We have just ended a century replete with violence. The twentieth century was possibly more violent than any other in recorded history. Just think of world wars and revolutions, and of colonial conquests and anti-colonial resistance, and, indeed, of revolutions and counter-revolutions. Yet even if the expanse of this violence is staggering, it makes sense to us.

The modern political sensibility sees political violence as necessary to historical progress. Ever since the French Revolution, moderns have come to see violence as the midwife of history. The French Revolution gave us terror and it gave us a citizens’ army. The real secret behind Napoleon’s spectacular battlefield successes was that his army was not comprised of mercenaries but of patriots, who killed for a cause, who were animated by national sentiment, by what we have come to recognize as a civic religion, nationalism. Reflecting on the French revolution, Hegel thought of man – in the generic sense – as different from animals, in that he was willing to die for a cause higher than life. Hegel should have added: man is also willing to kill for a cause higher than life. This, I think, is truer of modern man and woman than it is true of humanity in general.

The modern political sensibility is not horrified by all violence. Just put millions in the wrong uniform: citizens and patriots will celebrate their death as the end of enemies. The world wars are proof enough of this. What horrifies modern political sensibility is not violence per se, but violence that does not make sense. It is violence that is neither revolutionary nor counter-revolutionary, violence that can not be illuminated by the story of progress, that appears senseless to us. Not illuminated paradigmatically, non-revolutionary violence appears pointless.

Unable to explain it, we turn our back on history. Two such endeavours are worth noting. The first turns to culture, the second to theology. The cultural
turn distinguishes modern from pre-modern culture and then offers pre-modern culture as an explanation of political violence. If revolutionary or counter-revolutionary violence arises from market-based identities such as class, then non-revolutionary violence is said to be an outcome of cultural difference. On a world scale, it is called a clash of civilizations. Locally – that is, when it does not cross the boundary between the West and the rest – it is called communal conflict, as in South Asia, or ethnic conflict, as in Africa.

Faced with political violence that arises in a modern context but will not fit the story of progress, theory has tended to take refuge in theology. The violence of the Holocaust is branded as evil that can only be understood outside historical time. Rather than understand the Holocaust as a clue to the debased and grim side of humanity, this kind of thinking turns the horror into a question mark against the very humanity of its perpetrators. There is a huge resistance, moral and political, to thinking through this violence by locating it in a historical context.

THINKING THROUGH THE HOLOCAUST: THE VIOLENCE OF THE SETTLER

In the corpus of Holocaust-writing Hannah Arendt stands apart. Rather than talk of the uniqueness of the Holocaust, Arendt insisted on locating it in the history of genocide. The history she sketched was that of settler genocide of the native. It was the history of imperialism, specifically, of twin institutions – racism in South Africa, and bureaucracy in India and Algeria – forged in the course of an earlier European expansion into the non-European world.

Of the two main political devices of imperialist rule, race was discovered in South Africa, and bureaucracy in Algeria, Egypt and India; the former was originally the barely conscious reaction to tribes of whose humanity European man was ashamed and frightened, whereas the latter was a consequence of that administration by which Europeans had tried to rule foreign peoples whom they felt to be hopelessly their inferiors and at the same time in need of their special protection. Race, in other words, was an escape into an irresponsibility where nothing human could any longer exist, and bureaucracy was the result of a responsibility that no man can bear for his fellow man and no people for another people.

Not only did genocide have a history, but modern genocide was nurtured in the colonies: the ‘elimination of Hottentot tribes, the wild murdering by Carl Peters in German Southwest Africa, the decimation of the peaceful Congo population – from 20 to 40 million reduced to 8 million people and … worst of all … the triumphant introduction of such means of pacification into ordinary, respectable foreign policies’. The idea that ‘imperialism had served civilization by clearing inferior races off the earth’ found widespread expression in nineteenth-century European thought, from natural sciences and philosophy to anthropology and politics. When Lord
Salisbury, the British Prime Minister, claimed in his famous Albert Hall speech on May 4, 1898 that ‘one can roughly divide the nations of the world into the living and the dying’. Hitler was but nine years old, and the European air was ‘soaked in the conviction that imperialism is a biologically necessary process, which, according to the laws of nature, leads to the inevitable destruction of lower races’. The paradigmatic example of the destruction of lower races was Tasmania, an island the size of Ireland where European colonists first arrived in 1803, the first massacre of natives occurred in 1804, and the last original inhabitant died in 1869. Similar fates awaited the Maoris of New Zealand, the Native Americans, the Hereros of Southwest Africa, and so on.6

