

Land Conflict and Genocide in Rwanda

Karol Boudreaux*

* Karol Boudreaux is a senior research fellow at the Mercatus Center, lead researcher for Enterprise Africa!, and a member of the Working Group on Property Rights of the U.N.'s Commission on Legal Empowerment of the Poor.

Email: kboudrea=a=gmu.edu (replace =a= with @)

Abstract

In his 2005 best-selling book *Collapse*, Jared Diamond argues that some societies “choose to fail or succeed.” Diamond contends that when populations rise, some societies overuse resources which, in turn, leads to environmental degradation and, ultimately, social collapse. One of the cases he explores in his book is the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, which he calls a modern day Malthusian crisis. However, the arguments he employs to explain why Rwandan society was unable to peacefully and effectively manage rising population pressures overlook a host of political factors that limited the ability of people to respond to increased competition for land in pre-genocide Rwanda. In particular, by focusing on land-related conflict Diamond overlooks factors that kept Rwandans on rural land: lack of a formal land market that would allow people to sell land and move to more urbanized areas, government policies that limited the movement of citizens from the countryside to urban centers, tightly controlled markets that limited entrepreneurial opportunities for people who might wish to leave farms, and a general pro-rural ideology imposed by the pre-genocide Habyarimana government. Unlike citizens in many other densely populated countries such as Belgium, Hong Kong, and Singapore, Rwandans had only limited freedom to deal with rising population pressures. While land conflict was an important feature of pre-genocide Rwanda it was not the primary impetus for violence and genocide. A more nuanced interpretation of Rwanda’s genocide would see that government policies that limited land sales, freedom of movement and labor opportunities contributed in important ways to discontent among Rwandans.

2009 is the fifteenth anniversary of the Rwandan genocide. As people look back to that horrific event and ask, once again, “why did it happen?” and “how can it be prevented in the future?,” it may be useful to revisit one of the more popular explanations for Rwanda’s tragedy, which is this: Rwanda’s people were victims of a Malthusian crisis. The most notable advocate of this account for the Rwandan genocide is Jared Diamond.

In his 2005 best-selling book *Collapse*, Jared Diamond asks why some societies “choose to fail or succeed.” His basic argument is that societies that make wise choices about resource use and population control flourish, while those that choose poorly fail, often spectacularly.

The book focuses on problems associated with population growth. Diamond argues that population pressure and the environmental degradation that may accompany a rise in population are important catalysts for social change. When populations grow, people adopt more intensive agricultural techniques in order to feed themselves. They innovate and find ways to increase crop yields through the use of irrigation, fertilizers, terracing, and other technologies. However, a rising population also places pressure on the stock of fertile land. As fertile land becomes increasingly scarce, people bring marginal land under cultivation. They also shorten the fallow period, which drains the soil of nutrients. The result can be environmental havoc: valuable ecosystems are destroyed, soils are depleted, and resources are overused. People and the environment suffer; societal collapse often follows from environmental collapse.

Diamond does not argue that this path to self-destruction is inevitable. Instead, he says that other factors contribute in important ways to the ability of particular groups of people at particular times in history to respond effectively to the twin, and related, problems of increasing population and land scarcity. Factors such as the presence or absence of hostile neighbors and/or friendly trading partners, cultural and political values, and shifts in climate patterns also contribute to a society’s

responsiveness to the challenges of a rising population (2005, pp. 14–15).

Recognizing that groups of people respond differently to these challenges, the key question should be: “why?” Why do some groups of people develop successful strategies for dealing with these problems, while other groups do not? Why, for example, does a country like Belgium, which is small and densely populated by ethnically and religiously diverse people become peaceful and wealthy while Rwanda, another small and densely populated country remains poor and suffers cycles of violence? The answers Diamond provides are neither sufficient nor satisfying.

Putting collapse into a context

Diamond defines “collapse” as “a drastic decrease in human population size and/or political/economic/social complexity, over a considerable area, for an extended time (2005, p. 3). He sees Rwanda’s 1994 genocide as a modern example of a society collapsing tragically and dramatically. The Rwandan genocide has the dubious distinction of being the fastest in the 20th century: upwards of 800,000 people lost their lives in a mere 100 days. Millions were displaced, property and infrastructure was destroyed and the economy contracted by 50 percent. There is little question that in 1994 Rwandan society experienced something like collapse.

But why, to use Diamond’s own language, did Rwandans “choose” to fail? Why did the society implode? Diamond presents his case in Chapter 10, which is entitled: “Malthus in Africa: Rwanda’s Genocide” in which he argues that the genocide can be understood, in part, as a society-wide response to high fertility rates coupled with land scarcity. Too many people and limited fertile land were, Diamond posits, key variables in decoding the Rwandan disaster.

