

Studying Perpetrators: A Reflection

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Abstract: Based on more than a decade of research on perpetrators, in particular in Rwanda, this critical reflection underlines the value of studying perpetrators for examining the empirical dynamics of genocide and mass violence. At the same time, the essay also points to three potential limitations of perpetrator-centred research: 1. Can social scientists really understand acts of killing and mutilation? 2. Does the application of 'perpetrator' unwittingly foster a selective notion of history and encourage Manichean hierarchies in the interpretation of the past? 3. Analysing perpetrators, especially mid- and lower level ones, may not be insightful for thinking about the origins of genocide.

Keywords: perpetrators; genocide; mass violence; Rwanda

I. Introduction

In this essay, I reflect in a critical fashion on Perpetrator Studies. The goal is to provide a self-reflective analysis, one that speaks to interdisciplinary research on perpetrators but one that is also informed by my own research. This implies two specific biases. One is disciplinary, in that the social scientific, positivist tradition shapes my engagement with this topic. The other is area-specific, in that my deepest engagement comes from the study of perpetrators in the Rwandan genocide. Nonetheless, I hope that my self-reflection will be useful for scholars from other research traditions and for those who study other cases.

More specifically, I seek to address the following questions: what does the study of perpetrators contribute to the fields of Political Violence and Genocide Studies? What does the study of those who carry out the violence tell scholars of violence and genocide that such scholars could not learn elsewhere? Are there unique insights from studying perpetrators? My primary emphasis in this piece will be to consider the difficulties associated with studying perpetrators. In particular, I want to draw attention to three problems that, as I look back over my career to date, have come to trouble me.

Firstly, given the methods that we currently employ to study perpetrators, what is actually knowable about the drives and motivations that lead them to commit atrocities? In relation to my own experiences, what bothers me here is that something

A version of this essay was originally presented as a keynote address at the 2nd International Perpetrator Studies Conference at Utrecht University in September 2016. The author would like to thank Uğur Ümit Üngör and the other editors of the journal for comments on earlier drafts.

Journal of Perpetrator Research 1.1 (2017), 28–38
DOI: 10.21039/jpr.v1i1.52 © 2017 by the Author



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ultimately does not add up about what perpetrators tell me, or others like me, about their involvement in these horrible acts. Perpetrators 'self-fashion' in interviews and in court. As researchers, we know about social desirability bias and retrospective bias. We also know that genocides are crimes, and that perpetrators thus have an incentive to present themselves in the best possible light. And yet, even with those biases in mind, there remains something profoundly unsettling about their stories, about the fact that they killed other human beings, about the fact that they often committed these acts on multiple days and often in horrifying ways. Do we really understand — can we really understand — the processes that lead other people to murder other people? I think I understand the conditions that trigger the initial participation, or at least I understand some of them, but when I wake up at night or in the morning and I really think about what these individuals say, there is something that just does not add up — something that I feel we are missing. Or, if there is not, then the implications really are incredibly disturbing. In short, as much as I have thought about and spent time thinking about perpetrators, there is something that remains a mystery to me, something that I feel I cannot understand about the act of violence, the act of repeated violence, and, sometimes, the act of mutilation.

Secondly, I want to probe some of the unintended but negative consequences of applying the category 'perpetrators'. In some cases, using the label 'perpetrator' can be a sharp and deliberate move; in effect, to label a case that we do not *think* about as one in which someone did something bad, as doing something bad. For instance: think about the move to call members of Indonesian paramilitaries from 1965 'perpetrators', or what it might mean to call American settlers in the United States West 'perpetrators', or Allied pilots bombing Hiroshima 'perpetrators'. Calling people 'perpetrators', particularly if they are not typically recognized as such, is inherently normative. In making that move, observers are classifying individuals in a particular way; they are suggesting that such individuals did something wrong. Many scholars wrestle with the false stability of the term. Perpetrators are perpetrators when they commit an act of violence, but the act of violence is only one action in a broader repertoire of actions that individuals who commit violence actually carry out. During the period resulting in which we label them 'perpetrators', these individuals are also functionaries, fathers, mothers, sons, daughters, and friends, as well as rescuers, helpers, hiders, and sometimes even victims. In a period of genocide or mass violence, individuals conduct themselves in a variety of ways. Using the label 'perpetrator' can blind us to that range of action, leading the analysis to focus only on the act of violence. In short, it can oversimplify.