By the time the twentieth century dawned it was a European habit to distinguish between civilized wars and colonial wars. Laws of war applied to wars among the civilized but laws of nature applied to colonial wars – biological necessity expressed in the extermination of the lower races. In the Second World War, Germany observed the laws of war against Western powers, but not against Russia. As opposed to 3.5 per cent of English and American prisoners of war who died in German captivity, 57 per cent of Soviet prisoners – 3.3 million in all – lost their lives. Gassings of Russians preceded the gassings at Auschwitz: the first mass gassings were of Russian prisoners of war in the southern Ukraine,7 and the first to be gassed in Auschwitz were Russians, beginning with intellectuals and communists. The Nazi plan, writes Sven Lindquist, was to weed out some ten million Russians with the remainder kept alive as a slave labour force under German occupation. When the mass murder of European Jews began, the great Jewish populations were not in Germany, but in Poland and Russia, forming 10 per cent of the total population and up to 40 per cent of the urban population ‘in just those areas Hitler was after’. The Holocaust was born at the meeting-point of two traditions that marked modern Western civilization: ‘the anti-Semitic tradition and the tradition of genocide of colonized peoples’.8 Here then was the difference in the fate of the Jewish people. They were to be exterminated as a whole. In that, their fate was unique – but only in Europe.

This historical fact was not lost on the postwar intellectuals from the colonies. In his Discours sur le Colonialisme (1951) Aime Césaire writes that a Hitler slumbers within ‘the very distinguished, very humanistic and very Christian bourgeois of the twentieth century’, and yet the European bourgeois cannot forgive Hitler for ‘the fact that he applied to Europe the colonial practices that had previously been applied only to the Arabs of Algeria, the coolies of India and the Negroes of Africa’.9 ‘Not so long ago’, recalled Fanon in The Wretched of the Earth (1961), ‘Nazism turned the whole of Europe into a veritable colony’.10

The first genocide of the twentieth century was the German annihilation of the Herero people in southwest Africa.11 The German geneticist, Eugene Fischer, did his first medical experiments on the ‘science’ of race-mixing in concentration camps for the Herero. His subjects were both Herero and mulatto off-springs of Herero women and German men. Fischer argued that the Herero ‘mulattos’ were physically and mentally inferior to their German parents. Hitler
read Fischer’s book, *The Principle of Human Heredity and Race Hygiene* (1921), while in prison. The Führer later made Fischer rector of the University of Berlin, where he taught medicine. One of Fischer’s prominent students was Joseph Mengele, who would run the gas chambers at Auschwitz. The Holocaust was the imperial chickens coming home to roost.

The link between the genocide of the Herero and the Holocaust was race branding, whereby it is possible not only to set a group apart as an enemy, but also to annihilate it with an easy conscience. To understand the mindset that conceived the Holocaust, one would have to return to political identities crafted by modern imperialism, the settler and the native. Hannah Arendt, and more recently Sven Lindquist, focused on the agency of the settler, but not on the agency of the native. But it is not just the settler; the native too is a product of the imperial imagination. Framed by a common history, they define two sides of a relationship. Unless they are transcended together, they will be reproduced together.

The historians of genocide have sketched half a history for us: that of settler annihilation of the native. To glimpse how this could trigger a counter-tendency, the native annihilating the settler, one has to turn to Frantz Fanon. Hailed as a humanist by most of those who came to pay him homage after his death, Fanon has ironically come to be regarded as a prophet of violence, following Hannah Arendt’s claim that his influence was mainly responsible for the growing violence on American campuses in the 1960s. Fanon was recognized as the prophet of decolonization on the publication of his monumental study, *The Wretched of the Earth*; and yet one needs to recognize that he was also the first critic of decolonization. To understand the central thesis in *The Wretched of the Earth* – summed up in a single sentence, ‘The colonized man liberates himself in and through violence’ – one needs to put it in a triple context: that of the history of Algerian colonization, of modernist thought on the historical necessity of violence, and of the postwar movement to decolonization. Put in context, Fanon’s thesis was at the same time a description, a claim and a problematization. First, it was a description of the violence of the colonial system, of the fact that violence was key to producing and sustaining the relationship between the settler and the native. Second, it was a claim that anti-colonial violence is not an irrational manifestation but belongs to the script of modernity and progress, that it is indeed a midwife of history. And third – and most important for this essay – it was a problematization, of a derivative violence, of the violence of victims turned killers.