Analyzing the terrible events of 1994, Diamond does recognize that Rwanda’s mass violence was driven, organized, and encouraged by Hutu elites who were desperate to keep the reins of political control firmly within their grasp (Hintjens 1999, p. 247). But, he also believes that land scarcity coupled with low agricultural productivity actually drove people to murder. How? Drawing heavily on the work of André and Platteau (1997), Diamond argues that ordinary citizens participated in the violence because they were desperate and lured by property. If you ran off, or killed, a Tutsi (or a Hutu for that matter) you might just get the missing or dead person’s land. This would help you feed your family and perhaps

earn some income from the sale of crops such as coffee or tea. Alternately, running off or killing people would keep these competitors for scarce resources from taking your land.

Diamond is not alone in making this argument. Prunier (1995, p. 142) writes that poor Rwandan farmers, who lived in a highly centralized, authoritarian society, had a tradition of obeying superiors. These superiors told them that Tutsis were evil and a very real threat to their own lives. Farmers would have believed such assertions, but also another element might have been involved in convincing people to kill: “all these people who were about to be killed had land and at times cows. And somebody had to get these lands and those cows after their owners were dead.” And Pottier (2006, p. 510) writes that “ordinary people also killed for economic gain, often for access to a victim’s land.”

The problem with this argument is not that it is implausible but that it ignores the underlying causes of land conflict in Rwanda as well as the political economy factors that drove the Habyarimana government to repress its citizens and demonize opponents. Diamond’s analysis fails to develop a critical understanding of the role that Rwandan institutions and policies played in shaping a particularly authoritarian, inflexible, and anti-urban society. And it is these institutional and policy components that help explain why Belgium – with its high population and scarce land – is peaceful and wealthy while Rwanda is not.

In addition, more recent research (Strauss 2006, p. 136, p. 149) suggests that the lure of material gain played little role in prompting genocidal behavior and that few *genocidaires* actually took property during the genocide. Upon closer examination, the shortcomings in Diamond’s argument that Rwanda represents a modern day “Malthusian crisis” become clear. An examination of the way political economy shapes the choices dictators make, and the institutional factors that limited the growth of land markets, labor mobility, and off-farm job opportunities in Rwanda, provides a more nuanced understanding of why land was a source of conflict in Rwanda. Before examining Diamond’s analysis of the Rwandan genocide in detail, however, a brief history of the country is presented.

A short history of Rwanda

Rwanda is a small land-locked nation in central Africa. Today, close to nine million people live in the densely populated country. The vast majority of the population

is, and has always been poor and rural; they earn meager livings from subsistence farming.

The population is a mix of people – Hutus, Tutsis, and Twa. Mix is the operative word, as the people in Rwanda speak the same language (Kinyarwanda), many are co-religionists (Roman Catholic), and they share a common culture. Prunier (1995, p. 5) writes:

“The first explorers who reached Rwanda and Burundi were immediately struck by the fact that the population though linguistically and culturally homogenous, was divided into three groups, the Hutu, the Tutsi and the Twa... They shared the same Bantu language, lived side by side with each other without any ‘Hutuland’ or ‘Tutsiland’ and often intermarried. But they were neither similar nor equal.”

The perceived ethnic differences made a strong impression on early European colonists who wrote histories of the region in which the Tutsis were identified as superior Nilotic outsiders who brought a sophisticated kingship system to Rwanda. When the Tutsis, who were primarily pastoralists, arrived in the area that became Rwanda they found settled farmers (Uvin 1997, p. 92). These farmers were Bantus who tended to be poorer (or have fewer cattle) than the Tutsis. However, Schoenbrun (1998, p. 74) notes that people in western Great Lakes region (near Lake Kivu in western Rwanda) were grazing and breeding dairy cattle more than 2,000 years ago, so the distinction between Tutsi pastoralists and Hutu farmers may well have been overemphasized in some literature. Nonetheless, by the 19th century a strong, centralized Tutsi kingdom existed in and most Hutus were subservient to Tutsi masters (Prunier 2005, pp. 16–23).

In the late nineteenth century, Germans colonized this Tutsi kingdom, and incorporated it into German East Africa in 1890. Following the end of World War I, a League of Nations mandate transferred control of Rwanda and Burundi (Ruanda-Urundi) from Germany to Belgium.

Under Belgian rule Rwanda developed into a politically centralized, neo-traditionalist and overwhelmingly Catholic society. Prunier argues that it also became quite brutal. He writes (1995, p. 35) that:

“Between 1920 and 1940, the burden of taxation and forced labour by the native population increased considerably. Men were almost constantly under mobilization to build permanent structures, to dig anti-erosion terraces, to grow

compulsory crops (coffee for export, manioc and sweet potatoes for food security), to plant trees or to build and maintain roads. These various activities could swallow up to 50–60% of a man’s time. Those who did not comply were abused and brutally beaten. The result was a manpower exodus towards the British colonies, especially Uganda where there was plenty of work.”

