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Book Review: *Making Ubumwe: Power, State and Camps in Rwanda's Unity-Building Project*

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Making Ubumwe: Power, State and Camps in Rwanda's Unity-Building Project
Andrea Purdeková
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Ubumwe—or unity—is a central tenet in the Rwandan government's state and nation building project. Unity is used as a bulwark against the past violence and "genocide mentalities," but it equally points forward towards a promised future, Purdeková argues. According to the Rwandan government, unity promises a better future through development. In the meantime, the individual must sacrifice his/her present situation for the common good of a better future.

Purdeková is not concerned with whether unity is successfully achieved or whether it is indeed a good idea or not. Rather, she takes a strictly Foucauldian approach to explore the effects of the government's focus on unity. What do the policies on unity produce in terms of governmental effects? The result is an impressive study of power, government and state-building in this very unique and very contentious little African country.

Much has been published on Rwanda since the country got the international community's attention in 1994. The first wave of publications were concerned with documenting, witnessing, and explaining the genocide. Later a mass of studies emerged on the aftermath of the genocide in terms of justice, truth and reconciliation. In recent years a number of studies have been concerned less directly with the causes of the genocide and with its effects and have instead explored—critically—the kind of state that is emerging and in particular its authoritarian tendencies.¹ In a sense, Purdeková's book belongs to this latter category. However, her book is not yet another attack on the Rwandan government's authoritarian tendencies, the shrinking of political space, the curbing of freedom of expression and clampdown on political opposition. Her aim is not to evaluate whether these tendencies are good or not but rather to explore how the state functions and what happens. Through a mixture of first-hand experience, living in Rwanda, interviews with government officials, participant observations in government offices and in the *ingando* (civic education camps for selected populations), and interviews with Rwandans attending *ingando*, she draws a dense and complex picture of power and politics in everyday life in Rwanda.

The first part of the book is concerned with "how unity building is embedded within a broader political context."² She explores the legitimation of power through discourse (chapter 3), the presence of the state in all aspects of life (chapter 4) and the micro-effects this has on people's lives in terms of emotions and attitudes. The conceptual framing is sharp, as she asks "what kinds of legitimation are at work and to what effect?"³ Being born out of a rebel movement, civil war and genocide, the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) regime promises to provide physical security to the people. Therefore, threats to security must continuously be reproduced, she argues. Insecurity is linked to the external threat of the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR) rebels in eastern Congo, while divisionism and genocide ideologies are construed as the internal

¹ Scott Straus and Lars Waldorf, *Remaking Rwanda: State Building and Human Rights after Mass Violence*, ed. Scott Straus and Lars Waldorf, Critical Human Rights (Madison, Wis.; London: University of Wisconsin Press; Eurospan distributor, 2011).

² Andrea Purdeková, *Making Ubumwe: Power, State and Camps in Rwanda's Unity-Building Project* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2015), 62.

³ *Ibid.*, 63.

threat that constantly needs monitoring and combating. In this friend-enemy constellation, unity is the friend and divisionism becomes its enemy. Purdeková shows how the government targets children specifically and turns them against their parents in this fight against divisionism. Such policies give connotations of DDR and Maoist China, far from the positive images of Africa's new liberal development tiger, hailed by the United Kingdom (UK) and United States of America (USA). However, the two seem to go hand in hand in Rwanda, where I also met enthusiastic, open, well-educated government officials and NGO employees who happily would explain that the parent generation was beyond reach, stuck in genocide mentalities of the past, while the youth could still be reached and shaped.

The general impression one gets from Purdeková's account is of a state that, as opposed to the state most other places on the continent, is present in all walks of life, eerily resembling the strong and efficient state that made the genocide possible in 1994.⁴ One of the fascinating aspects of the book is its exploration of how people embody the state's rules through emotions. Fear, is a "dominant emotional tone" in Rwanda, Purdeková argues, and it is closely linked to distrust and suspicion.⁵ While scholars and Rwandan intellectuals often explain the prevalence of distrust and fear in the country as the result of genocide and conflict, Purdeková argues that they are also the result of the ever-present state. Similarly, she challenges the received wisdom that Rwandans have a "culture of obedience," often used as a partial reason for the "success" of the genocide.⁶ She argues that this is a culturalist explanation that ignores political structures. She concludes that Rwandans engage in what Schepher-Hughes has termed a "bad faith economy" where secrecy, mutual suspicion and deceit are the name of the game. Peter Uvin makes a similar argument for post-conflict Burundi where he turns Putnam's concept of social capital on its head, claiming that Burundians enter a number of relations not out of trust but out of distrust. They are hedging their bets and navigating hostile waters.⁷ The difference between Burundi and Rwanda may be that Burundians did so due to uncertainty, due in part to a weak government and state, while Rwandans do so against a backdrop of an ever-present state contributing to constant fear and suspicion.

