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Review

The Recurring Great Lakes Crisis: Identity, Violence and Power

Jean-Pierre Chretien and Richard Banegas (eds). New York: Columbia University Press, 2011. 256 pp.

Catherine Bolten^{*}

The Recurring Great Lakes Crisis is an edited volume comprising individual case studies that examine aspects of historical and on-going violence in Rwanda, Burundi, Uganda, and Congo-Kinshasa. The purpose of the volume is to “lead to a better understanding of the changes in the perceptions of violence which constitute one of the most serious obstacles to lasting peace” (1). The case studies encompass a diverse array of aspects of each of the conflicts, from the role of the Catholic Church in Rwanda since 1957, to the political and social problems created by the label “disaster victims” in Burundi after the 1993 crisis, to the “ethnic” conflict between the Wahendu and Walema in the Ituri district of Congo between 1999 and 2003. Most case studies resulted from field research carried out by the contributors in the Great Lakes region between 2000 and 2002.

In the introduction, the editors emphasize the volume’s goal of deconstructing four theoretical approaches which they argue have come to dominate and confuse academic understandings of violence in the region: a cultural prism emphasizing “ancient ethnic hatreds,” a geo-political understanding emphasizing regionalization, foregrounding “greed” and the preeminence of the war economy, and finally an institutional focus prioritizing the problem of “failed states.” They argue

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that the crisis is a paradox of the production of modernity in the region (though “modernity” is left undefined), and leave the chapters to illuminate “the social mediations and local rationalities at work in this so-called “Westphalian” war amongst regional powers” (23). The contributions thus emphasize local-level knowledge and evolving historical trajectories gained through painstaking interviews conducted by the authors.

The volume contained many strong chapters that successfully illuminate the complexities of the origins of historical crises, as well as how local understandings of these crises differ markedly from official narratives. From the problems of labeling people “victims,” to highlighting countervailing insights provided by interviews, to illustrating struggles over governance and democracy, the chapters present a wealth of detailed knowledge. Chretien’s chapter on local memories and understandings of the Burundian massacre in 1972 cogently and incisively illuminates the “institutionalization of the logic of elimination” (56). Beginning from the assertion that as many Hutu as Tutsi were killed in 1972, he highlights the fact that among Hutu victims it was the elite, and not the commoners, who were massacred, and that there was mass indifference to their plight. This gave rise to the extremist Hutu nationalism present in the refugee camps, thus illuminating how ideologies emerge from “both the real and the fantastic.”

Marcel Kabanda tackles the difficult issue of the role of the Catholic Church in the Rwandan genocide. Kabanda argues that the Catholic hierarchy contributed “in decisive ways to blur the relationship between different aspects of Rwandan society” for half a century before the crisis (62). Through an illuminating historical account of the active role taken by the church in promoting the rights of the Hutu and protecting its own interests before and during independence, Kabanda gives a solid foundation to the reasons why the church has been frustratingly silent in the aftermath of violence. As one of the most pervasive and foundational institutions in the country, he urges the Church to take a lead role in reconciliation.

In a chapter on the “disaster victims” in Burundi, Hatungimana explores how Hutu and Tutsi were selectively labeled as “victims” or as “displaced” or “dispersed” people in the wake of the 1993 massacre, complicating each one’s return to the land they claim as their own. In the wake of the crisis, as many people fled over the borders, the state took selective control of land, which complicates the claims of returnees who now demand ownership of land their families may not have occupied for a generation. He asks a question relevant to all understandings of war and

repatriation: who are the “real” victims whose needs must be addressed, and who is allowed to take on the attributes of a victim through policy and discourse?

In his short chapter on *genocidaires* in Rwanda, Straus argues convincingly that the RPF risks further violence by governing the country as though it is full of criminals. Through dozens of interviews with incarcerated Hutu, Straus reveals that the so-called Tutsi and Hutu ethnic groups were highly integrated before the genocide; therefore it was not deep-seated racism that triggered the events of 1994. The violence was directly orchestrated by the government, and in total, only 8% of the adult self-described Hutu population was involved in the killing. By (perhaps deliberately) misrecognizing this fact and emphasizing the continued vulnerability of Tutsi, Kagame’s government diminishes the ability and willingness of people to co-exist in the aftermath.