It was under Belgian rule that the government first issued citizens identity cards that specified their ethnicity as Hutu, Tutsi, or Twa. These distinctions enabled Belgian administrators to fill civil service jobs and school positions with Tutsis. This policy resulted in economic and political marginalization for most Hutus (Newbury 1995, p. 12; Uvin 1997, p. 95).

In the 1950s, the colonial government introduced some political reforms aimed at improving the lot of Hutus. These reforms may have been an attempt, on the part of the Belgians, to lessen ethnic tensions or it may have been a way to promote loyalty in a group that then might favor a continued Belgian presence in the country. Not surprisingly, Tutsis resisted these changes, seeing in them a threat to their privileged status. In response to the Belgian reforms, a Tutsi-led independence movement emerged and the Tutsi king called for the Belgians to leave the country.

At the same time Hutus, with growing support from the Roman Catholic Church in Rwanda, issued a manifesto (known as the Hutu Manifesto) that called for greater Hutu voice and political power. In 1959, after the Tutsi king died under mysterious conditions, Hutus staged a revolution. Both groups reacted violently, and thousands of Tutsis were killed and close to 100,000 were displaced to neighboring countries.

The Hutu revolution lasted until the country gained its independence from Belgium in July, 1962. Gregoire Kayibanda, a Hutu from southern Rwanda, became the president and prime minister of the new country. Porter (2006, p. 3) notes:

“Rwanda quickly became a single-party state with a highly centralized and authoritarian administration under the control of Hutu elite from south-central Rwanda ... *Following independence, the state took ownership over all land.* An ethnic quota system determined access to education and employment in the civil service, and it was virtually impossible for Tutsis to attain high-level positions in government or the military” (emphasis added).

In 1963, exiled Tutsis unsuccessfully invaded the country. This led to further retaliatory attacks against Tutsis, in which thousands of Tutsis were killed. Another round of retaliatory killings against Tutsis took place in the early 1970s, in response to the mass murder of hundreds of thousands of Hutus in neighboring Burundi (Lemarchand 1997, pp. 321–338).

In 1973, General Juvénal Habyarimana led a *coup d'état* and took control of the country. Habyarimana was from northwest Rwanda, and under his leadership Hutus from this area quickly gained control of important government offices and the economic benefits these offices presented. Habyarimana controlled the levers of a single-party state in which the government became extraordinarily powerful and sought control over “every aspect of Rwandan society.” (Porter 2006, p. 4). Verwimp (2003, p. 163) describes the political changes:

“From 1974 to 1976, Habyarimana consolidated his political power. He outlawed political parties and created his own Revolutionary Movement for Development (MRND) ... the MRND was a truly totalitarian party: every Rwandan had to be a member of the MRND ... Habyarimana institutionalized *Umuganda*, the compulsory communal labour, and had peasants participate in village animation sessions to honor him ... All citizens were under tight administrative control. Every 5 years the president was re-elected with 99% of the vote.”

Newbury (1995, p. 14) notes that some improvements were made during Habyarimana's early tenure: “during the first decade of his rule, Habyarimana could point to important achievements of his government in several sectors: in the development of infrastructure (roads in particular), in the expansion of schools and health centers, in reforestation programs, and in attempts to promote increased agricultural production.” Rwanda's economic growth rates were generally good during the 1960s and 1970s. However, by the mid to late-1980s the country's economic situation had begun to deteriorate and by the early 1990s it had become dire.

The economic crisis of the late 1980s and early 1990s was the result of several factors: first, Rwanda was heavily dependent on export revenue from the sale of coffee and tea and the prices for both commodities fell sharply during this period. Uvin (1997, p. 106) points out that “coffee export receipts fell from \$144 mio (*sec*) in 1985 (an exceptionally good year) to \$30 mio (*sec*) in 1993.” Second, after 1990, the government diverted its limited resources to the war effort, fighting the invading

Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF). Cannon (2005, p. 6) says Habyarimana diverted upwards of 40 percent of the national budget to military purposes between 1990 and 1994. And third, in 1990 the government agreed to a structural adjustment program that led to a 40 percent currency devaluation, higher prices, higher taxes, and increased fees for a variety of services (education, health, etc.) These elements added up to increasing poverty and hardship for the vast majority of Rwanda's citizens (World Bank 1994, *iii*).

The 1990 invasion of the RPF plunged the country into civil war for three years and precipitated a political crisis: political moderates (who supported a power-sharing arrangement with the Tutsi-led RPF) broke away from the government and formed an opposition. This opposition threatened the monopoly hold on power of ruling elites. Unsurprisingly, some officials within the government vehemently resisted calls to work with either the opposition or the RPF to create a transition government.