However, I am interested in a different blind spot. It is one I know from the case of Rwanda, but I think that the point applies to other examples as well. In Rwanda, we apply the category 'perpetrator' selectively, to those persons who participated in the violence against Tutsis or others during the genocide of 1994. But the 1994 genocide

in Rwanda was not the only mass violence to take place during that period. Violence was committed by members of the Rwandan Patriotic Front during their advance, and during their later consolidation of power; there were revenge killings of Hutus by Tutsi civilians; there was also massive violence initiated in the Democratic Republic of the Congo against Hutu refugees, committed by RPF or RPF-affiliated forces between 1996–2004. Yet ‘perpetrator’ only refers, as far as I have heard it, to Hutu killers or other participants in the genocide. The application of the term ‘perpetrator’, therefore, unwittingly contributes to a bifurcated, ultimately false representation of the history of violence in that region. Used in this way, it helps to obscure, rather than to clarify, the full picture of violence. It contributes to a certain silence about violence. That problem is similar when considering who counts as a ‘victim’. As that category has expanded, however, scholars have come to recognize multiple types of victims.

Third, I turn to the micro level — to perpetrators themselves — because of dissatisfaction with the evidence at the macro level. I will return to this in a moment, but essentially if you want to understand questions of mobilization, questions of motivation, and to develop an actual understanding of the micro dynamics of violence — the way that individuals came to be involved, what they did, why, and how — you have to look at perpetrators, their units, their immediate contexts, and so forth. History and ideology do not tell us, generally, how violence takes place and why people take part in it. Yet this in itself poses another, increasingly significant, question. Does the study of perpetrators allow us to answer some of the big questions about why genocide occurred in one country, but not in another? Does a study of perpetrators help gain insight into why elite decision-makers choose to steer a country down a path of extreme violence? My answer, increasingly, is no — we need to examine the conditions and factors that shape elite decision-making in order to understand why leaders choose a path of genocide, or whether they choose a path of non-genocide. We can certainly call these actors ‘perpetrators,’ for they are, but we also have to recognize a certain disjuncture between elite decision-making and decision-making on the ground. Those lower-level actors respond to and enact, rather than make, policy directives themselves. In sum, we have to be aware of the limits of what perpetrator research can tell us about the origins of genocide and other forms of mass atrocity.

Broadly speaking, these are the main points I wish to cover: a discussion of what perpetrator research gives us that other kinds of research do not, but also a discussion that draws attention to three weaknesses, even blind-spots, in the field that we as scholars need to maintain a keen awareness of.

II. Rwanda

I started working in Rwanda some twenty years ago at the start of the first war in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, a massive state that lies to the west of Rwanda, then known as Zaire. At that time, Zaire was home to the former genocidal regime and some 1.2–1.3 million Hutu refugees; they all had fled Rwanda after the genocide and after losing the civil war. The Rwandan exiles included a large portion of the so-called ex-FAR, the Rwandan army that had been defeated during the civil war and genocide, as well as the famous paramilitary and youth-wing groups, such as the *Interahamwe*. In essence, the old forces associated with the Second Republic and the genocide were looking to reorganize themselves in Congo and ultimately attack Rwanda to reconquer power — that, at least, seemed to be their ambition, and while there has not been a lot of detailed study, that is indeed a fair interpretation in my view.

It turns out that some of the rearming and training was happening in, and adjacent to, the UN-administered refugee camps, which were illegally located too close to the Rwandan border. The post-genocidal state, with the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) and Paul Kagame as the effective power-holders, warned the UN and other international actors that the status quo was unacceptable. However, nothing changed, and at the end of October 1996, the Rwandan armed forces invaded Congo under the rather shrewd umbrella of a rebel Congolese organization.

At the time, I was a journalist, and I flew from Somalia back through to Nairobi before moving on to Kigali, and then to the border region between Rwanda and Zaire, where I eventually hid out and stayed on the Zairian side. The first order of business for the Rwandan government forces was to break up the camps and to fracture the potential for an invasion of Rwanda. Indeed, within a couple of weeks, they succeeded in breaking up the camps, and that was when things got especially interesting. At that time, there was a split movement among the Rwandan refugees. A large number streamed out of Zaire and back into Rwanda, whilst another large number moved west, deeper into Zaire, where many were forced to live in terrible conditions and where many were eventually massacred.