The final part of the book is concerned with performing *Ubumwe* through the *ingando* camps. I find it frustrating that this part of the analysis is left so late in the book. Rather than being the centre of analysis and the point of departure for understanding the Rwandan state, it seems to serve the purpose of illustrating what has already been said. *Ingando* is an example *par excellence* of the government's unity building project—and the camps are also organised by the National Unity and Reconciliation Commission (NURC). *Ingando* camps are a means to create "ideal development citizens," she argues and points towards the general function of camps to create movement, transience and dislodgement in order to obtain the opposite; namely anchoring, locating and fixing. In other words, students, ex-combatants, members of the diaspora, and other groups that are deemed in need of *ingando*, are removed from society for a limited time in order that they can be reinserted into society as transformed and improved citizens.

The great strength of Purdeková's analysis of the *ingando* camps is the way she explores the context that they are part of and the effects that they have on broader society. Most often camps (from refugee camps to prisons) are analysed as units in themselves, exploring the mechanisms of control and correction that take place in them and/or the everyday appropriation of camp space by those who occupy them.⁸ What these studies often forget is the effects of these camps on society outside. Purdeková does just that. What I miss in her account, on the other hand, is a more in-depth "feel" of what actually goes on inside an *ingando* camp. We get glimpses, when she describes a meeting or a daily routine. But not a sense of the place and its inhabitants. This is possibly due to

⁴ Peter Uvin, *Aiding Violence: The Development Enterprise in Rwanda* (West Hartford, CT: Kumarian Press, 1998).

⁵ Purdeková, *Making Ubumwe*, 119.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 122.

⁷ Peter Uvin, *Life after Violence—A People's Story of Burundi*, (New York & London: Zed Books, 2009).

⁸ Cindy Horst, *Transnational Nomads: How Somalis Cope with Refugee Life in the Dadaab Camps of Kenya*, (Oxford: Bergahn, 2006); Victoria Redclift, "Subjects or Agents? Camps, Contests and the Creation of 'Political Space'," *Citizenship Studies* 17, 3-4 (2013), 308-321.

the limitations of doing fieldwork in a tightly controlled setting, only allowing her short visits to the camps. Despite these limitations, she does manage to give us an impression of how the camps are marked by a distinctly military ethos. This goes some way to explain one of the paradoxes of *ingando*; on the one hand the organizers urge the participants to think independently and to debate openly, while on the other hand debate is de facto muted and reduced to agreeing with the instructor. There is a “military accent on immediate, unquestioning and coordinated response.”⁹ This echoes Sundberg’s findings where it was seen as important to shout “*yego!*” (yes!) in the exact right way and to stand up and sit down in unison.¹⁰

When studying camps, the question of liminality always emerges. In many ways, Purdeková invokes the concept but she also explicitly claims that the *ingando* camps differ in that they are extremely structured spaces and hence not anti-structure as Victor Turner¹¹ would claim. In my study of refugee camps, I also found that there were attempts by the camp authorities to structure and organise the camps in detail. But I also found alternative structures emerging in the camp—beyond the reach of the official camp authorities. While this may be because I took a different approach to hers, it may also be due substantial differences in the two kinds of camps. Despite the attempts by United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to transform the refugees into democratic citizens, the main objective of the refugee camp was to contain a population that was “out of place.” *Ingando*, on the other hand, has the explicit objective of transforming subjects. And while the refugee camps are open-ended and often protracted, *ingandos* have a clearly defined beginning and an end, and in that sense resemble more the classical liminal spaces that anthropologists like Victor Turner described.

By focussing on the exceptional spaces of the *ingando* camps, where unity is performed and ideal citizens are shaped, Purdeková provides great insights into the workings of the post-genocide state—a state that at once distances itself from the pre-genocide state while bearing striking resemblances to the latter.

⁹ Purdeková, *Making Ubumwe*, 193.

¹⁰ Molly Sundberg, *Training for Model Citizenship: An Ethnography of Civic Education and State-Making in Rwanda*. (Unpublished doctoral thesis. Uppsala Studies in Cultural Anthropology No 54. 2014)

¹¹ Victor Witter Turner, *The Forest of Symbols; Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967).