It is in Fanon that one finds the premonition of the native turned perpetrator, of the native who kills not just to extinguish the humanity of the other, but to defend his or her own, and of the moral ambivalence this must provoke in other human beings like us. Although the extermination of colonizers by natives never came to pass, there were enough uprisings that killed many for extermination to hover in the settler imagination as a historical possibility. No one understood the genocidal impulse better than this Martiniquan-born psychiatrist and Algerian freedom fighter. Native violence, Fanon insisted, was the violence of
yesterday’s victims, the violence of those who had cast aside their victimhood to become masters of their own lives.

Listen to Fanon: ‘He of whom they have never stopped saying that the only language he understands is that of force, decides to give utterance by force…. The argument the native chooses has been furnished by the settler, and by an ironic turning of the tables it is the native who now affirms that the colonialist understands nothing but force’. For Fanon, the proof of the native’s humanity consisted not in the willingness to kill settlers, but in the willingness to risk his or her own life. ‘The colonized man’, he wrote, ‘finds his freedom in and through violence’.15 If the outcome was death, natives killing settlers, that was still a derivative outcome. The native who embraces violence to safeguard his and her freedom is the victim-turned-perpetrator.

### LEGAL AND POLITICAL IDENTITIES

If we are to make political violence thinkable, we need to understand the process by which victims and perpetrators become polarized as group identities. Who do perpetrators of violence think they are? And who do they think they will eliminate through violence? Even if the identities propelled through violence are drawn from outside the domain of politics – such as race (from biology) or ethnicity or religion (from culture) – we need to denaturalize these identities by outlining their history and illuminating their links with organized forms of power.

Just as we need to locate identities such as class in the history of markets in order to understand them as the outcome of specific historical relations, so we need to turn to the history of state formation to understand the historical nature of political identities. This is particularly so with the modern state, which tries to naturalize political identities as anything but political. On the one hand, the modern state enforces particular group identities through its legal project; on the other, it gives depth to these same identities through a history-writing project. It is by giving group identities both a past and a future that the modern state tries to stand up to time.

Settler and native may be drawn from biological discourses on race, but they need to be understood as political identities enforced by a particular form of the state. If they became politically potent, it is because they were legally enforced by a state that made a distinction between those who were indigenous (natives) and those who were not (settlers) and turned it into grounds for political, social and civic discrimination. Where indigeneity was stigmatized as proof of lack of civilization and taken as sufficient reason to deny the rights of the conquered, and foreignness was valorized as a hallmark of civilization and turned into a guarantee of rights – indeed privileges – for immigrants, there ‘settler’ and ‘native’ were racialized as legal and political identities.

Contemporary colonial history of Africa lends itself to a distinction between two distinct modes of rule, each identified with a different form of the colonial state. In the literature on modern colonialism, these two modes are characterized
as direct and indirect rule. The transition from direct to indirect rule is one from a modest to an ambitious project. Whereas *direct rule* was preoccupied with shaping elite preferences, *indirect rule* aimed to shape popular preferences. Indirect rule needs to be understood as a response to the crisis of direct rule. Direct rule focused on native elites. It aimed to create native clones of Western modernity through a discourse on civilization and assimilation. Direct rule generated a dual crisis. On the one hand, its civilizational project tended to divide society between an alien minority claiming to be civilized, and a native majority stigmatized as backward. On the other hand, the products of this civilizational project – native intellectuals and entrepreneurs – aspired to replace alien rule by self-rule as the basis of a native modernity. The demand for self-rule was the crisis of direct rule.

The colonial response was to subordinate the civilizational project to a law and order project. The big shift was in law: whereas direct rule aimed at introducing rule of law as a single project, indirect rule replaced the idea of a single rule of law with the construction of many sets of ‘customary’ laws. Thus, it bypassed modernizing native elites by championing alternative elites – said to be traditional – who would be allies in the enterprise to shape mass preferences through a discourse grounded in tradition. But indirect rule did not accept tradition benignly, as a historical given. It treated history as a raw material, putty from which to shape ‘genuine’ tradition. Whereas direct rule was dogmatic and dismissed native tradition as backward and superstitious, indirect rule was analytical. The political project called indirect rule aimed to unpack native tradition, to disentangle its different strands, to separate the authoritarian from the emancipatory, and thereby to repack tradition, as authoritarian and ethnic, and harness it to the colonial project. By repacking native passions and cultures selectively it aimed to pit these very passions and cultures against one another. I wrote of this in *Citizen and Subject,* an argument I need not elaborate here.