As a reporter, I went against the massive human tide moving east toward Rwanda, instead looking to enter the camps from which they came. When I, and some others, got to the other end of this human tide, what we found were a group of very agitated young men. They did not want to see me; indeed they were quite hostile, which left me feeling extremely uncomfortable, so I turned around and left. Later that day, after receiving protection from a passing vehicle, I returned to the camp, at which point the hostile young men were gone. Those of us who entered the camp encountered a mass grave; to this day, who perpetrated the violence remains unclear to me. The victims in the grave were primarily women and children. In addition, there was a great deal of debris left by the ex-army soldiers and officers. Some colleagues even found doc-

umentation of secret arms deals, in which Rwandans were receiving weapons while in the camps in Zaire. With the indelible memories of that day, in particular the mass grave, imprinted on my mind, I would begin a long scholarly engagement with Rwanda and the authors of its violence.

In all likelihood, that was my first encounter with perpetrators. I shall not dwell on the remainder of the time I spent as a journalist in that region. It is sufficient to say that it is my belief that we, the journalist class, missed one of the big stories that was happening before our very eyes in that period: the systematic massacre of Hutu refugees who had fled westward, rather than returning to Rwanda. It was, as we later learned, a campaign to hunt down refugees — a campaign spearheaded by the RPF state, and a campaign that probably led to hundreds of thousands of civilian deaths. I shall return to this point later, but in effect we have no studies of those ‘perpetrators’. Indeed, we do not even refer to those who committed these crimes as ‘perpetrators’, as far as I am aware. Rather, as a journalist class, we were focused on whom we thought were the real ‘perpetrators’ — those in the camps who had taken up arms against Tutsi civilians during the 1994 genocide.

In any case, I now had Rwanda under my skin, and when I eventually returned to the States to start a PhD in Political Science, I decided to make the Rwandan genocide — at that time not a well-known episode — the focus of my research. The way in which I came to the study of perpetrators was fairly straightforward. At that time, the majority of work on Rwanda operated at a very macro level — it was a political history of the country, a history of ethnicity and the construction of ethnicity in that country, and a great deal of human rights documentation of the violence. From a theoretical point of view, there was a huge amount of speculation and hypotheses — Rwandans committed the violence because of ethnic hatred, because of deep poverty, because they needed land, because they were obedient as a people, because of the influence of radio propaganda, and so forth. There was, however, basically very little data — very little systematically collected evidence — that sought to evaluate these hypotheses; that sought to say, if these hypotheses were true, what evidence would there be to support them? And how can we collect evidence to assess and develop arguments about the nature of violence in Rwanda? This was a classic ‘ecological inference’ problem, in which there was a lot of macro-level, historical information from which people were making inferences about individual-level behaviour. Those historical drivers may well have operated at the local level, but we simply did not know.

Of course, this disconnect between theory and evidence was a huge problem for the study of this particular case, in which there were upwards of 100,000 civilian perpetrators of the violence, perhaps many more, and where the state’s deliberate mobilization of the civilian population was a critical part of the genocide campaign. In order to begin addressing these issues, I designed a research program that would allow me to collect micro-level evidence in order to develop and test micro-level hy-

potheses about the drivers of the violence. Part of that research program involved reconstructing the dynamics of mobilization and violence initiation in different communities, what I termed a 'micro-comparative design of different communes'. The most significant part of the program, however, was a survey of perpetrators in all Rwandan prisons.

My first pilot interviews as a first-year doctoral student, before I finalized my survey instrument, were, in hindsight, rather comical — a point that will perhaps be of particular interest to those who intend to conduct research in this area. In the early stages of my research I requested, and obtained, permission from a prison warden to interview a confessed killer, and as I sat there, incredibly nervous, all I could think about was — repetitively — this man killed someone else. I eventually blurted out, 'So why did you kill someone?' That interview, of course, went nowhere. Despite this rather inauspicious start, however, over time I learned how to approach these men (I interviewed only men) and how to ask questions that were indirect and that yielded answers that were useful. I also developed a sampling strategy that allowed for some randomization. I sampled from a population of those who had confessed and finished their legal hearings but, of that population, I drew random numbers to determine with whom specifically I would speak.

