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# A New Model for Studying Mass Murder: *The Order of Genocide* by Scott Straus

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Scott Straus's *The Order of Genocide* stands as a groundbreaking work. It asks and answers some of the most troubling questions about the genocide—how and why it occurred and how and why so many ordinary men and women participated in it. Straus brings extraordinary assets to this ambitious project, including his background as a journalist working in the region (before obtaining his PhD), scholarly expertise in genocide and African politics, and an acute sensitivity to method and evidence. The result is a book that adds a great deal of knowledge to our understanding of the Rwandan case and of genocide in general.

*The Order of Genocide* boasts multiple strengths, not the least of which is Straus's ability to hone in on the most important questions. Straus asks, for example, "Why did the hardliners choose genocide as their strategy and why were they so successful?" (63). Hardliners do not always seize on genocide as their preferred strategy for staying in power, and it is not clear from the evidence, argues Straus, that the hardliners in Kigali had done so before the assassination of the Rwandan president on 6 April 1994, the date most observers mark as the start of the genocide. Straus argues convincingly that the genocide was not "meticulously planned," as many have maintained, but was the hardliners' response to an increasingly threatening and dynamic situation. Genocide was not the first strategy they took; rather, it was the one they took when they felt the most threatened, that is, when the RPF had (allegedly) killed the president and had begun a swift advance through the country. This argument is novel and extremely convincing; it also illustrates the author's sophisticated and thorough treatment of new and existing evidence.

What guides Straus throughout the book is a keen awareness that methods matter. He remains skeptical of any single source of data, be it the words of confessed killers, the decisions of an international judicial body, or any other text. This skepticism drives him to look for multiple ways to triangulate the data. For example, he compares different periods in Rwandan political history to look for common dynamics driving episodes of past violence targeted at Tutsi; he situates the testimony of confessed killers within that of other witnesses and survivors to probe the veracity of the killers' words; he tests his own argument as he goes along to see if each subsequent step is consistent with previous ones. All of these methods show a great deal of exacting logic and creativity in pursuing answers to extremely difficult questions. Straus is also transparent about the choices and assumptions he makes. A person might disagree with any of his decisions, but no one can fault Straus for hiding how he arrived at either his data or conclusions.

It is Straus's methodological conscientiousness that makes the findings from the interviews he conducted with confessed and sentenced perpetrators a seminal contribution to the study of genocide and mass killing. These findings are critical because they put to rest many of the tropes surrounding the genocide. Indeed, what

is striking about these data is what Straus does *not* find. He does not find evidence that extremist radio or ideologies compelled these men to murder; instead, he finds that their reasons were much more immediate—they feared being killed by other Hutu perpetrators or by the equally fearsome RPF if they did not join in the carnage.

Straus also finds no evidence to support the common argument that ethnic hatred drove people to kill. He does find that among the most aggressive killers, ties to Tutsis were less extensive and expressions of antipathy toward Tutsi more common. The vast majority of confessed killers, however, report that they had no problems with their Tutsi neighbors before the genocide. What ruptured relations were key events that caused widespread panic and insecurity, such as particularly deadly RPF attacks and the assassination of the president.

Finally, Straus finds no evidence of a “culture of obedience” whereby Rwandans blindly followed orders to kill Tutsi. His informants *do* say that they were following orders to kill, but Straus eschews a facile interpretation of these statements. Peasant killers followed orders because mobilization often occurred through face-to-face confrontations that left little room for refusal or evasion.

Straus is exceedingly thoughtful in interpreting his data. He never overreaches but always leaves the door open for the possibility that new evidence or a new way of looking at the evidence might shed new light on his reading of events. This readiness to reassess his thinking shows Straus’s commitment to understanding the genocide in its full complexity and depth, rather than in a superficial or overly pat way.

To be sure, there are times when Straus could go further. For example, he argues that people were afraid of the RPF but does not consider other possible sources of this fear, such as *how* the RPF was waging war. The atrocities the RPF committed against civilians were not pure myth, after all, but had been witnessed by countless people.

Straus might have also looked for patterns in how local leaders mobilized people for mass murder, rather than assuming that mobilization occurred randomly (120). Given the level of surveillance that was in place, the population density, and the topography (all of which Straus chronicles nicely), it might be equally likely that local leaders knew very well whom they could tap as “enforcers” and, by extension, who would be most vulnerable to recruitment into mass murder. Understanding patterns of mobilization would also have helped Straus to develop a theory of agency on the part of ordinary perpetrators.

Straus’s argument regarding the role played by ethnicity (or “race,” as he calls it) is the weakest of the three main arguments he makes about the causes of the genocide. His arguments about the critical role played by the war and about local elites’ use of violence to establish authority are extremely well documented and well argued; with respect to ethnicity, however, he makes a less than convincing leap from people’s awareness of ethnic difference to the mechanism he calls “collective ethnic categorization,” which became activated at crisis moments. From his data, it is not entirely clear whether “collective ethnic categorization” was a product of or, precursor to, people’s participation in the violence. It may well have been both, but Straus’s analysis does not probe this distinction.

Straus can hardly be faulted for any of these lapses, however. No book can do everything, and this one does much more than most. Indeed, other scholars would do well to emulate its breadth, depth, and systematicity. Its most important contribution, however, may be the tenacity and courage that Straus shows in explaining the unthinkable—how otherwise ordinary people could imagine, conceive, and carry out genocide.