

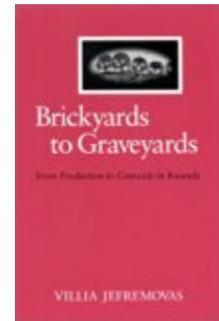
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Villia Jefremovas. *Brickyards to Graveyards: From Production to Genocide in Rwanda*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002. xi + 162 pp. \$21.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7914-5488-6; \$59.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7914-5487-9.

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Published on H-Genocide (January, 2005)



## A Genocidal Economy?

Villia Jefremovas' book, *Brickyards to Graveyards: From Production to Genocide in Rwanda*, is a fascinating account of the Rwandan brick industry before 1994 that raises many important questions about the Rwandan genocide. Jefremovas posits, as her title suggests, a crucial link between economic organization in Rwanda and the mass killing of 1994. Based on field research conducted in Rwanda between 1984 and 1986, she argues that her five field sites serve as lenses "through which the lead-up to the events that so horrified the world in 1994 can be viewed" (p. 2). She bases this argument on the fact that most of the pre-genocide massacres and later mass-killing occurred in regions where Jefremovas, a professor of geography and environmental studies at Carleton University, found a high degree of economic stratification that was reflected in the brick industry. The implication is that in areas of greater economic inequality, the call to genocide found more fertile ground.

Jefremovas points out that resources in the regions that experienced some of the worst massacres before and during the genocide were monopolized by a few powerful patrons connected with the leading Hutu Power faction within the ruling party. This resource inequality would make peasants in the regions (mostly the northwest) much more dependent upon their patrons, and hence vulnerable to their genocidal demands. Such a line of argument suggests that people engaged in genocide primarily as economic actors. This explanation of the Rwandan genocide, often referred to as the "resource crunch" thesis, has been put forth in less sophisticated ways since the

genocide began, most notably in a USAID-commissioned report from November 1994.[1] The "resource crunch" thesis argues that population growth within the context of severely limited resources accounts for the willingness of people to take up arms against their unarmed neighbors. In Jefremovas's words:

"[the genocide] did not arise out of ancient hatreds but through overt political manipulation, ruthlessly orchestrated by a morally bankrupt elite. Factors such as the growing landlessness, disparities between rich and poor, the ambitions of an increasingly ruthless elite losing their grip on power, regional politics, and regional dynamics played a central role in the genocide and political slaughter. There is no doubt there was a difference in how Hutu and Tutsi were treated—nonpolitical Hutu were terrorized while nonpolitical Tutsi were killed—but, as Filip Reyntjens argues, the socioeconomic aspects of the killings also should not be ignored.... As the killings gained momentum, the violence became more complex and less linked to purely political ends. There was outright robbery. Personal vendettas were settled. Property under dispute could be appropriated by one claimant from another on the basis of accusations. Human Rights Watch/Africa points out repeatedly that political authorities needed to chastise the mobs for looting without killing. People who had excited the jealousy of their neighbors by being marginally more affluent were attacked" (p. 119).

Critics of the "resource crunch" thesis accuse its au-

thors of treating Africans as an unthinking, amoral mass. Mahmood Mamdani, for example, writes in his *When Victims Become Killers* (which was published a few months after Jefremovas's study): "My critique of those who tend to accent the economic and the cultural in the understanding of the genocide is that their explanation obscures the moment of decision, of choice, as if human action, even—or, shall I say, particularly—at its most dastardly or heroic, can be explained by necessity alone." [2] Jefremovas avoids this pitfall of economic approaches to genocide by consistently restating the complexity of the factors that made the genocide possible, and by focusing on individuals. Indeed, one of the strengths of Jefremovas's book is that it is filled with people.

Since her research was conducted almost a decade before the genocide, however, Jefremovas is unable to provide the crucial empirical bridge between her sources and her theory. In other words, she is unable to address the "moment of decision" or to explain to readers how this might have worked out at her field sites. This problem of "bridging" is reflected in the structure of her book. The substantive chapters on the brick and tile industry do not themselves take up the issue of the genocide, which is left for the introduction, conclusion, and her discussion of Rwandan history in chapter 4. Because the book is based on research that predated the genocide, it is built around data that was collected in the context of very different research questions. Jefremovas was interested in the organization of production, and nowhere does the research seem to have engaged the question of identity (with the exception of gender identity). Therefore, we are not told who killed whom in the brick sites, or who was known to have Hutu and Tutsi identity cards. We do not know how political identity was working alongside economic stratification. Without providing this crucial empirical link to brickyards and graveyards, and in the absence of a focused discussion of the precise ways in which economic stratification and dislocation alone may have prompted people to kill, the reader is left with an unclear sense of precisely how economic realities may have nurtured an environment conducive to mass murder. Of course, it may be that political identity was inoperative as a source of social friction during the years that Jefremovas conducted research. It could also be that it was a latent hostility, not discussed openly because of its possible implications. Or it could be that Jefremovas simply did not document it. However, since this book is about a genocide that was directed by the central state primarily against "Tutsi" Rwandans, Jefremovas's study warrants a specific and focused discussion of why political identity

was absent from any empirical analysis. In other words, the reader would have benefited from a circumspect discussion of Jefremovas's strategy in linking brickyards to graveyards.

