

Observation and genocide: rethinking rwanda essay



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The Rwandan genocide, in addition to being one of the most horrific acts of the twentieth century, remains outside the periphery of human understanding. Its cause—the assassination of Juvenal Habyarimana—is certain, though the agents behind that action remain unknown. Perhaps this is the most stinging aspect for those attempting to ponder a horror of such magnitude: in the absence of specific individuals at whose feet the blame can be laid, observers are left trying to put together concrete impressions from the broken shards of abstraction. Three individuals have offered thoughts on how violence in the world can be understood, and help to shape the view of the Rwandan genocide.

These individuals are Jiddu Krishnamurti, Eckhart Tolle, and Lierre Keith. Each one offers a very unique perspective: for Krishnamurti, attempts to understand violence on the part of observers is an inherently political act, wherein the observer attempts to absolve themselves of the cycle of violence while effectively propagating it...something that can be seen in the differences between the Rwandan Patriotic Front and the Hutu regime. For Eckhart Tolle, the key to a successful life is to seek non-identity, becoming someone able to interact with the world without seeking to imprint their identity on it. This concept was clearly abandoned in the political and physical struggles of Rwanda which, as with all national conflicts, was a struggle between ideologies to determine what the identity of the nation would truly be. Finally, Keith complicates the issue by positing that revolution is a necessary component to resisting corrupt systems and authorities. However, the line is all too thin between revolting against corruption and fueling the fires of anarchy that destroy human lives...which

no amount of ideological re-conceptualization can make right. While each perspective offers a kind of fragmented view of the brutal truths of Rwanda, it is ultimately Krishnamurti that provides the best lens with which to examine the genocide.

Edward Tolle's personal philosophy is a prime example of something that works well on the micro level, but is of little use in attempting to apply it to the macro level of a nation. Tolle believes that instruction in how life should be lived can only come out of a place of personal stillness; as Tolle himself says, I feel now that I need to return to the pure stillness periodically. And then, when the teaching happens, just allow it to arise out of the stillness. So the teaching and stillness are very closely connected. The teaching arises out of the stillness. But when I'm alone, there's only the stillness, and that is my favorite place. Tolle's beliefs are close companions to traditional transcendent thought—Thoreau, for instance, sought his own personal stillness in the woods, and through Walden, sought to impart his personal lessons to future students. However, in contemplating something as horrific as the Rwandan genocide, traditional precepts of transcendent thought are of little use.

The foundation of Tolle's principles (and transcendent thought in general) is the achievement of personal stillness, which leads to personal transcendence. For all intents and purposes, this is the polar opposite of political action and political rebellion: those actions and their agents are not seeking to impart a transcendent stillness into individuals, but to demonstrate that stillness often leads to complacency with regimes that are corrupt and inept. Instead of encouraging individuals to seek out their own

personal identity, political rebellions urge individuals to subsume their personal identity into a national identity—to become the avenging limbs of the body of state, striking at those who they perceive to have poisoned the body. So it was with the Rwandan Patriotic Front. Tolle preaches an existence that is not spent helping one's self. As he says, Transcendence of the world is to act and to interact without any self-seeking. In other words, it means to act without seeking to enhance one's sense of self through one's actions or one's interactions with people. Ultimately, it means not needing the future anymore for one's fulfillment or for one's sense of self or being.

However, a kind of national identity for the refugees that would come to comprise the Rwandan Patriotic Front prevented such an action. After all, one individual abandoning a need for the future was equivalent to abandoning the needs of other refugees facing torment in Uganda. There was a kind of perversion of Tolle's philosophy buried in the edicts of the RPF soldiers: they did not necessarily seek self-enhancement in the sense of self-aggrandizement. Instead, as with utilitarianism, the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few: soldiers sought to further their cause rather than themselves, which was perceived as the best way to help out other refugees.