Nonetheless, in 1993 the Habyarimana government did sign the Arusha Accords, which led to a cease fire between the government and the RPF. The terms of the Accords required that the Habyarimana government rewrite the constitution, provide a number of ministries to opposition politicians, integrate the RPF and Rwandan armies, and create a power-sharing agreement with Tutsis.

The Accords were never fully implemented and in 1993 violence erupted once again in the capital city of Kigali. In response, the RPF launched a new assault on the government. The United Nations began peacekeeping operations in August 1993, but these proved disastrously inadequate. Finally, in April 1994 President Habyarimana's plane was shot down by a rocket launched from near Kigali airport. It remains unclear who was responsible for this attack. During the evening of April 6–7, the killings began in Kigali and within days the genocide was well underway across the country. In July, the RPF finally brought the killing to a halt and drove the Hutu government into exile. By the time the violence stopped, close to one million people were dead; nearly two million had left the country; and close to one million were internally displaced. Nearly 40 percent of the pre-war population was missing; the country was devastated.

In July 1994, the RPF created a coalition national unity government, with a Hutu president, Pasteur Bizimungu, in a key leadership role. Following the genocide, the international community responded with a humanitarian effort directed by the United Nations, which lasted until 1996. In late 1996, hundreds of thousands

of refugees from Zaire (now Congo) and Tanzania returned to the country. International war crimes trials began in Tanzania in 1997. In 2000 President Bizimungu resigned and Paul Kagame was sworn in as President. In 2003, multi-party elections were held. President Kagame's Rwanda Patriotic Front won in a landslide, and a new constitution was adopted.

The RPF remains in power today. It is often criticized (Reyntjens 2004, p. 177; Pottier, 2006, p. 510) for increasingly authoritarian tendencies – particularly in terms of limiting freedom of the press and opposition voices – but the government has also tried to improve the economy and strengthen the private sector and it has implemented a system of local courts, called *gacaca*, in an attempt to promote reconciliation while also addressing the problem of how best to deal with over 100,000 alleged perpetrators (Boudreaux and Ahluwalia 2009, pp. 165–172).

What Diamond argues

As noted above, Jared Diamond sees in Rwanda a modern example of societal collapse. He also suggests that problems associated with population growth help explain why Rwandans murdered each other on such a massive scale. His thesis is that “modern Rwanda illustrates a case where Malthus's worst-case scenario does seem to have been right” (2005, p. 313). He argues that a rising population led to unsustainable resource use which in turn created conflict. If conflict can not be managed peacefully and through courts, it may, Diamond argues, be managed in “nastier” ways (2005, p. 313), such as mass killings and this helps explain the Rwandan genocide.¹

Diamond rejects early explanations of the genocide in which the killings were explained solely in terms of tribal and ethnic hatred. He agrees with Alison Des Forges, late author of the respected work *Leave None to Tell the Story*, that a small group of Hutu political elite, who were opposed to the power sharing agreement worked out in the Arusha Accords, purposefully planned and put the genocide into motion in a desperate attempt to retain power.

However, Diamond also believes that while this analysis is “correct and accounts in large degree for Rwanda's tragedy... there is also evidence that other considerations contributed as well.” (2005, p. 318). This is surely right. Given that so many civilians participated in the killing, it is important to try to understand their motivation. Would ordinary people kill neighbors, friends,

even family members, just because a group of politicians ordered them to do so?

Diamond believes the answer to this question is “no.” Rather, what drove ordinary Rwandans to become killers was economic desperation. In 1994 95 percent of the population lived in rural areas (World Bank 1994, *xi*). By the early 1990s the average Rwandan farmer had access to only a small plot of land: approximately 80 percent of farms in 1994 were less than 2 hectares. Nearly 20 percent of farms were less than 0.37 hectares. Only 20 percent of farms were larger than 1.90 hectares (World Bank 1994, p. 79). And in 1994, this small amount of land needed to feed an average family of 4.9 people in rural areas and 5.6 people in urban areas (World Bank 1994, p. 62). By 1990 the average population density of the country was 760 people per square mile or, 280 per square kilometer – higher than the population density of the UK, although not as high as that in Holland (Diamond 2005, p. 319). This translated into a great many mouths to feed and limited capacity to actually feed them.

Although food production in Rwanda rose in the 1960s and 70s, by the 1980s this increase stopped and poverty rates increased. The World Bank notes, in its 1994 report, that “Rwandan farmers have historically defied predictions of disaster by keeping food production ahead of population through a variety of measures” but that this success stalled in the early 1990s because of increasing land scarcity, low use of fertilizers to improve soil fertility, a high risk environment due to thin markets, lack of irrigation, and little intercropping, and excessive government intervention in favor of coffee and in opposition to other crops, including food crops (1994, *vii*). By the late 1980s the country was experiencing localized famine. Poverty was worst in the south central region of the country while the northwest (home region of President Habyarimana) was the most “well-off.” (1994, *iv*).

