

The New Criterion

Books

February 2008

Fear of regress

by [Anthony Daniels](#)

On *La stratégie des antilopes* by Jean Hatzfeld.

From time to time, I attend the meeting of a group of doctors who are interested in the philosophical foundations and implications of their work. The most recent such meeting was addressed by an academic philosopher on the subject of the Aristotelian conception of virtue. For some reason that I cannot now recall, the question came up in the discussion afterwards of whether there were human experiences so terrible that they were beyond the powers of medicine to assuage, or of doctors, at least qua doctors, to alleviate.

A former colleague of mine, a man of wide and cosmopolitan culture, held that there were not; in essence, that there was no human response that, at least potentially or in theory, fell outside the schema of pathogenesis, diagnosis, prognosis, and treatment. I held the opposite. I maintained that even the concept of diagnosis was, in certain circumstances, unseemly, diminishing, and demeaning. Life has depths that cannot be plumbed by technical means.

In asserting this, I was thinking of a passage in a recent book about the Rwandan genocide by Jean Hatzfeld, *The Strategy of Antelopes*.^[1] It is the third in a trilogy of books on the subject by the author, a former correspondent of the left-wing French daily *Libération*. In the first, called *Life Laid Bare*, he interviewed survivors of the genocide, a few of the 9,000 Tutsis who, out of 59,000, survived the massacres in a region of Rwanda called the Bugesera. In the second, called *Machete Season*, he interviewed a group of the Hutu perpetrators from the same region who were imprisoned after they were forced back to Rwanda having fled to the Congo at the end of the genocide. In the third, he interviewed both survivors and perpetrators after the latter had been let out of prison and had returned to live in proximity to the few surviving relatives of those they had killed. I doubt whether a more harrowing trilogy has ever been written, and I hope (though I do not necessarily expect) that there will never again be an occasion to write one.

In the passage to which I have referred, one of the survivors, the teacher Innocent Rwililiza, talks of the post-genocide government policy of reconciliation:

Who, in the end, speaks of forgiveness? The Tutsis, the Hutus, the freed prisoners, their families? None of them, it's the humanitarian organizations. They import forgiveness into Rwanda, which they wrap in plenty of dollars to convince us. There is a Forgiveness Plan just as there is an AIDS Plan, with meetings to spread the message, posters, little local presidents, very polite whites in turbo-charged 4x4s. These humanitarians teach the teachers and encourage the local counsellors. They finance various aid projects. We, we speak of forgiveness in order to be thought well of, and because the subsidies can be lucrative.

Later the same speaker says of himself and other survivors:

Never to speak of one's anger, one's sadness, never to be able to say everything that one thinks for fear of annoying a Hutu or the authorities: never to reveal what is in one's heart is tormenting. For example, Claudine says in secret that she hates the Hutus, Francine says that she shakes when she glimpses a Hutu on the road, Berthe does not go any more to Mass for fear of sitting next to a Hutu. Marie-Louise doesn't look after her fields any more for fear of seeing Hutu women. If they opened their hearts, and spat out their feelings, it would give them relief, but it would be chaos for the country.

And you don't have to read very far in these books to realize that the experiences of these people condemned to silence, and to deny any expression of their real feelings, are of an order of suffering that causes one to blush with shame and embarrassment when one thinks of the minor inconveniences that have so often reduced one to fury or despair. Here, taken at random from *Life Laid Bare* (that is to say not chosen for any special quality that is out of context with, or unrepresentative of, the whole book), is the account of Francine Niyitegeka, who took refuge in the marshes near her home, as did many of the Tutsi, once the massacres began, only to be hunted down by their Hutu neighbors:

That morning I had run into the marsh behind an old woman I knew. We were crouching silently in the water. The killers discovered her first, and I saw them cut her [the word "cut" is used throughout by all witnesses, survivors and perpetrators alike, to mean kill with machete, a euphemism that, oddly enough, magnifies rather than diminishes the horror of the proceeding] without bothering to drag her from the bog. They searched the surrounding foliage with the utmost care, because they knew all too well that a woman never just is by herself. They found me, holding my child in my arms. They slaughtered my child. I asked to go out onto the grass and not die in the the filth of slime and blood where the old woman was already lying. There were two men; I have not forgotten one feature of their faces. They dragged me out into the papyrus and clubbed me, laying me out straightaway with a first blow on the forehead, without cutting my throat. Often they would leave the wounded in the mud for a day or two before returning to finish them off. As for me ... they simply forgot to come back there.