The very alignment with such a cause prevented them from actualizing on Tolle's terms: he claims that "when that seeking isn't there anymore, then you can be in the world but not be of the world. You are no longer seeking for anything to identify with out there." Again, the RPF soldiers represented a twisted version of this particular wisdom: the soldiers were no longer seeking anything to identify with, because their identity is fully subsumed in

the nationalist cause of the rebellion. The first principle of such a view is the elevation of principles and ideologies over individuals: if soldiers are willing to put their cause above their own lives (which, theoretically, they value more than anyone else's), then individuals who stand in their way effectively stop being human beings. They are, instead, impediments to a brutal ideology that must be removed, no matter the cost.

In Tolle's view, anyone in the area of a warzone (or potential warzone) is effectively denied the stillness that he thinks is necessary to transcendence. It is not surprising, then, that in the absence of the transcendence afforded by personal stillness, individuals latch onto political movements that claim they will affect positive change in the region. Simply put: the individuals are hoping to accomplish in the larger group something they are unable to accomplish on their own...but accomplishment is conflated with change, to the effect that any shift in an existing regime is viewed as a positive change. Lierre Keith has an altogether different view of rebellion and its necessity to social change.

According to her, revolution is a positive thing that allows individuals to oppose corrupt institutions and agents of authority...the only obstacles to such positive change being "personal cowardice, the intellectual pitfalls of liberalism, the tremendous seductions of conformity and privilege, psychological identification with the powerful and their values, and a very real fear of retaliation, to name just a few." She identifies many political problems as being propagated by a large number of individuals with power, and accordingly, resistance to these problems must be equally large in number: "the problem with politics is, it's a group project." Keith's views do <https://assignbuster.com/observation-and-genocide-rethinking-rwanda-essay/>

offer a tantalizing way of viewing distinctions between the conflict in Rwanda and the conflict in other parts of the world, such as America.

She draws a distinction between “ liberalism” and “ radicalism” by noting that with liberalism, “ the crucible of social reality is placed in the realm of ideas, in concepts, language, attitudes. And liberalism is individualist. The basic social unit is the individual.

” As for radicals, they “ see society as composed of actual institutions– economic, political, cultural–which wield power, including the power to use violence.” In contrast with liberalism, one of the cornerstone concepts of radicalism is that “ the basic social unit is a class or group, whether that’s racial class, sex caste, economic class, or other grouping. Radicalism understands oppression as group-based harm.” This is one of the key reasons it is difficult for, say, Americans to understand the Rwandan genocide. In America, conflicts are often relegated to the courtroom, in which abstract ideas of justice and morality are debated and defined.

For those in Rwanda, the banding together into groups was a necessary aspect of defending themselves from institutionalized violence and discrimination (as with that faced by refugees in Uganda). As elaborated upon above, this prevents individuals from actualizing independence from the stillness of private reflection and from the sanctuary of an intellectual forum. Rather, material violence and material discrimination is seen to necessitate material responses. Neither herself buys into the necessity of subsuming personal identity into group or national identity in order to affect change when she points out the relative uselessness of trying to reform

individuals corrupted by institutions of racism and feminism rather than attempting to dismantle those institutions altogether: “ my point is that however important personal accountability is, it’s not political action.” In fact, Keith’s militant feminism actually provides a necessary springboard for understanding the actions of the RPF before and during the Rwandan genocide.

Keith points out that culturally-condoned power relationships do not change unless they are made to change: What you find is a whole web of institutions and cultural practices that support male violence: religion, laws, the police, the mass media and pornography, heterosexuality, the very definition of masculinity. He didn’t put that fist in your face because of who you are as an individual. He did because he belongs to a class of people called men, and you belong to a class of people called women, and that describes a set of power relations. Because of this, Keith thinks that men, as a gender, are basically beyond reform or reeducation: “ I don’t want to educate men, I want to stop them.” Her very vivid example provides a tentative context for RPF forces, who believed that they were striking back at the corrupt institutions which had oppressed refugees in Uganda for decades.