Despite their efforts, Rwandan farmers were not able to boost agricultural productivity in proportion with population increases. Population rates continued to increase and families had to divide land into extremely small pieces when children married, making a bad situation worse over time. In other words, Diamond is certainly right that there was significant population pressure in Rwanda. The vast majority of people had access to only very small parcels of land (Newbury 1995, p. 14). Because of this, land was used intensively, overused, and marginal lands were brought under cultivation. Environmental degradation does seem to have occurred (Mushara 2006, p. 6) and it seems reasonable to assume that some people coveted other people's land.

However, taking all of this as a given, some questions

arise that Diamond never asks. For example, if things were so bad in the countryside, why didn't Rwandans do what rural people the world over do in difficult times? That is, why didn't Rwandans leave the countryside and move to the cities or emigrate (of course, tens of thousands involuntarily fled earlier violence)? In a situation of rising land scarcity, what political pressures kept smallholder farmers on their land? Alternately, why didn't more efficient farmers buy land from less efficient farmers and develop a commercial agriculture sector that would feed the nation – as happened in places like Belgium and the United States? Why didn't people find off-farm jobs to supplement their incomes? And finally, why didn't Rwandans limit their birth rates? What kind of family policy existed in Rwanda before the genocide?

Diamond does not ask these questions. As a result, he overlooks important institutional issues that limited the ability of ordinary Rwandans to respond in more peaceable ways to rising land scarcity. Population pressure *was* real in Rwanda, but Rwandans had a very constrained set of options available for dealing with the problem of large families, small farms, and falling productivity. To the extent that Rwandans “chose” failure and societal collapse, it was in very large part because their government prevented them from developing successful alternate strategies for dealing with land conflict and rising poverty.

Limited options, lots of conflict

If ordinary Rwandans killed for land we must think carefully about why this would be so.² Why weren't people able to work out their land conflicts peacefully? Why was violence an acceptable strategy for so many?

One reason is the various legal restrictions that Rwandan governments created, over the course of decades, that limited individual freedom in general and the operation of local markets in particular. Because of government actions, Rwandans were unable to make use of some of the strategies that people living in other high population/high density environments adopt to allocate scarce land and to create non-agricultural jobs. History, legislation, and regulation, coupled with the leadership's incentives to retain power, combined to worsen ethnic tensions among people competing for land, while also making it very difficult for Rwandans to sell land, to relocate at will, and to find jobs in urban areas. These problems were exacerbated by a pre-genocide ideology that lauded rural life. Taken all together, they help us to understand better why land became a contested resource in Rwanda.

Choosing repression

As discussed above, the Habyarimana government was a tightly controlled totalitarian political system. The government kept a firm grasp on the political arena, limited civil society, and controlled the economy. In other words, the Habyarimana government was extremely repressive, controlling virtually all aspects of the lives of its citizens.

In his work on the political economy of dictatorships, Ronald Wintrobe (1998, p. 5) argues that citizens and dictators engage in a kind of rational exchange. Citizens exchange loyalty to the regime for some set of favors (for example, a generally good economy, low food prices, less expensive foreign imports, access to credit, etc.) that the regime controls (1998, pp. 46–49). When the “supply” of loyalty is high (because citizens are willing to cooperate with the regime) the benefits each citizen receives is lower than it otherwise would be – the regime doesn't need to distribute as many rents to citizens.

However, if citizens become dissatisfied with a regime they might choose to support opposition candidates, who offer different favors/rents. When citizens choose to support political opponents, a leader must make a choice: offer the desired benefits and retain loyalty or use repression to raise the cost of opposition. When repression increases citizens bear higher costs of opposing the government (time in jail, torture, exile, etc.) By using repressive tactics, regimes get the loyalty they need to stay in power. The Habyarimana regime used repression to maintain loyalty throughout much of its rule. We can understand the tight control of civil, political, and economic life in Rwanda as an effort of the government to maintain political power.

Given the deteriorating economic conditions of the late 1980s and early 1990s the perceived need to ratchet up repression in Rwanda rose. As revenues from the sale of coffee and tea fell, as expenses related to war rose, and as a program of fiscal austerity was imposed by the IMF (though never fully implemented) the government was less able to provide benefits to citizens and supporters. Loyalty to the regime was at serious risk and an opposition formed. In order to retain power the government chose to increase already significant levels of repression, increase anti-Tutsi rhetoric, and increase the costs associated with opposition. To discuss the genocide without discussing these crucial political elements is to leave much of the story untold.

