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RTLM Propaganda: the Democratic Alibi

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Among the testimonials of participants in the Rwanda genocide gathered by journalist Jean Hatzfeld is this passage:

Killing is very discouraging if you must decide to do so yourself ... but if you are obeying orders from the authorities, if you are adequately conditioned, if you feel pushed and pulled, if you see that the carnage will have absolutely no adverse effects in future, you feel comforted and revitalized. You do it without shame ... We envisaged this relief with no reluctance whatsoever ... we were efficiently conditioned by radio broadcasts and advice we heard. (Hatzfeld 2003: 85)

This psychology of killers perpetrating mass slaughter makes the most sense not when it is seen as some kind of exotic, ethnocultural way of thinking, but rather when situated among the methods of an eminently modern propaganda. The psychology is explained in a handbook written by French psychosociologist Roger Mucchielli (1972), *Psychologie de la Publicité et de la Propagande: Connaissance du Problème, Applications Pratiques*. A training handbook in the field of humanities designed for psychologists, facilitators and leaders, it can be found along with the rest of Mucchielli's works in the library of the National University of Rwanda, Butare. The handbook inspired a note 'regarding expansion and recruitment propaganda', written by a Butare intellectual and later found by the team headed by human rights researcher Alison Des Forges (1999: 65–6). The Mucchielli manual explains – without moral or ideological expectation – the mechanisms of mass conditioning and mobilization required to create a mass movement. It describes methods for moulding a good conscience based on indignation toward an enemy perceived as a scapegoat. It describes such tactics as 'mirror propaganda' or 'accusations in a mirror', the notion of ascribing to others what we ourselves are preparing to do. The good conscience would legitimize collective action based on widespread certainty of being on the side of the strongest and the just. In other words, the collective action would be the embodiment of the 'people'.

The fascination that some genocide organizers displayed for Mucchielli's work is quite understandable. All the ingredients for such conditioning existed

in Rwanda: a low literacy rate, a proclivity for a unanimous partisan approach surrounding moralistic assertions, a well-established potential scapegoat in the Tutsi minority and enduring references to the ‘majority people’ (*rubanda nyamwinshi*).

From an ideologic point of view, this socioethnic populism entailed the pre-eminence of the ‘Hutu people’, whose absolute right was based on the fact that this community constituted the majority (perceived as homogeneous). The right was also based on the assertion of the community’s indigenous character, in contrast with the so-called foreign nature of the Tutsi community (also seen as naturally homogeneous).

From the early 1960s, this ideology had infiltrated all spheres of public life in Rwanda, evolving from a distinctive pre-colonial and colonial history and the subsequent process of decolonization. It is impossible here to review the details of twentieth century Rwandan history; however, it seems important to recognize that the roots of the extremist propaganda that prepared and accompanied the genocide are twofold. First, the propaganda is set within a traditional socioracial policy that had been refined for a generation. Second, changes within Rwanda’s political and social conditions in the generation since independence meant that, after 1990, the sense of belonging among the Hutu was no longer the sole factor leading to political mobilization. As a result, this propaganda was grounded in the sheer efficiency of its arguments (combined with sufficient provocation and violence) and became a tool for disqualifying all opponents and for uniting the Hutu masses around the so-called Hutu Power movement, thus facilitating ‘recruitment and expansion’. From then on, the use of democratic language became a ‘technology’ designed for totalitarian mobilization, under the guise of freedom of speech – the democratic alibi.

A review of the propaganda themes exploited by Radio-Télévision Libre des Milles Collines (RTL) highlights its obvious inclination to play on two fronts. The first is associated with racist ardour against the Tutsi ‘cockroaches’ and the second pertains to the legitimacy of the elimination of these ‘cockroaches’ by the ‘majority people’. The first front, which is ethnoracial, surfaces when journalists use epithets such as ‘dogs’ or ‘snakes’ when referring to Tutsi, accusing them of cannibalism and mercilessly welcoming their disappearance. It is also apparent when journalists start theorizing about the primacy of ethnic considerations, about the final battle of the Bantu and Hima–Tutsi and about the need to eliminate people who do not have an identity card at checkpoints. In fact, the ‘interethnic’ aspect of the conflict was emphasized near the end of the massacres and in the aftermath of the genocide as growing awareness of international disapproval set in. When he was questioned in Goma in July 1994, Gaspard Gahigi, editor-in-chief of RTL, invoked his right to speak about the ‘ethnic problem’ as this problem led to the ‘humanitarian catastrophe’ that was then unfolding in the refugee camps in eastern Zaire. On 3 July 1994, Kantano Habimana, the most popular journalist host on RTL, was still advising his audience to ‘keep this small thing in your heart’, meaning the intent to eradicate the arrogant and ferocious ‘hyenas’ (Chrétien et al. 1995: 317).¹

When the French Operation Turquoise reached Rwanda in June, RTL M dispensed advice from ‘our intellectuals’ on the need to legitimize, for the benefit of these foreign friends, the role of barriers during ‘a war’. The station also advised of the necessity to approach foreign journalists with great caution. ‘Today, everyone knows that it was an ethnic war,’ Gahigi explained on 15 May 1994 (Chrétien 1995: 137). In other words, racism is either coded or benignly portrayed as natural, in accordance with ethnographic beliefs prevailing among Europeans. According to this way of thinking, hatred was quite natural between these ethnic groups, public anger was spontaneous and authorities did everything in their power to prevent the worst from happening. This would become the central theme of information campaigns led by those who had close ties to the genocidal regime and oversaw the refugee camps of Kivu between 1994 and 1996.