Refugees saw themselves as perpetual victims, and due to harsh hereditary crime laws (the children of refugees continued to pay for the so-called sins of their fathers), it is not inaccurate to say that they were constantly being struck by the collective fist of Uganda. Their response was in perfect accord with the victim/victimizer binary proposed by Keith: sick of being hit by the fist, they decided to become the fist themselves. Keith is a large proponent of the idea that even nonviolent protest is inherently political: “ I think this is

so important because the main divide isn't between violence and nonviolence. It's between action and inaction." She believes that nonviolent protests still have an intended action, pointing out that the Montgomery bus boycotts were not an attempt to educate racist whites, but to bring economic pressure to bear on an issue that would not have otherwise changed. She contrasts this with pacifism, which is effectively a non-statement...it does not have a public impact on the evils of war the same way that a large protest in the street does.

This illustrates the problems that precipitated the Rwandan genocide: due to the way that the refugees were treated by Uganda, they effectively had no non-violent ways to exercise force on an unjust government. Economic pressure could not really be applied to Ugandan companies because many of them were continuously applying economic pressure to refugees through workplace discrimination practices. Public protests were effectively quelled by ghettoizing the refugees into specific refugee sectors. The only form of non-violent protest left to the refugees was something that, by its very nature, demanded an almost immediate use of violence: the abandonment of posts in the Ugandan military. While it certainly does not render their actions (and the resulting genocide) as morally defensible or ethically correct, Keith's views illustrate that the area forced the RPF to be radicals rather than liberals, and that they exercised the only form of political pressure that was available to them.

However, this does not make up for the lives lost. When it comes to attempting to understand the magnitude of human loss, Krishnamurti provides the most comprehensive philosophical tools. Tolle and Keith

essentially occupy different polar ends of the political spectrum—he embodies the traditional liberal methods of individual education through passive thought and meditation, and she represents the militant actualization of oppressed groups against the institutions that oppress them.

Krishnamurti provides the necessary middle ground between these diametrically opposed forces by cutting to the heart of the matter: “there is the realization that the mind is the past, the mind is this conditioned response.” In terms of the Rwandan genocide, it is important to note that the horrible events were an aggregate of decades of conditioned responses that the perpetrators of violence saw as ingrained in their minds through hereditary conditioning. It is important to note that both sides of the conflict were attempting to escape what they saw as a kind of perpetual social injustice. When asked if the mind can ever be free of the past, Krishnamurti noted that it is necessary to know who is posing the question, because “if it is the observer who is putting the question, then he is trying to escape from the fact of himself, because, he says, I have lived so long in pain, in trouble, in sorrow, I should like to go beyond this constant struggle.” In a way, this echoes some of Keither’s larger points, as the philosophical implications of horrors such as the Rwandan genocide are often pondered by liberal philosophers who, by the very nature of their questioning, are trying to remove themselves from the equation...trying to believe that, half a world away, America somehow has no effect on the economy or quality of life of those in Rwanda, and therefore bears no responsibility for attempting not only to rebuild after the fact, but to prevent the outbreak of future atrocities.

Unlike Keith, Krishnamurti does not feel that the correct response to such perceived injustices is radical pressure against corrupt institutions. This is because he realizes that the philosophy he advocates is a spectrum, and not merely a single abstract point: while observers can contribute to philosophical problems via their perceived non-engagement with the subject, many atrocities (such as the Rwandan genocide) would actually be much worse without any observers for a simple reason: “if there is no observer, then there is silence, a complete negation of the whole past” (“The Urgency of Change”). Observers are simultaneously responsible for chronicling history, but also acknowledging their role in creating and shaping that history. In this sense, the passivity and non-being of Tolle is not an adequate response; for all intents and purposes it simply builds the pressure of cultural oppression into a pent-up valve that eventually explodes. By way of example, he points to India, claiming that “here also they talk endlessly about peace, in all the churches, of love, goodness, loving your neighbor – yet you have had the most terrible wars, fifteen thousand of them, within the last five thousand years.” The provocative reason he provides for this is quite simple: “violence and pleasure are intimately related” (“Talks In Europe 1967”). In this sense, the agents of Rwandan genocide, denied many other, simpler pleasures, actually pursued a deep biological need for release that effectively overrode abstract concepts of ethics and morality.