Co-editor Banégas provides the final analytic chapter of the volume, which is also the only chapter on Uganda. Through an examination of international donors funding governance initiatives under Museveni’s increasingly authoritarian regime, he argues that, “good governance is not necessarily democratic.” He asks the principal rhetorical question consistently dogging “good governance” policies: “can one promote better state governance practices... striving to enhance accountability, while at the same time increasingly privatizing these same states?” Though tackling the difficult issue of international funding for governance initiatives, Banégas’ chapter, more than any other, required an update on the governance situation in the intervening years since it was written.

The two weakest chapters decreased the overall impact of the volume. Both focused on Congo-Kinshasa, and unconvincingly attempted to marshal the contributors’ individual research into a coherent framework with the rest of the case studies. Each article failed in terms of regional incorporation and theoretical assumptions. Alphonse Maindo, in his examination of the perceptions of the war in Kivu among residents of Kinshasa and Bunia, argues that the war is both “popular” and “foreign.” Not surprisingly, those who have affiliations with the conflict zone feel more involved in the war. Maindo consistently finds “curious” the feelings among Kinshasa residents that the war is “foreign,” thus revealing his own assumptions about the “naturalness” of states and nations. Maindo diverges from the volume’s stated project of writing about the particular historical trajectory, which would illuminate Congo as King Leopold’s personal labor reserve, Lord Leverhulme’s quest for palm oil, and the vagaries of the scramble for Africa, among

other factors, and not a coherently imagined “nation” in any sense. By taking “Congo” for granted, the fascinating insights on the diversity of opinions about the war in Kivu revealed in the chapter are diminished.

In the chapter on the conflict in the Ituri forest, Prunier provides a meticulous analysis of the historical, social and political factors creating and contributing to the violence. However a simplistic, overgeneralized understanding of the relationship between ethnology and history clouds the analysis. He treats ethnicity and anthropology as though they represent the same facts, one’s “essence” (182–83), and ignores the consistent pattern in his own evidence that violence was largely sparked in retaliation to moves made by those who had the power to bring state structures to bear on their political will—that violence was the antithesis of state power. This would have provided a cogent counter-example to Rwanda, where violence was set in motion through the infrastructure of state power, and created room for fascinating discussion on the role of government legitimacy in the individual and regional crises.

Finally, the editors note in the forward that the articles were written nearly a decade ago, with publication delayed due to problems with having them translated from the original French. In spite of this fact, minimal effort was made to update the chapters. Chretien’s one comment on this problem could be interpreted as either flippant or defeated: “Anyway, most of the chapters published in this collection are analytical pieces, not chronicles of political events in the Great Lakes.” Given the editors’ emphasis on the importance of precise documentation of the on-going historical trajectories and local interpretations of events as prerequisites to analysis, this comment is both surprising and distressing.

Provided the editors’ goal of “lead[ing] to a better understanding of the changes in the perceptions of violence which constitute one of the most serious obstacles to lasting peace,” it is critical to ask whether a diverse array of regionally connected case studies not updated for publication with at least a short survey of the literature published in the interim can accomplish that goal. There is much rich historical detail and intricate ethnographic insight in this volume, and emphasizing the particular historical trajectories of each nation while maintaining the important interplay of those trajectories in a regional context is a valuable contribution to the literature. However, aside from the fact that the volume was decisively not brought up-to-date, there were two interrelated nodes of unresolved tension that weaken its overall impact. First was an awkward disconnect between the apparent painstaking field research—most of it accomplished through the ethnographic method of

interviewing—and a few contributors’ willingness to disparage ethnography as a search for “anthropological essence” in line with the discredited theory of “ancient ethnic hatreds.” Chreti n’s emphasis on this in the conclusions falls into similar overgeneralizations decried in the introduction. He explains collective memory as “a factor as rigid as demography or economics” (239), while completely misunderstanding ethnographic method and writing as “top down” and “favoring simplistic explanations focusing on a single cause” (238). This obscures the finer details of the creation and marshaling of identity and memory, opening the possibility for violence, which many of the contributors unearthed through their own fieldwork. It glosses over in one fell swoop the clear indication that scholars continue to grapple with exactly *how* “hatred for the other,” to which violence is clearly linked (61), is created. Research in the Great Lakes and elsewhere must continue to search for how, why, and under what precise circumstances “the Other” comes into being and salience in order for these crisis to be averted in the future.