In the months preceding the genocide – from October 1993 to April 1994 – and during the slaughter in April and May 1994, the essential reference is that of the majority people and the legitimacy of self-defence against a ‘feudal clique’. The reference normalized the massacre perpetrated by the majority, which becomes an expression of democratic anger. ‘If the Hutu who represent 90 per cent in our country ... if we can be defeated by a clique of 10 per cent, the Tutsi population, it means that we have not demonstrated our full strength,’ said the leader of MRND, Joseph Nzirorera, on 28 May 1994 (Chrétien 1995: 118–19). Just two weeks earlier, on 14 May, Kantano Habimana talked about the fact that ‘the small-size family in Rwanda’ is that of the *Inkotanyi* [the RPF guerrillas symbolizing all the Tutsi] ... ‘It is a minuscule group descending from those we call Tutsi. The Tutsi are few, estimated at 10 per cent,’ he added. Already, on 23 March 1994, Kantano Habimana was defending the logic of Hutu Power to fight the logic underlying the Arusha accords. ‘This Rwanda is mine. I am of the majority. It is I, first and foremost who will decide, it is not you.’

The aim of this thesis regarding Hutu majority is very clear: to achieve, through propaganda methods identified earlier, a massive and violent mobilization of the Rwandan Hutu in support of extremist factions, such as the Coalition pour la Défense de la République (CDR), which was the soul of RTL M. On 3 April 1994, Noël Hitimana spelled it out very clearly:

The people are the actual shield. They are the truly powerful army ... On the day when people rise up and don’t want you [Tutsi] anymore, when they hate you as one and from the bottom of their hearts, when you’ll make them feel sick, I wonder how you will escape.

Hence, it was freely recognized that the systematic slaughter of Tutsi was legitimate: ‘The proof that we will exterminate them is that they represent only one ethnic group. Look at one person, at his height and physical features, look closely at his cute little nose and then break it,’ Kantano Habimana proclaimed on 4 June 1994 (Chrétien 1995: 193). As early as 13 May, he observed:

The Tutsi are very few. They were estimated at 10 per cent. The war must have brought them down to 8 per cent. Will these people really continue to kill themselves? Do they not risk extermination if they persist in this suicidal behaviour of throwing themselves against far more numerous people? (Chrétien 1995: 205)

Three days later, Habimana proclaimed the expected victory of the ‘Sons of the Cultivators’ (*Benesabahinzi*, meaning the Hutu) who ‘slowly exterminate’ their enemies. These types of declarations of war, labelling the disappearance of the Tutsi a ‘mass suicide’, were widespread. They weave together the notions of demographic strength, the certainty of victory and the good conscience of a citizen’s struggle. As it had claimed since October 1993, RTLM aimed to ‘tell the truth’ – the truth of numbers and the truth of right. Georges Ruggiu, Belgian announcer for French-language broadcasts on RTLM, calmly explained at the end of June that, as reported by Radio France International, 50 people killed in a commune merely represent 9 per cent of the population of the commune, which is ‘approximately the proportion of individuals who might have helped the RPF’. In other words, their eradication was normal. Hence, we should be talking about the ‘media of genocide’ rather than the ‘hate media’ because they were conveying and justifying cold and deliberate propaganda.

The democratic alibi that this propaganda so busily sustains is also discernible in historical references. For example, on 23 May 1994, RTLM, via Ananie Nkurunziza (closely associated with the police and acting as an intellectual analyst), linked the prevailing circumstances with all that happened in Rwanda between 1959 and 1967, that is, the way in which a so-called ‘social’ revolution had been accompanied by populist movements against the Tutsi (including the acts of genocide of December 1963 to January 1964, perpetrated in Gikongoro). In his view, these acts arose from ‘a realization’ or ‘an awakening’. That is precisely what RTLM, pursuing the work of the periodical *Kangura*, was trying to do: to restore the logic of socioracial mobilization, which had been so efficient 30 years earlier.

As Parmehutu did in the 1960s, the extremists in 1993–94 likened their actions to those that took place during the great European revolutionary and liberation movements, such as the French Revolution. For example, on 17 June 2004, just as the French government had announced its plan to intervene, Kantano Habimana compared ‘the final war in progress’ to the French Revolution (Chrétien 1995: 331). On 30 June, Georges Ruggiu, referring to the ‘furious population’, stated: ‘Has Robespierre not done exactly the same in France?’ (Chrétien 1995: 204). On 3 June, RTLM editor-in-chief Gaspard Gahigi awaited international assistance, which he equated to the Normandy landings of 1944 (Chrétien 1995: 331). It would also be appropriate to consider the divine justifications that were invoked, whereby God, the Holy Family and the Virgin Mary were all mobilized for the sacred cause of the Hutu people (Chrétien and Rafiki 2004: 283).