All the survivors had similar tales to tell, and I would have difficulty in persuading myself, let alone Cassius Niyisonda, that his social withdrawal was pathological:

Of the killings in the church [in which 5,000 people were killed], which he survived at the age of seven, Cassius conserves only four clear images: my mama who was cut in front of me, just before my turn. The metal of the machete raised above my head. The hiding place under leaves in the forest where I spent the daytimes. The wound because it had festered so that I still tend to scratch the insects that devour my scalp with my fingers.

The scar on his head is so large and prominent that no one could mistake Cassius for anything other than a survivor. He tells Hatzfeld:

Afterwards, the genocide barred my path through childhood. I was blocked, I had missed it. I was prevented on all sides, from study, from family life, from building a house, from finding a suitable job.

And then we learn that:

Cassius doesn't try any more to remedy his apartness; on the contrary, he is pleased to distance himself from others, to be seen as solitary, and he admits that from now on he

will devote all his energy to the memory of the genocide, on which he has reflected, a great deal.

Cassius says he will marry one day all the same, out of respect for his parents. He is the only survivor in his family, and to allow his lineage to disappear is unthinkable for an African. But his wife will not be an ordinary woman; rather she will have to be a survivor, for only a survivor could understand what he has been through.

It would surely be callow in the highest degree for anyone to suggest that he had a “solution” to offer for Cassius’s problem. Would it not be insulting even to propose a “diagnosis”? And Cassius is right when he implies that the genocide in Rwanda is a subject worthy of the deepest reflection, by which he means philosophical and anthropological reflection, even for those who have not lived it. For the Rwandan genocide was the first in history, as far as I am aware, that was not carried out mainly by agents deputed by a state, but rather by ordinary, unpaid men, by the general population, who enthusiastically killed friends and neighbors, and that thus confronts us in a particularly stark and unambiguous way with the very worst potentialities of mankind.

I know next to nothing of the author, save that he is Jewish and was born in Madagascar in 1949. This is, however, sufficient for me to surmise that he was predisposed by his biography to a personal concern with questions of the extremes of human political behavior: for he was born on the very island that the Nazis had briefly considered, before they decided on their policy of total extermination, as a repository for the whole of European Jewry, at the time of the brutal and sanguinary suppression of an anti-colonial movement, in the course of which up to 100,000 Madagascans were killed by the newly liberated French. It would have been surprising in the circumstances if he had been drawn to sports or fashion journalism.

One of the merits of his trilogy of books, which I have little hesitation in calling great, is that it does not permit the reader to make the comfortable, and comforting, assumption that the Rwandan genocide occurred among so different, alien, and distant a people that it can have no meaning or significance for us. We cannot just say, as did the former French minister, Alain Peyrefitte, “After all, they’re the blacks and we’re the whites.” Hatzfeld’s interlocutors speak in a way that is immediately accessible to us; it does not take a social anthropologist, with a deep knowledge of the local customs, to understand what they say.

On the contrary, these farmers, villagers, and small-time businessmen and -women speak with more eloquence, and with subtler reflection, than I think much of our own population would manage after having experienced so terrible an episode. Of course, Hatzfeld’s sample of witnesses is selected, above all by their willingness, and presumably therefore their ability, to speak; and furthermore, we do not know how much editing he applied to the transcripts of what they said. Yet I suspect (from my own knowledge of Africa) that there is something in the nature of modern life in industrialized societies that, far from adding to the ability of people to express themselves forcefully, detracts from it: just as I noticed that as soon as people moved from the countryside into the towns in Africa, they lost their instinctive and very strong aesthetic feeling for form and color, and were attracted at once to the merest kitsch.