That having been said, Jefremovas's discussion of the genocide itself is complex and detailed. Her grasp of Rwandan history and the literature on the genocide is subtle and sophisticated. Her chapter on the history of oppression—"Land Tenure, Common Property, and Labor and Power: Precolonial, Colonial, and Postcolonial Transformations"—and her conclusion can stand on their own as critical overviews of the literature. She outlines the dynamics of oppression in Rwanda—what Catherine Newbury called the "cohesion of oppression" [3]—from the growth of the precolonial central state, when to be a "Tutsi" meant to be connected to the ruling dynasty, through the economic crisis and "civil war" of the early 1990s. She shows that economic organization and political identity ("ethnicity") were very closely linked throughout this history, and therefore cannot be neatly teased apart for purposes of analysis.

Despite the deep history of particularly harsh forms of economic stratification, the specific differences between north and south that became important during the genocide find their root in the two post-independence "republics." During the "first republic" (1961-73), the ruling nationalist Parmehutu Party sought to solidify its populist rhetoric in land redistribution policies for southern and central Rwanda, the regions from which it drew its base of support. The significant landholdings of Rwanda's Tutsi aristocrats, who had been dispossessed and forced into neighboring states during the revolution for independence, were partially parsed among small farmers and impoverished peasants. The "second republic" of Juvenal Habyarimana (1973-94), which drew its support from a tiny elite in the northern prefectures, sought to solidify its power through the rhetoric of "Hutu traditionalism," which supposedly dictated that land should be centralized in the *hands* of a few. This left the vast majority of people to cope with smaller and smaller plots and diminishing resources. Habyarimana's government resorted to ethnic massacres from 1991 to 1993 and eventually to genocide in 1994 as a means of shifting focus away from its own corruption and the mounting economic tensions this had caused (p. 19).

The regional differences in access to land are reflected in the labor relations within the brick making sites Jefremovas studied. In the south, employers were forced to offer piece-workers incentives (such as cash advances) be-

cause most southern laborers had access to large enough plots of land to provide a source of alternative income through the farming of household staples and cash crops. In the north, where land was controlled by powerful patrons connected to the state, labor competition was fierce because most laborers did not have access to enough land to provide other bases of income. Individual biographies demonstrate a particularly high level of competitiveness and alienation in the northern sites, where relationships of trust and mutual responsibility seem to have broken down in every sphere of peoples' lives, including (or especially) within families. For Jefremovas, this seems to be the most important explanatory factor in the genocide. Class, not "race," led to mass murder, even though she herself points out that the two acted together in history as a pernicious team.

The problem with prioritizing the economic factor in causal studies of the genocide is that the explanations we use to analyze economic life just do not appear to capture the complexities involved in explaining perpetrator violence, especially in cases of genocide. In some sections, Jefremovas goes so far as to suggest that political ("ethnic") identities played almost no role in explaining the dynamics of massacre and resistance. For example, in her conclusion, where she discusses the genocide directly, Jefremovas argues that "ethnic hatred was not the major factor in the patterns of complicity and resistance" (p. 114) and makes no distinction between the facile "tribal" explanations found in the press and the more complex considerations of the role played by identity—in the Rwandan case as well as in all other instances of genocide. To support her thesis that "ethnic hatred" did not play a role in peoples' decisions, she points out that the north had the lowest population of Tutsi because it was incorporated into the precolonial state only in the latter half of the nineteenth-century.<sup>[4]</sup> This is a very provocative argument, for it would suggest that the abject fear of possible future Tutsi domination, which Mahmood Mamdani sees as the main factor explaining peoples' participation in genocide, was not a factor. More important factors would then be opportunistic considerations, such as the possibility of "solving" land disputes or increasing one's own holdings.

While most genocides are generally accompanied by a depressing set of opportunistic activities on the part of low-level perpetrators interested in short-term gain, this does not itself prove such activity as the causative factor, or even as one causative factor among many. There is also no evidence to suggest that "ethnic hatred" can exist only in places where the hated ethnic group constitutes a

considerable minority. Jews constituted less than 5 percent of the German population before 1933 and yet they were singled out as cosmic threats by the National Socialists. Furthermore, as many studies have shown, the Tutsi had been racially defined as alien outsiders by the state for decades, and were relegated to second-class status even under Habyarimana, who was lauded for deracializing the legal definition of "Tutsi." Northerners would have been vulnerable to state propaganda and dominant political understandings of belonging regardless of the time and intensity of the region's incorporation into the precolonial state. One could also argue, as Jefremovas herself does in another part of her conclusion, that the south's late entry into the genocide is explicable precisely by the fact that there was such a large Tutsi minority, which led to increased intergroup contact, the dispelling of stereotypes and myths, and intermarriage (p. 118).