Limited markets for land

In the pre-colonial era, the Tutsi king owned the land in the area he and his court controlled (Pottier 2006, p. 513). Prunier writes that under the pre-colonial government a chief of land was responsible for allocating land; interestingly, this chief according to Prunier, “was often” a Hutu (Prunier 1995, pp. 11, 27). Land could not be alienated but could be inherited, (by male heirs) or acquired through clearing unused land, and it could also be leased in exchange for labor and gifts. In the northwest, Hutu-dominated area of the country, land was held in what Pottier describes as “corporate lineages in a system of clientship” (2006, p. 513). Under this system, similar to much customary land law in Africa, the original settler would allocate land to family members and to non-family clients. Clients would lease allocated land for a payment. However, across the bulk of the country, land was allocated by central authorities who held ultimate title to the land.

Under colonial rule, the Belgians continued to recognize customary land law, but also introduced law that allowed the foreigners to purchase land. Musahara writes that “until independence in 1962, an indigenous or customary tenure system existed alongside codified land tenure rules for land owned by foreigners” (2006, p. 4). The Rwanda Constitution of 1962 retained Belgian rules for land tenure, which meant that all unoccupied land belonged to the state, and the government (specifically, the Minister of Agriculture) was required to approve all contracts for the sale or gifting of land.

A 1976 land law imposed further restrictions on the sale of land in Rwanda. Land held under customary law needed the Minister’s approval for sale, but now also required an “opinion” from a local community council (Musahara 2006, p. 5). Further, no sales could be approved if the seller owned less than 2 hectares or if the buyer owned more than 2 hectares. Given that the average size of a family land holding shrank from 2 hectares in 1949 to 1.2 hectares by 1970, these limitations would have imposed significant restrictions on formal transfers of land. Pottier points out that: “[t]he [1976] decree also thwarted the development of an open land market ...” (2006, p. 514). Sales did take place, however, and these seem to have resulted in urban elites consolidating land-holdings. By the mid-1980s, 50 percent of Rwanda’s agriculturally productive land was held on 182 farms, out of a total of more than 1,000,000 farms in the country (Bigaza, Abong, and Mukarubuga 2002, p. 69).

Thus, before the genocide the vast majority of Rwandans had access to scattered, very small plots of land that

they inherited from family or that the state allocated to them for use. In the past, the land market was quite small, but by the 1980s and certainly after the genocide, significantly more people have acquired land by purchasing it, informally and illegally if necessary (Musahara 2006, p. 9; Pottier 2006, p. 514).

Before the genocide the ultimate title to land remained in the hands of government.³ Land markets in Rwanda have never evolved in the way they have in the developed world. As population pressure was rising in Rwanda one would expect individuals would create more individualized rights to land in order to better internalize the rising value of the land (Boudreaux 2005, p. 91). However, this option was severely constricted because government controlled the sale of land. Smallholders who wanted to sell their property and move to urban areas were prohibited from doing so by law (unless they had “connections”). Additionally, regulations limiting movement of people made it difficult for people to leave their villages and move to cities. One of the reasons there was “unbearable” stress on land resources was that markets in land were not allowed to develop. A tightly fettered market contributed to the problem of “land scarcity” in Rwanda.

Regulation limited people’s freedom to move

One of the most startling figures about Rwanda is that in 1994, 95% of the population was rural – this was the lowest degree of urbanization in the world at that time (Verwimp 2000, p. 348). One is immediately struck by the oddness of this number. In a densely populated small country, why were so many people living in the country and not in urban areas?

The answer, overlooked by Diamond, is that *people were not allowed to move to cities* (Verwimp 2000, p. 339). In its 1993 *Human Rights Country Report on Rwanda*, the US Department of State wrote:

“Freedom of movement and residence [in Rwanda] are restricted by laws and regulations which require all residents to hold national identity cards and residence and work permits. Police conduct periodic checks, especially in urban areas, and return all those not registered in the locality to their own commune. Property owners who do not require tenants to show valid documentation are subject to fines and even imprisonment. Undocumented tenants are subject to expulsion.” (1994)

Official ideologies of agricultural self-sufficiency and

the virtues of peasant life (discussed below) combined with a desire to limit the growth of informal, slum settlements (which are more difficult for government to control than are poor rural citizens), led the Rwanda government to promote a set of anti-urban-growth policies that coercively kept people in rural areas. In its 1994 report, the World Bank (1994, p. 34) wrote:

“A web of regulations exist limiting the size of urban areas, through residence and work permits, land tenure regulations, business registration and bureaucratic instruments. These regulations have the effect of increasing the number of poor people in the country, and increasing the poverty gap as well. Poverty increases as pressure on rural land increases and people are not able to move to cities (or other rural areas for that matter) to relieve the pressure and are thus trapped in increasing poverty.”

