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# Reviews

**Making and Unmaking Nations: War, Leadership, and Genocide in Modern Africa** by Scott Straus
Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015. Pp. 400. $26.95 (pbk)
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Scott Straus has written a thought provoking study of genocide. By deploying a unique comparative research design emphasising negative cases – cases where a genocide was predicted but did not occur – he is able to identify and isolate the impact of specific drivers of mass violence. His argument is that leadership and ideas matter, and that African leaders' capacity to prevent genocide is often ignored or downplayed. By focusing on countries on the brink, he demonstrates the impact and agency of African leaders as they either push a country over the edge, or more commonly, serve as sources of restraint.

There are many strengths in this work. But the book also suffers from one major flaw. Specifically, Strauss fails to engage the work of African scholars, several of whom anticipate and extend his argument in important ways.

But first, the positives. Straus critiques approaches that seek out specific risk factors that can be quantified and measured in order to build a model of countries heading towards mass violence. Such risk modelling has become increasingly dominant in government and corporate circles and perhaps inevitably, has come to define much work on violence in American political science as well. In contrast, Straus argues that even when common risk factors such as ethnic polarisation, an ongoing civil war, or an economic or political crisis are present, it is wrong to underestimate the role of political agency. His novel research design is to identify cases where these models predict mass violence and to then show how the actions of a few key political elites was able to prevent it. He contrasts Côte d'Ivoire, Mali and Senegal, where mass violence was avoided, with well-known cases like Rwanda and Sudan where genocide occurred.

The opening chapters provide an overview of the genocide literature laying out definitions and competing explanations. They also set up his focus on actions of leaders at the national level while stressing how these intersect with decisions made at the international and local levels. Chapter 3 lays out his theoretical argument. Specifically, Straus suggests that 'genocide necessitates a social construction of threat' (p. 56). This leads him towards an exploration of how political elites manipulate ethnic or national identities in order to pursue their political interests. Importantly, these are not driven solely by particularistic concerns, but may also reflect political or economic goals that push leaders towards more inclusive politics, the key restraining factor in his framework.

So what's not to like? In his emphasis on political narratives put forth by leaders Straus is echoing a position that has long been voiced by African

intellectuals. The Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA), among others, has published numerous studies of mass political violence and its relationship to leadership. Yet, not one African scholar is cited in his theoretical discussion which constitutes a third of the text. This despite the author acknowledging that the idea for the book is derived from a conversation with an Ivoirian scholar, Bernard Zadi, who is relegated to the preface and whose extensive scholarly production does not enter the bibliography. Straus certainly draws on African scholarship to build his case studies. But intentionally or not, the effect is to treat African intellectuals as only useful when providing descriptions of their home countries – their theoretical contributions so insignificant as to not even warrant mention.

Grappling with the theoretical contributions of African scholars might have allowed Straus to push his argument further, especially as the actions and beliefs of leaders figure frequently in much African scholarship. For example, though he stresses the importance of ideology, he does not provide an analysis of where this inclusive ideology comes from nor what it is responding to. Many African scholars, drawing on Frantz Fanon, address this by examining the ways in which European colonial rule manipulated ethnic identities. For Mahmood Mamdani, among the best known African analysts of genocide, colonialism politicised indigeneity and positioned some Africans as racial outsiders. Genocide, in this conception, is the logic by which the native seeks to remove the settler once and for all. Like Straus, Mamdani stresses the role of the first generation of African leaders who were faced with a choice of how to deal with the question of the 'settler', whether European, Arab, Asian, and most dramatically, other Africans.

It is worth quoting Mamdani to demonstrate the similarity of the argument. Mamdani contrasts two examples of leaders who dealt with the national question very differently. In Tanzania, 'Nyerere stood for a single unified citizenship, both deracialized and deethnicized'. On the other end of the spectrum in Rwanda, 'Kayibanda championed a racialized nationalism – of the Hutu – built on the very political identities institutionalized by colonialism: Hutu and Tutsi' (Mamdani 2001: 32–3). To use Straus's terms, these are the 'founding narratives' of the Rwandan and Tanzanian states.

According to Mamdani, the result was that 'Tanzania came to be a paragon of political stability in the region, the one postcolonial state that did not turn entire groups into refugees', while in contrast, 'Rwanda signified a postcolonial pursuit of justice so relentless that it turned into revenge as it targeted entire groups from the previously colonized population, groups it first victimized and turned into refugees, and later annihilated' (Mamdani 2001: 32–3). Mamdani claims that most African regimes fell between the two, de-racialising the civic sphere without de-ethnicising the customary realm. Where neither de-racialisation nor de-ethnicisation took place, as in Rwanda, genocide resulted as groups sought a final solution to the presence of the racialised other.

I recount this alternative narrative at length to highlight the fertile terrain Straus might have tackled. Beyond the normative question of whether Western scholars should admit their debts to African scholars, engaging African intellectual production would have allowed Straus to push his analysis further.

What would Strauss's account look like if he took seriously the role of colonial rule in producing exclusionary nationalism in Africa? While colonialism makes

it into his account, it is given fleeting attention versus the emphasis on elite discourse. But what were African elites responding to and how did they depart, both structurally and rhetorically, from the previous era?

Similarly, when writing about the speeches of African leaders such as Konare in Mali and Houphouet-Boigny in Côte d'Ivoire, Strauss repeatedly stresses their rhetorical commitment to inclusivity and dialogue. But from where did this trend emerge? Did they converge on them independently, or do they reflect a common dilemma of postcolonial African states, one that each sought to overcome in his own way once entrenched in power? In my reading, figures like Houphouet-Boigny and Nyerere embraced the task of de-ethnicisation from different political positions – Houphouet-Boigny arriving there as a solution to the challenge of economic growth and Nyerere coming from a more normative position. But without a deeper discussion of the world that colonialism wrought, we are provided little context for appreciating the actions of these leaders in their times.

What also of the role of democratisation? While in Mali, inclusivity and democratisation proceeded apace, neither Houphoet-Boigny nor Nyerere were democrats. Indeed, democratisation and inclusivity often appear to be in an unresolved tension. Can a leader be both pro-inclusivity and anti-democratic? Is democracy innately pro-inclusivity? Or, as several Ivoirian scholars such as Francis Akindes have suggested, is democratisation itself responsible for upending the nationalist framework that Houphouet Boigny devoted much of his life to creating? If so, what lessons does the Ivoirian example offer to post-genocide states like Rwanda? A deeper engagement with African scholars might have allowed Straus to address these questions without sacrificing the lucidity that he brings to an admittedly difficult subject.

## REFERENCE

Mamdani, M. 2001. *When Victims Become Killers: colonialism, nativism and the genocide in Rwanda.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

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**Democratic Contestation on the Margins: Regimes in Small African Countries**
edited by CLAIRE METELITS and STEPHANIE MATTI
Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2015. Pp. 173. $80 (hbk)
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That small African countries are relatively under-studied is as clear as it is undesirable, and therefore this examination of democratic contestation in six such countries is a timely and worthwhile contribution. Framed by Levitsky and Way's (2002) concept of Competitive Authoritarianism, these six case studies offer rich and detailed information about the nature of politics in countries that tend to receive relatively scant attention (Botswana, Benin, Burkina Faso, Togo, Djibouti and Guinea-Bissau). By imposing the framework of Competitive Authoritarianism, the editors cajole the contributors into focusing