In short: between the urges of the body and the urges of the mind, the urges of the body win out every single time. The mind/body divide is represented by Krishnamurti as a religion/reality divide as well. He points out that the tenets of many religions (such as Christianity) are fundamentally

at odds with the tenets of reality; concepts such as “love your neighbor” compete with business truisms such as “do whatever it takes to succeed.” Given a choice between what provides for the spirit and what provides for the belly, individuals favor survival. This trickles down even worse in societies with a strict military hierarchy such as Uganda: “The whole structure of the army, any structure based on the hierarchic principle, on authority, is again domination and pleasure, which is again part of violence, basic violence.” Krishnamurti elaborates further on the cyclical nature of violence, observation, and the propagation of violence: So when [the observer] says, ‘I must change, I see the necessity of change’, he the observer, the experiencer, the thinker, does project a pattern, an idea of what should be, and trying to become that, creates the conflict, the contradiction, because he has separated himself from the thing to be observed. (“Talks In Europe 1967”) Krishnamurti identifies the problem as it permeates both liberal and radical paradigms of social change: the imprinting of a new ideology over an old ideology cannot be accomplished without conflict.

Krishnamurti differs from Keith in that he does not seem to think of this conflict as a necessarily morally righteous—to abstain from observation is to be complicit in a problem by negating it in the eyes of the public, silencing an issue that affects many individuals. However, shifting from observation into a call for action is an act that irrevocably revokes the status of an observer. For better or for worse, they are now part of the ideology in which they are trying to enact, and must bear the responsibility of that. What does this mean for the Rwandan genocide? That the conflict was created and

perpetuated by individuals that thought they existed outside of it—thought that they were somehow above the pettiness and strife that is the root of all violence. Still thinking of themselves as merely observers, individuals on both sides of the conflict were unable to reach any kind of non-violent accord, because to do so would mean admitting (consciously or unconsciously) that they are part of the conflict, rather than hovering peacefully above it. The ideal solution would have been a series of serious protest aimed at attracting international—military strikes instead of military desertion, extra pressure placed upon the United Nations, and so forth.

The reasoning is simple: The Rwandan genocide is a horrible (yet borderline archetypal) example of how when clashes between ideologies turn to violence, there will always be innocents who are caught in the middle. The true measure of an ideology's strength is how much weight it places upon human life. Any ideology or ideological follower that is unwilling to sacrifice their own lives for a cause yet wishes to sacrifice others is guilty; those aware of such injustice that do not perform any part, great or small, in rectifying the issue, are also guilty. Though it is tied into the institution of liberalism that Keith so despises, it is important that collective guilt becomes its own institution.

Only then can collective healing be performed for scarred areas of the world such as Rwanda. Though Krishnamurti had the clearest philosophical perspective of the three for analyzing the Rwandan genocide, it is important to note that he did not have a truly definitive answer for philosophical conundrums such as the exact role of the observer, and the ability to free one's mind from cultural prejudices that are essentially hereditary. The

optimum solution likely involves a synthesis of these three disparate authors: one needs the self-reflection of Tolle without the mental and emotional isolationism.

One needs the passion and willingness to act of Keith without the blind dismissal of all forms of education and rehabilitation over immediate, pressure-pinching action. And one needs Krishnamurti's ability to ask the hard philosophical questions with the Zen-like patience of understanding that finding the answers to these conundrums is a matter for a lifetime, and not simply for a few introspective moments. At its most abstract, that is what the Rwandan genocide represents: a horrific puzzle for which we must eventually realize that there is no singular answer...rather, the answer lies in pondering the puzzle, and never letting the images of human cruelty and ideological warfare fade away. Rwanda itself represents but a single piece of the larger puzzle of human misery, and to allow ourselves to forget it in the face of future horror is to stand idly by and allow history to repeat itself. Whether observer, victim, or perpetrator, there is no escaping the all-encompassing guilt of complicity...

nor should there be. Works CitedCohen, Andrew. "Ripples on the Surface of Being: An Interview with Edward Tolle" EnlightenNext Magazine. n. pag. Web. 25 May 2010Krishnamurti, Jiddu.

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