People were required by legislation to apply to local government officials for residence permits if they stayed more than three days away from their primary place of residence. Prunier writes that: “Unless there was good reason, such as going to school or getting a job, the authorization to change residence would not be granted – unless, of course, one had friends in high places. Administrative control was probably the tightest in the world among non-communist countries” (1995, p. 77).

Giving local officials the authority to approve or reject permits created opportunities for corruption and limited people’s freedom to move. With a rising population and a small land area, Rwandans surely needed to leave the countryside and move into cities to find alternative means of making a living. However, the World Bank reports that the Habyarimana government’s fear of slums led to policies that kept citizens in the countryside rather than allowing for potentially chaotic urban development (1994, p. 41).

But it is precisely urban development that allows for a broad and deep division of labor and thereby increases opportunities for people to earn higher off-farm income. Verwimp points out that: “we know that migration, and especially temporary employment in cities, is an important strategy to cope with poverty” (2000, p. 340). Yet, urban development was purposefully thwarted in pre-genocide Rwanda. Migration into cities from the countryside was, according to the World Bank, “made difficult by laws and regulations restricting labor mobility. Migration towards neighboring countries is limited either by political reasons or by the absorptive capacity

of neighboring regions” (1994, p. 21). A typical strategy for dealing with rising population and increasing land scarcity – movement to urban areas – was off limits to most Rwandans.

Limited job opportunities

The business environment in pre-genocide Rwanda was not conducive to job creation and strong economic growth. The country was heavily dependent on agriculture as a source of export revenue. In 1994 90 percent of the active labor force still worked in agriculture and agriculture provided 40% of GDP (World Bank 1994, *xi*). Services provided another 40 percent of GDP in 1994 and the industrial sector represented the rest of the economy. The World Bank report noted that:

“Local entrepreneurship is not well developed, except for a small informal sector. In addition to the physical constraints – Rwanda is land-locked and hilly – the major obstacles to private sector development are the presence of the state as a privileged competitor and a disabling environment characterized by an inadequate incentive system and pervasive government interference in virtually all aspects of economic life.” (1994, *xi*)

So not only was there a dysfunctional land market and restrictions on people’s freedom to move within the country, the government interfered with many aspects of the economy. As noted above, government regulation restricted the movement of people into urban areas, so market centers were few and relatively small. The pre-genocide government also required entrepreneurs, even very small-scale traders such as fruit and vegetable vendors, to obtain trading licenses (World Bank 1994, *viii*). The government required farmers to devote a portion (one-quarter) of their planting to coffee production. Intercropping was forbidden by law – which meant farmers had few opportunities to grow crops for the local market (Boudreaux 2007, p. 5). All these restrictions constrained local entrepreneurship.

The World Bank report nicely summarizes the reasons for limited growth and job creation in pre-genocide Rwanda:

“Rwanda’s macroeconomic and regulatory framework has not been conducive to the onset of sustainable labor intensive growth ... in the past because the Government has historically tended

to: (a) heavily regulate the economy from artisans to air transport; (b) maintain artificially high exchange rates; (c) restrict free movements of population and labor; (d) control cropping patterns (forbidding cutting down coffee trees); and (e) control social behavior.” (1994, p. 14)

The Report argues that this restrictive environment limited economic growth, made it more difficult for poor people to find better alternatives to subsistence farming, slowed the growth of urban areas, made schooling expensive and “made it difficult to set up new businesses.” Had the government interfered less with the economy and had it allowed people to move the stresses caused by land scarcity would have been mitigated. Instead, the government made it difficult and costly for people to build new businesses, to employ and fire workers, and to develop alternative livelihood strategies to subsistence farming.

Rural ideology

Philip Verwimp summarizes the Habyarimana regime’s economic ideology in the following way:

“Habyarimana’s macro-economic ideology, as derived from his speeches, is as follows. Rwanda is a peasant economy and should remain so; in fact, all Rwandans should be peasants. Agricultural manual labor is the only source of value and thus all human and physical activity should be concentrated in rural areas.” (2000, p. 340)

Given this policy preference, it is natural that the Habyarimana government “followed a consistent policy to make peasants stay in the rural areas. They had to remain in an agricultural setting” (2000, p. 339). The Hutu peasantry was glorified; intellectuals and bourgeois merchants were vilified.

The Habyarimana government stressed the need for Rwanda to find a path to “auto-development” through agricultural self-sufficiency and the export of primary commodities such as coffee and tea. Ensuring that the country could feed itself and still earn export revenue to pay for needed imports (such as fuel) and luxury items were the twin policy goals. As in many African countries, the government forced smallholder farmers to sell these export commodities at artificially low prices. The government then sold coffee and tea at higher world market prices and used the “profit” for its own ends.