Over and over again, on almost every page in fact, one is overwhelmed by the magnitude of what happened, by the dignity of the survivors and the terrible insouciance of the perpetrators, who seem to be unaware of the moral significance of what they have done. Here, again taken at random, and not for any special quality of depth or eloquence, is what Marie-Louise Kagoyire, a survivor, says:

They wanted to wipe us out so much that they became obsessed with burning our photo albums during the looting, so that the dead would no longer even have a chance to have existed. To be safer, they tried to kill people and their memories, and in any case to kill

the memories when they couldn't catch the people ... they worked for our extermination and to erase all signs of that work, so to speak. Today, many survivors no longer possess one single photo of their mama, their children, their baptism or their marriage, a picture that could have helped them smooth a little sweetness over the pain of their loss.

And here is Pio Mutungirehe, a perpetrator (what beautiful names all the interlocutors have, a true reflection of the musical Kinyarwanda language that Hutu and Tutsi share), talking after his release from prison:

I haven't retained a single deplorable trace of the killings. I have learnt to accept what happened in the marshes. I have become a better person than before, with the same character. I had been dragged into an unknown nastiness, I have been corrected in prison, I have learnt to avoid quarreling with the survivors, I have put aside the desire for revenge.

Our notions of the humanly possible are surely expanded when we learn that after his release from prison Pio, the unrepentant, prolific, and enthusiastic killer of Tutsis, who seems to think that a genocide can be reduced to a learning experience, marries a Tutsi girl called Josiane Umwrerwa, a neighbor whose parents he may well himself have killed. Not surprisingly, the families of bride and groom are not very pleased; as Innocent Rwigyira puts it, reconciliation (in the circumstances) is the equitable distribution of mistrust. But there may well be a story behind the marriage, at least that is the rumor recounted by Clementine "Fifi" Mukankusi.

During the genocide, many Hutu spared young Tutsi women for a time to have sex with them, keeping them aside and killing them when they tired of them. But Pio, it is thought, not only has sex with Josiane, but spared her (a very dangerous thing to do, for he would have been killed by other Hutu if this had been discovered). Josiane reciprocated when Pio was in prison, by visiting him, pretending herself to be a Hutu.

One of the revelations of the book is that genocide is fun—for the perpetrators of it, that is. (And here we must remember that the perpetrators were ordinary people—not hardened psychopaths—who were often polite to their Tutsi neighbors, played football with them, helped them in the fields when they needed help, even counted them as friends, and so forth.) Here—again at random—is Elie Mizenge, describing how it felt during the three months when they killed eighty-five percent of the Tutsis in the area and appropriated their property:

We no longer worried about wasting batteries, we turned on all the radios at once. The blast of the music never stopped. Poor people seemed at ease, the rich seemed cheerful, the future promised us good times. We were satisfied with our private celebrations, with eating well, drinking well, and having lots of fun. Besides, a youth could hide a girl he had brought back from the marshes. But when he had had enough or when tongues started wagging, he had to kill her, to avoid serious penalty.

Hatzfeld doesn't tell us much about the historical background to the genocide, I suspect because explanation so easily slides into exculpation. And what mitigation could there be for scenes such as the following, recounted by Alphonse Hitiyaremye?

The first evening, coming home from the massacre in the church [the one in which 5,000 people were killed], our welcome was very well put together by the organizers. We all met up again back on the soccer field. Guns were shooting in the air, whistles and suchlike musical instruments were sounding. The children pushed into the center all the cows rounded up during the day. Burgomaster Bernard offered the forty fattest ones to the interahamwe [the Hutu extremist militia] to thank them, and the other cows to the people, to encourage them. We spent the evening slaughtering the cattle, singing, and

chatting about the new days on the way. It was the most terrific celebration.

But man is an explaining animal, he seeks to understand. And many people have discoursed on the origins of the genocide, on such questions as whether the Hutu and the Tutsi are really different ethnicities, or whether they merely are different social classes, or belong to categories unknown to procrustean Western social science. Was it the Belgians, for purposes of their own, who transformed the Hutus and Tutsis into races—or entries on identity cards that every person had to have?

Hatzfeld hardly mentions the mirror-image country of Burundi, where the boot is on the other foot, so to speak, and where in 1972 the Tutsi government killed, or tried to kill, every single Hutu who had been to secondary school, that is to say up to 200,000 people (the equivalent of more than 400,000 in the population of 1994), to the universal silence of the world, such that when Tutsi rebels invaded Rwanda it was only natural that the Hutu should fear the consequences?