Unlike those who seek to explain political violence by turning to the domain of culture, I intend to argue that even when political identities are drawn from the domain of culture, they need to be understood as distinct from cultural identities. Theoretically, the experience of indirect rule should alert us to the relationship between culture and politics. When the raw material of political identity is drawn from the domain of culture, as in ethnic or religious identity, it is the link between identity and power that allows us to understand how cultural identities are translated into political identities, and thus to distinguish between them. At the same time, to historicize political identity by linking it to political power is to acknowledge that all political identities are historically transitory and all require a form of the state to be reproduced.

Politically, indirect rule was an attempt to stabilize colonial rule by moving away from direct rule that created a volatile context in which the identity of both rulers and ruled was racialized, but the former as a minority and the latter as a majority. Indirect rule did this through a legal project that fractured the singular, racialized and majority identity, *native,* into several, plural, ethnicized, minority identities – called *tribes.*
To understand how political identities may be defined through the force of law, let us take an African example from any indirect rule colony in the first half of the twentieth century. Recall that the colonial census classified the population into two broad, overall groups. One group was called races, and the other tribes. This single distinction illuminates the technology of colonial rule. To elaborate this technology of rule, I would like to make five observations.

First, the census divides the population into two kinds of groups: some are tagged as races and others as tribes. Why? On examination, one can discern a clear pattern: non-natives are tagged as races, whereas natives are said to belong to tribes. Races – specifically Europeans, Asians, Arabs – were all those the colonial state defined as not indigenous to Africa. Tribes – called ethnic groups in the postcolonial period – were all those defined as indigenous in origin.

Second, this distinction had a direct legal significance. All races were governed under a single law, civil law. True, civil law was full of discriminations: racial discrimination distinguished the master race (Europeans) from subject races (Asians and Arabs). Subject races were excluded from the exercise of certain rights considered the prerogative only of members of the master race. But this discrimination needs to be understood as internal, for the domain of civil law included all races.

The situation was different with tribes and customary law. There was not a single customary law to govern all tribes defined as one racialized group – natives. Instead, each tribe was ruled under a separate set of laws, called customary laws. It was said that each tribe was governed by a law that reflected its own tradition. Yet most would agree that the cultural difference between races – such as Whites, Asians and Arabs – was greater than that between different tribes. To begin with, the different races spoke different languages, mutually unintelligible. Often, they practiced different religions. They also came from different parts of the world, each with its own historical archive. Different tribes, in contrast, spoke languages that were often mutually intelligible.

My point is simple: even if races were as different culturally as whites, Asians, and Arabs, they were ruled under a single law, imported European law, called civil law. Even if their languages were similar and mutually intelligible, ethnic groups were governed under separate laws, called ‘customary’ laws, which were in turn administered by ethnically distinct native authorities. With races, cultural difference was not translated into separate legal systems. Instead, it was contained, even negotiated, within a single legal system, and was enforced by a single administrative authority. But with ethnicities, the case was the opposite: cultural difference was reinforced, exaggerated, and built up into different legal systems and, indeed, separate administrative and political authorities. In a nutshell, different races were meant to have a common future; different ethnicities were not.

My third observation: the two legal systems were entirely different in orientation. We can understand the difference by contrasting English common law with colonial customary law. English common law was presumed to change with circumstances. It claimed to recognize different interests and interpretations. But
customary law in the colonies assumed the opposite. It assumed that law must not change with changing circumstances. Rather, any change was considered prima facie evidence of corruption. Both the laws and the enforcing authorities were called ‘traditional’. Indeed, Western colonial powers were far more concerned to establish the traditional credentials of their native allies than they were to define the content of tradition. Their preoccupation was with defining, locating, anointing the traditional authority. Most importantly, traditional authority in the colonial era was always defined in the singular. We need to remember that most African colonies had never before had an absolutist state. Instead of a single state authority whose writ was considered law in all social domains, the practice was for different authorities to define separate traditions in different domains of social life. The rule-defining authority thus differed from one social domain to another; besides chiefs, the definers of tradition could include women’s groups, age groups, clans, religious groups, and so on.

The big change in the colonial period was that Western colonial powers exalted a single authority, called the chief, as the traditional authority. Marked by two characteristics, age and (male) gender, the authority of the chief was inevitably patriarchal. As David Laitin showed in his study of Yorubaland, the practice was to look for those local elites most in danger of being sidelined, local elites that had legitimacy but lacked authority, and then to sanctify their position and enforce their point of view as customary, and reinforce their authority in law as traditional.17

Colonial powers were the first fundamentalists of the modern period. They were the first to advance and put into practice two propositions: one, that every colonized group has an original and pure tradition, whether religious or ethnic; and two, that every colonized group must be made to return to that original condition, and that the return must be enforced by law. Put together, these two propositions constitute the basic platform of every religious or ethnic fundamentalism in the postcolonial world.