In order to promote the virtues of hard work the

government implemented a policy known as *umuganda*. Under *umuganda* all Rwandans (except those with powerful friends or connections) had to “volunteer” one day per week to do work for the local government. Verwimp writes that: “[ac]cording to him (Habyarimana)... those not performing agricultural work, the ‘non-peasants,’ are harmful to society... only the Hutu peasant, the one tilling the land, is productive and good for society” (2000, p. 335). This coercive requirement was, in part, designed to humiliate intellectuals, forcing them to do “real” work. It also provided another way for the government to control the population and finally, it allowed the government to accomplish some development goals, such as building infrastructure (2000, pp. 344, 346).

What was the outcome of this particular “development ideology?” Verwimp says “the policies that Habyarimana executed during his reign, served his two main objectives at the same time: Rwanda would remain a poor rural society based on agriculture, and he would stay in power” (2000, p. 356). Tragically, the policies created to fulfill Habyarimana’s dream of an agrarian utopia contributed to the nightmare of the genocide.

Oddly enough, as Verwimp points out, Habyarimana himself was a somewhat conflicted Malthusian (2006, pp. 4–6). Convinced that Rwanda’s rising population was a concern, especially as agricultural productivity was not keeping pace with population growth, he nonetheless rejected the use of “fast solutions” (family planning methods) because they were un-Rwandan (2006, p. 4). Not only was family planning not provided by the government, but there is evidence that may actually have sought to prohibit it: in some instances the government may have supported attacks on pharmacies selling condoms (Prunier 1995, pp. 88–89). The idea was to ensure that Rwandans would have large families, work the land (providing food for all), and so preserve “Rwandan” values. Sadly, another strategy that Rwandans might have used to better control their environment, family planning, was off limits thanks to government policies.

Conclusion

The history of Rwanda is one of deep government intrusion into people’s lives. Under colonial and post-colonial governments citizens have had only limited freedom to speak, to challenge authority, to trade, to build a new and different life. The kinds of freedoms that have allowed citizens of other small, densely populated countries to allocate scarce land and create off-farm employment were simply not available to the vast majority of Rwandans

before the genocide. Pre-genocide governments robbed Rwandans of the chance to adapt and deal with land scarcity and food security in a peaceful manner.

More specifically, the Habyarimana regime actively repressed the citizenry, glorified the peasantry, rural life, and agricultural labor. It denigrated urban life, markets, and intellectual labor, and imposed policies that kept people in the countryside, kept cities artificially small, and limited the growth of markets. Given these policies, can it really be argued that the Rwandan “society” “chose” failure, “chose” environmental degradation and, ultimately, collapse?

Rwandan *society* did not make these choices. Instead, an authoritarian leader and his cronies, desirous of maintaining political power, chose to impose on the citizens policies that made it impossible to trade land effectively, to move, to find work, to make use of family planning, and to manage conflict peaceably. It is more appropriate to attribute the collapse in Rwanda to a highly repressive political environment purposefully manufactured by a dictator and designed to keep him and his party in power.

Collapse in Rwanda should not be seen as the result of greed or of too many people on too little land. Given freedom, people find ways to cope with high population density – as the history of the West shows. Other factors were at work. These political factors blocked the development, in Rwanda, of alternative coping strategies to population pressure and land scarcity. Unfortunately, in his analysis of the Rwandan genocide Diamond neither recognizes nor acknowledges how the political environment, made manifest in a set of harmful policies, contributed to a staggering social and economic crisis.

Notes

1. The claim that if a problem cannot be managed peacefully it will oftentimes be “managed” through the use of violence is tautological. Higher population density does not necessarily lead to violence, as we can see from countries such as Belgium and Hong Kong. This suggests other explanations are in play and that the Malthusian explanation is limited at best.
2. In his thoughtful, carefully researched book *The Order of Genocide*, Scott Straus reports the results of survey work he did in Rwanda with over 200 *genocidaires* – individuals convicted of perpetrating genocide. He finds, no surprise, that most of his respondents were farmers with little education. When he asked respondents why they participated in the killing, 64.1 percent said they killed people “because they feared the negative

consequences from other Hutus of not participating” (Straus 2006, pp. 135–36). Another 12.9 percent said they killed out of “obedience.” Only 5.2 percent said they killed for material gain. When asked, “Did you take any property during the genocide (including food)?” 77.3 percent responded “no.” (2006, p. 149). Recognizing that killers might provide unreliable answers to such questions, he triangulates his data through use of qualitative interviews and regression analysis. Straus’ work raises questions about the role of land “hunger” as a motive for violence during the genocide.

3. The government issued a new Land Law in 2005 that provides a process for titling land. However, implementing this law has been a slow process and a number of potentially troubling issues associated with the security of land rights of smallholders, women’s rights to land, and the potential for increased conflict have not adequately been addressed. For a discussion of some of these concerns see Johan Pottier, “Land Reform for Peace? Rwanda’s 2005 Land Law in Context.”

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