This calculated populism was designed to ‘awaken’ the Hutu masses. It also served to comfort the usual biases that prevailed in France and in Belgium,

notably within democratic-Christian circles and also among leftists, about the nature of the Rwandan regime. In Western media there is an apparent intertwining of ethnographic analysis (atavistic antagonisms, etc.) and a 'democratic' interpretation of 'majority power', to the extent that during the 1980s, President Habyarimana was often portrayed as a democratic state leader, a representative of the Hutu majority. Other factors defining democratic culture (human rights, respect for minorities, refusal to recognize the exclusion of communities, rule of law, social justice) were considered to be ancillary under the tropical sky.

Georges Ruggiu's biography is mainly the account of a young Third World activist who, when he first landed in Kigali, compared the suburbs of the capital to the Brazilian *favelas* he had visited.² In Belgium, he had had the opportunity through the social-Christian movement to mingle with Rwandan militant students who were members of the sole party (MRND). As if spontaneously, without possessing an extensive knowledge of Rwandan history, he adhered to the dogmas of the majority people and of a democracy that in his view would be set back by the Arusha compromise. His populist beliefs almost naturally connected with the racial ideology of the extremists with whom he associated.

From a broader standpoint, we know that this belief was also brought forth by President Mitterrand to vindicate France's steadfast support for Habyarimana and later for the Kambanda government, including the Operation Turquoise endeavour. When surveying the French written press in May and June 1994, one notices that various articles printed in *Le Monde*, *Libération* or *Le Nouvel Observateur* combine ethnographic factors (under the 'old demon' of Hutu-Tutsi antagonism) with suggestions of 'popular defence'. One Belgian media report plainly condemned the 'sanctioned racism' prevalent in Rwanda and within a number of the country's Western partners (Cros 1994). On 26 June, reporter Jean Hélène from *Le Monde*, who was on site in Cyangugu with the French army, alludes to 'popular exultation', 'the relief of villagers' and the concern of 'Rwandan authorities' to 'track down the enemies of the nation who threaten the population' (Hélène 1994). On 4 July, French missionary Father Maindron, even though he had witnessed events in the Kibuye region, declared to a French journalist that the killing was 'a spontaneous popular rage' (Luizet 1994). He was echoed by the prefect of Cyangugu, when he talked to French soldiers about 'legitimate self-defence ... against an enemy from within' (Smith 1994).

What is manifest today is the obvious continuum from the propaganda devised by RTLMM through to current theses denying the genocide. In fact, these viewpoints do not attempt to deny the massacres, but rather to justify them in terms of 'ethnic hatred', 'spontaneous rage', 'legitimate popular uprising' or 'international disinformation'. An editorial by Jacques Amalric (1994) was prescient:

Are we next going to lend credence to Capitaine Baril's utterances, who would have Tutsi being responsible for their own extermination ... We can fear the worst, after hearing the content of some private conversations, supposedly

held confidentially: ‘Things are not as simple as you believe. It is not a question of all innocents on one side and culprits on the other.’

In fact, racist propaganda wearing the mask of democracy – the common thread of extremist media – was also voiced by official channels and managed to find assent, whether through distraction or genuine conversion, among Western partners. This would largely explain why it took two months to clearly identify, in Western media, the nature of the events taking place in Rwanda. The president of Médecins Sans Frontières very adequately summarized the situation: ‘Neither France, nor the international community gave themselves the means to characterize the genocide and to promptly assume its implications’ (Biberson 1994).

Alfred Grosser (1989) wrote: ‘No, it is not true that the slaughter of Africans is felt in the same way as is the slaughter of Europeans.’ This rings terribly true in the case of Rwanda. Although this could be blamed on a level of indifference toward far away tragedies, more likely it is due to significant exotic ethnographic factors that still hinder a more sensible perception of African societies. But first and foremost in this case, it is because of the effectiveness of modern propaganda – propaganda that was well thought out, constructed, refined and of unyielding efficiency, both within and outside the country. This propaganda succeeded in camouflaging genocide and making it appear to be a vast democratic mobilization, consequently trapping an entire population.

NOTES

1. The RTLM broadcasts cited in this article were transcribed from tape recordings used during preparation of expert testimony for the Media Trial in 2002 by J.F. Dupaquier, M. Kabanda, J. Ngarambe and J.P. Chrétien. The tapes that remain are part of the documentation of the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda. We have noted variations in the numbering of the tapes between 2000 and 2002. Thus citations are based on the date of broadcast and the name of the journalist. When the transcripts were also mentioned in our book *les médias du génocide* (Chrétien et al. 1995), we indicated the appropriate page number.
2. Ruggiu, G. *Dans la tourmente rwandaise*. Unpublished journal. 127 pp. This journal was presented as evidence to the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda on 16 June 2003 as exhibit no. K0269165–K0269292.

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