And what about overcrowding as an explanation, competition for land and all that? Rwanda is one of the most densely populated countries in the world, yet almost entirely agricultural. Its hills were already eroding fast when I was there only a few years before the genocide, the earth visibly slipping off the hillsides. (It was the overcrowding that I thought accounted for the high degree of organization of the country by comparison with its neighbors, the border between Rwanda and the Zaire of the time being one of those in Africa that coincided with a complete culture change, in this case from efficiency to chaos, and not merely an arbitrary change of sovereignty.) The average Rwandan woman gave birth to nine children in her lifetime, the great majority of whom survived. Clearly, it couldn't go on like that.

The perpetrators, however, while frank about their joy at appropriating the property of those they had slaughtered, particularly the corrugated iron roofing of their houses (which became a kind of currency among them, and some of which they carried with them as their most precious possession when they fled to the Congo as refugees after the Hutu government was finally overthrown by the Tutsi rebels), were not living lives of desperation before the genocide, or if they were, failed to mention it. Indeed, some of them, no less enthusiastic about the slaughter than the others, were notably prosperous, at least comparatively so.

So what explains the genocide? History? Certainly the see-sawing of Hutu and Tutsi predominance, and the fears that reversal of that dominance aroused, given previous massacres, seems relevant. Intimidation? There is little doubt that Hutu not wishing to take part in the genocide were intimidated into doing so, and some were killed for refusing. Land hunger and economic desperation? True, agricultural plots were getting smaller and smaller, marginal land was increasingly coming into use, and the Tutsi, pastoralists with economically useless or damaging cattle, must have seemed a luxury the Hutu could ill afford, yet none of the perpetrators spoke of his personal destitution. Greed? Yes, the perpetrators took what they could and feasted upon it, but men can be greedy without being genocidal. Ideology? Yes, the Hutu had been prepared by propagandists to regard the Tutsi as subhuman, as cockroaches to be crushed underfoot, but brains cannot be washed as clothes can be dyed or bleached.

Yet the sheer brio, the unbridled joy of the killers does not quite fit in with any of the above explanations, either individually or in combination. Can we just ascribe it, then, to human nature? But genocide is not common (certainly much less common than the use of the word would suggest), and so human nature alone cannot explain it.

Is explanation the wrong concept? There is a confusion here, in my mind as in that of others. In his book *The Genealogy of the Rwandan Genocide*, for example, the Belgian historian Dominique Franche says, "I must state at the outset: one does not explain a genocide. To claim to do so would be obscene." Genealogy is a strange word to use of a non-explanation. But if we are not to seek

explanation, what then? Complete silence on the subject?

And at what point, if it is explanation we are seeking, do we say, Ah, now I understand? Innocent Rwililiza captures very well the disorienting effect the genocide had on him, and I think has on those who reflect on it:

Having lived the killings, my theories have changed, philosophical thoughts no longer convince me, I mistrust classical ideas, I no longer respect logic as I ought. I have learned to allow for the unthinkable, to expect any surprise, to reflect anxiously on everything. I see treason behind all thought. No explanation satisfies me. I am always mistrustful. I want always to know what is really happening behind what happens.

I do not suppose that it was ever any part of Jean Hatzfeld's intention, in writing this trilogy that every alert person should read (on this point, I confess, I agree entirely with Susan Sontag's introduction to *Machete Season*), to undermine our modern pretensions to understand ourselves at long last in a fundamental way, or to be on the very verge of doing so, now that we have so much technological paraphernalia to visualize our own brains, and a neo-Darwinist synthesis into the bargain, but his books reveal these pretensions to be absurd, ludicrous, preposterous, nugatory.

And there is another thought that comes to mind, not one that would find much favor with his former newspaper, I suspect: that the hope of progress must always be tempered by the fear of regress.

Notes

[Go to the top of the document.](#)

1. *La stratégie des antilopes*, by Jean Hatzfeld; 302 pages, Editions du Seuil, €19. [Go back to the text.](#)

Anthony Daniels's most recent book is *In Praise of Prejudice* (Encounter Books).

[more from this author](#)

This article originally appeared in *The New Criterion*, Volume 26 February 2008, on page 64

Copyright © 2012 The New Criterion | www.newcriterion.com

<http://www.newcriterion.com/articles.cfm/fear-of-regress-3767>