One of the problems that Jefremovas has in making her case for a link between brickyards and graveyards is that she often states its existence without clarifying exactly what the link is. She writes in her introduction, for example, that "although many of the specific brick and roof tile industries in this study no longer exist because of the 1994 genocide, the conditions and history that shaped the nature of labor organization and the logic of these industries, coupled with civil war and structural adjustment, molded the politics of genocide in Rwanda" (p. 18). In her conclusion she restates this argument in a slightly different way: "I will argue that the factors that conditioned the development of these small industries—the centralization of power; the transformations in land tenure and access to resources; regional disparities; and the growth of self-interested elites; coupled with war, economic crisis, and structural adjustment, were also the factors that underlay the politics of the 1994 genocide" (p.109). She comes close to arguing that Rwandan history itself shaped both the brick industry and the genocide—an obvious point, inasmuch as history can be said to shape everything.

Attempting to fit her research on the brick and roof tile industry into a book on the genocide, Jefremovas seems to have gotten too mired in the complexities of explanation at the expense of developing a clear argument that would bring to light the significance of her data. It is unfortunate that Jefremovas nowhere outlined her precise point, for her book can begin to help explain some central questions involved in research on the Rwandan genocide. Unlike more purely economic and environmental approaches to the genocide, Jefremovas raises the possibility that the social atomization—

the degree to which people lack meaningful and trusting relationships outside of state-controlled relations of power—caused by extreme economic stratification can be a powerful facilitator of state-sponsored plans for genocide. The descriptions of her field sites suggest that in some regions the bonds holding people to one another were almost completely rent asunder by the daily competition for resources. “In Rwanda,” she writes, “historical processes stripped the lineage of economic, political and social power. Kin ties did not link their members in a complex mesh of rights and obligations. Rather they became a mechanism through which clientage ties could be formed” (p. 94). Jefremovas gives the example of one young man (in the north) who told her:

“I don’t have any land because I left for Uganda and, when I came back, my parents had sold everything and left for Zaire. They had a lot of debts and to pay them back they were obliged to sell their land. Once they were landless they left for Zaire and most of the family preferred to join them. At this time I was in Uganda. I don’t know how things have worked out in Zaire for them. I’m living on the parcel of land that used to be my parents’ but I have no land. Renting land is difficult, the owners are often mean. If you produce a great deal [on their land] they can take back the land” (p. 80).

Jefremovas tells us that the young man’s landlord was his uncle.

Apart from the stark fraying of historical ties between people at the local level, Jefremovas also found a particularly comprehensive form of domination over women. Although women were responsible for most of the agricultural labor, they could not keep the profits made from selling crops. The historical traditions guaranteeing women’s access to land and their claims on its produce began to disappear under the increasingly coercive conditions of land tenure *and* labor organization during the period of colonial domination. In independent Rwanda they could not own land. Domestic violence against women was common—seemingly encouraged—and because of the economic competition within families, they often had nowhere to go (pp. 88-89).

From Jefremovas’s description of the brick and roof tile industry in the 1980s emerges a very interesting question: in what way can economies that contribute to social

atomization, the rupture of public space, and the shattering of historical (non-state) institutions (like the lineage), lay the foundation for widespread participation in mass murder? Is there a point when bonds become so tenuous that people no longer see human beings in general as human beings and when they therefore do not place the same moral weight upon killing as they would in other circumstances? Can Jefremovas’s work help us better understand the arresting routinization and normalization with which many perpetrators approach genocide, which in the Rwandan case presents itself again and again in oral testimonies? For example, look at the comment of a Hutu teacher to a French journalist in Butare: “A lot of people got killed here. I myself killed some of the children.... We had eighty kids in the first year. There are twenty-five left. All the others, we killed them or they have run away.”[4] Jefremovas’s study directs our attention towards aspects of social brutalization that might make it easier for people to participate in genocide. Therefore, despite the structural problems of the book, *Brickyards to Graveyards* is an important addition to the literature on genocide. Although Jefremovas emphasizes the particularity of the socio-economic realities that she believes contributed to, or caused, the genocide, many are, of course, hardly unique to Rwanda. Her book opens up a very fruitful line of questioning about “pre-genocidal conditions” in spaces of economic violence and physical brutalization, which one hopes she will continue to pursue in her future work.

#### Notes

[1]. Scott Grosse, “More People, More Trouble: Population Growth and Agricultural Change in Rwanda” (Ann Arbor: Department of Population Planning and International Health, School of Public Health, University of Michigan, 1994).

[2]. Mahmood Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers: Colonialism, Nativism, and the Genocide in Rwanda* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), pp. 196-197.

[3]. Catherine Newbury, *The Cohesion of Oppression: Clientship and Ethnicity in Rwanda, 1860-1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).

[4]. Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers*, p. 228.

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**Citation:** Elisa von Joeden-Forgey. Review of Jefremovas, Villia, *Brickyards to Graveyards: From Production to Genocide in Rwanda*. H-Genocide, H-Net Reviews. January, 2005.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=10104>

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