — for instance arising from power struggles within the leadership — might all too easily lead to the renewed politicisation of ethnicity or any other cleavage in society, erupting in another wave of violence.

Endnotes

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- 2. Discussion with Gen James Kaberebe, Rwandan Minister of Defence, Kigali, 9 March 2012.
- 3. Discussion with Ildephonse Karengera, Director of Memory and Prevention of Genocide at the National Commission for the Fight against Genocide, Kigali, 27 February 2012.
- 4. Marie-France Cros, *La Libre Belgique*, 11 June 1999. Cited in Reyntjens 2004, p 182.
- 5. Quotation of President Kagame, cited in Pottier, 2002, p 53.

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