I learned an incredible amount in the six months that I spent in the Rwandan prisons. In fact, my research with perpetrators changed the way I understood the dynamics and drivers of genocide in Rwanda. I know this may seem strange, but I really did expect the men I interviewed to be monsters; I really did expect them to have a racist understanding of their history; I really did expect them to think about Hamites and invasions from Ethiopia; I really did expect them to have been handed out machetes a couple of weeks or a month before the genocide. What I did not expect was for them to be ordinary in every demographic sense of the term — in terms of age, marital status, paternity rates, education, and so forth. I also came to understand their decision making in a new way, heavily influenced by mundane conditions, by the reality of war and the acute uncertainty in war, by peer-to-peer pressure and superior-to-inferior face-to-face mobilization, and by a sense of being relatively powerless peasants in a state with exceptional reach and potency at the local level.

There is an expression in Rwanda, in which people talk about violence like the wind, and indeed, when you reconstruct what happened step by step, you can see how the violence spread and how, in turn, it spread quickly. For me, this has had long-term implications for thinking about the conditions in which genocide occurs. I place particular emphasis on the importance of war and on the decision-making that takes place in the context of acute uncertainty, fear, and threat. I also place particular importance on the existence of an organizing principle that coalesces violence around an idea or social category — in this case the simple, but incredibly dangerous, idea that the leaders spread that 'The Tutsi is the Enemy'. I also found that an effective state,

or some other form of institution, that can gather together and organize violence, is crucial.¹

And finally, the evidence from the Rwandan perpetrators, alongside other evidence that I collected, contributed significantly to my rethinking of the roles played by intentionality, planning, and the dynamics of violence. I came to think about how this kind of violence may happen through a process of escalation, which may be unforeseen even to those who set it in motion, rather than something that is all set up, planned in advance, and then implemented. In sum, studying perpetrators allowed me to think about and reconstruct the micro dynamics of violence. Indeed, to understand the dynamics of violence, the actual processes that lead people to take part in atrocity, we need to study perpetrators. Those micro-dynamics may indeed be quite different from the macro-dynamics that set leaders down a path of genocide, that shape why leaders choose a path of genocide. Indeed, the micro-dynamics often point us back to issues of micro-calculations of survival, of self-preservation, of fear, of pressure, of situational considerations in the context of an intense, major upheaval. This research fundamentally altered my understanding of the Rwandan case and this type of violence more generally. It also dispelled many myths and, in turn, made the violence much more concrete and understandable.

Before closing this section, it is important to recognize that one can raise questions about my methods. For instance, I did not interview non-perpetrators as a control group, instead using census data to compare perpetrators to the overall population. In my case, restrictions placed by my university's Institutional Review Board limited whom I could interview for this research. That body was concerned with the possible negative consequences of research on human subjects, and as a result I was not permitted to do systematic research on non-perpetrators. Moreover, at the time I was doing my work, it was hard to know if people outside of prisons really were non-perpetrators. It was possible that they were perpetrators but that the evidence against them had not yet been collected. In any case, I do not have systematic data that allows me to say why one person became a perpetrator versus another person. What I have are sets of data that allow us to say that, among the perpetrators I sampled, here were the leading causes behind committing these acts.

There are other questions too. Are my results biased by sampling from a particular population of prisoners? Presumably some of the worst perpetrators did not return to Rwanda after the invasion in the Congo, did not confess to their crimes, or were killed in revenge killings. Some of the perpetrators I interviewed did commit multiple murders on multiple days, but on average my sample is probably biased toward the less violent among the entire perpetrator population. Also, I did not interview women. At the time of my research, there were few women who had confessed and

1 These arguments are developed at greater length in Scott Straus, *The Order of Genocide: Race, Power, and War in Rwanda* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006).

been convicted, but certainly gender was not a focus of my research. I likewise did not focus on sexual violence. I was more interested in the dynamics of mobilization and in the process of murder, and again, whom I sampled limited how much I could focus on sexual violence. All of these represent biases in my data. And, of course, do perpetrators ever tell the truth? Even if they are not lying directly, they may not be able to understand or live with the horror of their mentality at the time of the violence. These are all real concerns, and there are surely others.

But the bottom line is that studying perpetrators and studying micro-dynamics can tell us a huge amount about what actually happened, about how it happened, and about why it happened. That in turn can shape our understanding of the event and, in my case at least, it can dispel some myths about the violence itself. If scholars wish to understand the dynamics of mobilization and the drivers of individual level participation, and to think about what mobilization and motivation tell us about the event as a whole, it seems to me that we have to study perpetrators — even while being self-conscious of the limits and biases inherent to that exercise.

III. Concerns

So what, then, are the concerns with conducting research into the perpetrators of mass violence and genocide? As I have indicated, there is something that troubles me about what we do and do not know. My findings in Rwanda were not unique. Other researchers who have gone into Rwanda to interview and conduct research on perpetrators returned with similar conclusions. Moreover, if one looks at other cases, one finds similar kinds of findings about micro-level considerations of incentives for career advancement or job protection, of revenge-seeking, of fear, of peer pressure, of family mobilization, and even of coercion — of the fear of the consequences of disobedience. I certainly do not *not* believe that these factors are real. They are persuasive, and one of the things that is disturbing here is that we can understand how people who have no burning hatred in their hearts can make those decisions. It is a cliché to say that you or I could do it, but there is truth in that cliché. I certainly emerged from my research in Rwanda incredibly thankful that I did not have to make the choices that those men made.

But my concern is the following: these people did kill. They murdered other people. And in many cases they did it on multiple occasions, or at least they took part in groups that committed murder on multiple occasions. Murder is hard work. It is bloody. It is awful. It has to shock people, perpetrators included. They killed babies. They killed little boys and girls, old people, pregnant women. And that is the part that, to me, just does not add up. We have answers. Abram de Swaan refers us to the idea of compartmentalization, and indeed I suspect that individuals can rationalize murder-

ous violence to themselves in some fashion.² Perhaps that is how prejudice and hatred work: perpetrators did not see those they killed as fully human, and therefore the kinds of issues of moral conscience and fellow feeling that might apply did not. But that way of understanding perpetrator behavior does not totally correspond with my findings. It was not really dehumanization. They said they had seen Tutsis as family members, neighbours, community members, and sometimes mentors.

When I pushed my interviewees on these points, they kept coming back to me with two different sets of answers. One was: the Tutsi was the enemy, that was the law, those were our instructions, that is what we had to do. The commonality of this response prompted me to call my book *The Order of Genocide*. The other response was: I lost my mind, I became 'seized by the devil', or I stopped thinking, or my heart stopped. What does that all mean? Do I as a political scientist have the tools to understand those processes? We almost never have observational data of the actual killing. We do not have real-time interviews. We are not going to do an experimental study on people who come to kill. Can we, therefore, understand what happened in those moments when people were engaged in killing others? What tools do we need to understand what happened in that moment? Do we even know what we are looking for? Given the difficulty of understanding and observing moments when others kill, how we can as scholars avoid simply resorting to tropes?

I myself am not convinced that people can always know what they are doing. I have come to believe that there is something about the act of killing in genocide and mass violence that we do not understand and may not be able to understand, and I think that it is important to recognize that. Again, I would like to reiterate that I speak from the position of political science, and that perhaps other disciplines do a better job of wrestling with these questions.

The second problem to which I want to draw our attention is the way in which the application of the category 'perpetrator' can serve, or has served, to occlude certain kinds of violence. In this way, the term 'perpetrator' skews history, renders certain kinds of violence invisible, or contributes to a Manichean notion of the history of violence, in which some kinds of violence are horrific, and other kinds of violence are understandable, even legitimate, or ignorable and unnoticed.

What, then, is a perpetrator? In my definition, I think of perpetrators as those who had a hand, directly or indirectly, in the physical destruction of individuals. Perpetrators take part in violence against non-combatants. If they are direct, they kill; they maim; they torture; they incite violence; they order violence; they distribute weaponry. If they are indirect, they contribute to an institution or organization that itself participates in violence; they make meals for people that go out and kill; they reveal the location of would-be targets; they steal or take advantage of victims.

2 Abram de Swaan, *The Killing Compartments: The Mentality of Mass Murder* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015).

This, of course, is not the only way to think about perpetrators. Some do not like the 'direct' versus 'indirect' distinction. In addition, there are many types of violence besides murder, such as sexual violence, torture, and the like, that need to be considered. But, accepting my definition for the moment, if we were rigorous in our application of that term, we probably would have a more expansive range of examples of perpetrators than we currently do. We would not only be discussing Turkish and Kurdish perpetrators against Armenians, German and collaborator perpetrators against Jews and Roma & Sinti, Serbian perpetrators against Muslims, Hutu perpetrators against Tutsis, Sudanese Arab perpetrators against non-Arabs, Cambodian Khmer Rouge against other Cambodians, and ISIS perpetrators against Yazidis. We would, in fact, have a very large range of cases, any number in which we might suspect genocide, mass atrocity, mass violence, and crimes against humanity have taken place. But we do not, or most of us do not. We tend to attach the term 'perpetrator' to known and already validated cases of genocide. Again, I am not sure that we do the same thing with 'victims,' where I think by and large scholars are more comfortable recognizing a wider range of experiences.

From a theoretical, scholarly point of view, then, it seems to me that, if we employ the term 'perpetrator,' we need a more rigorous application of the idea of 'perpetrators of violence' or 'perpetrators of mass violence'.

What has particularly bothered me the most, as I reflect on the Rwandan case, is that by only recognizing one category of 'perpetrator,' we have in effect blotted out the actual range of violence that took place. Genocide took place. The state orchestrated, implored and condoned, and mobilized for the destruction of the Tutsi population of Rwanda between April and July of 1994. The state also ordered the destruction of political opponents of the ruling party and those who opposed the genocide. Those who ordered and carried out that violence are the ones that I and other scholars call 'perpetrators'. But there were other kinds of violence in that period and in the broader period. We know that as the RPF moved to take territory from the genocidal forces, they killed Hutu civilians. We know that some Tutsi civilians took revenge on their Hutu neighbors. We may not know exactly how many were killed, but those numbers are in the tens of thousands. We also know that in the war in Congo, RPF forces killed tens, if not hundreds, of thousands, as they pursued the rear of the genocidal forces and overthrew the Congolese leadership. Yet when we talk about Rwandan 'perpetrators', none of those crimes are taken into consideration.

These are very controversial issues in Rwanda, and I want to make it perfectly clear that I am not denying the genocide and that I am not making a moral equivalence between these kinds of violence. But I am saying that if we want to account for the violence that took place in this region, then we have to take into account this broader array of violence. From a normative point of view, I think that accounting for this broader picture of violence is essential for the future history of Rwanda and for

the possibility of a durable peace in that country. Moreover, recognizing the full picture of violence is important for scholarship on Rwanda and the Great Lakes region of Africa more generally. Otherwise, we are unwittingly contributing to a selective, uneven sense of history. There is nothing necessarily wrong with focusing on one type of violence to the exclusion of another; narrow studies contribute to scholarship and understanding. But we should not forget, and we should encourage, studies of the broader range of violence. Most specifically, we should not reserve the term 'perpetrator' only for one type of violence. For those not necessarily interested in the specifics of Rwanda, the point to consider is this: in using the term 'perpetrator,' are we inherently recognizing and privileging one type of violence over another? In so doing, are we contributing to a tendentious, selective notion of history?

As a final point, I think that it is imperative that we recognize the limits of what a perpetrator-centred research agenda can tell us about the origins of genocide and other forms of mass violence. In most cases, perpetrators, at least mid- and low-level ones, are making decisions about whether to participate in violence downstream of elite level decisions about political objectives and how to respond to particular situations. Actors at a lower level do not design policy and nor they do not put a country on a path towards a particular type of violence. Studying them allows us to understand the process of violence, to understand how it happens; they are an essential part of the story, as I argue above. They offer clues to the macro terrain. But, likewise, we cannot neglect the macro terrain if we are to ask the questions of: what are the origins of genocide? Why did genocide happen here and not there? Or, what is the strategic or ideological objective in choosing genocide as the type of violence?³ Examining the micro level does not get at those questions very well. Moreover, to understand the context in which the decisions are made, we need to look at the macro level.

In sum, to examine and try to understand the origins and dynamics of genocide and related forms of violence, we cannot look at just the micro or just the macro. We need both.

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3 These are the questions that I examine in my most recent book: Scott Straus, *Making and Unmaking Nations: War, Leadership, and Genocide in Modern Africa* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015).