Fourth, this legal project needs to be understood as part of a political project. The political project was highlighted by the central claim of the indirect rule state, that natives are by nature tribal. Even though this claim was first fully implemented by Britain in those African lands it colonized in late nineteenth century, in the aftermath of the Berlin Conference, the claim had already been made by Sir Henry Maine, Law Member of the Viceroy’s Commission in post-1857 India. To quote from Maine’s Ancient Law: ‘I repeat the definition of a primitive society given before. It has for its units, not individuals, but groups of men united by the reality or the fiction of blood-relationship’.18 In time, this very claim, that natives are by nature tribal, would be advanced as reason why the African colonies have no majority, but only tribal minorities. This claim needs to be understood as political, not because it is not true but because this truth does not reflect an original fact but a fact created politically and enforced legally.

It is not that ethnicity did not exist in African societies prior to colonialism; it did. But I want to distinguish ethnicity as a cultural identity – an identity based
on a shared culture – from ethnicity as a political identity. When the political
authority and the law it enforces identify subjects ethnically and discriminate
between them legally, then ethnicity turns into a legal and political identity.
Ethnicity as a cultural identity is consensual, but when ethnicity becomes a polit-
cical identity it is enforced by the legal and administrative organs of the state. These
organs make a distinction between ethnic groups, between those considered
indigenous and those not, the former given right of access to rights considered
‘customary’, such as the right to use land, but the latter denied these same rights.

This takes me to my fifth observation. When law imposes a cultural difference,
the difference becomes reified. Prevented from changing, it becomes frozen. But
as the basis of legal discrimination, between those who are said to belong –
whether in terms of religion or ethnicity – and those said not to belong, between
insiders entitled to customary rights and outsiders deprived of these rights, these
culturally symbolic differences become political.

The distinction between cultural and political identities is important for my
argument. Cultural identities are as a rule consensual and voluntary, and can be
multiple. All post-modernist talk of hybridity and multiple identities belongs to
the domain of culture. Once enforced by law, however, identities cease to be all
of these. A legal identity is not voluntary, nor is it multiple. The law recognizes
you as one, and as none other. Once it is enforced legally, cultural identity is
drawn into the domain of politics and becomes political. Such an identity cannot
be considered a vestige of tradition because of its ancient history, nor can it be
dismissed as just an invention of the colonial power because of its legal enforce-
ment. Even if grounded in a genealogy that precedes colonialism, popular
identities like religion and ethnicity need to be understood as the very creation
of colonial modernity. To distinguish between cultural and legal/political iden-
tities is to distinguish between self-identification and state-identification.

RWANDA: A METAPHOR FOR POLITICAL VIOLENCE

Colonial Rwanda was different in one important respect from the picture I
have just described. In colonial Rwanda, the census did not identify any tribes.
It only identified races: Hutu as Bantu, and Tutsi as Hamites. The Bantu were
presumed to be uncivilized, and the Hamites civilizing agents. We shall see that
this difference between Rwanda and other African colonies – the fact that polit-
cical identities in Rwanda were racialized, but not ethnicized – would turn out
to be of great significance. Rwanda is today a metaphor for political violence,
more particularly for senseless violence in politics. I recently wrote a book on
Rwanda. Here, I would like to describe the intellectual and political journey that
came to be the writing of the book.

Rwanda had a revolution in 1959. On the face of it, the revolution pit Hutu,
the indigenous majority, against Tutsi, the immigrant minority. The identities
‘indigenous’ and ‘immigrant’ came straight out of colonial history books and
colonial law. Within the revolution, there was a debate as to who was the enemy,
and thus, who were the people. Two tendencies contended for supremacy.
Those who lost maintained that the battle was not of Hutu against Tutsi, but of the majority against the minority, the poor against the rich, and the nation against the colonizers. This tendency lost, not because it lacked support but because its support eroded when the counter-revolution attempted a restoration of the Tutsi monarchy. With the defeat of the counter-revolution, the target of revolutionary violence broadened, from those who had symbolized the local manifestations of power (such as the chief) to all Tutsi. When the revolutionaries of 1959 talked of justice, they did not talk of justice for the poor or for Rwandans but of justice for the Hutu – at the expense of the Tutsi. To ensure that justice would indeed be done, they insisted that the revolutionary state continue the colonial practice of issuing cards that identified every individual as Hutu or Tutsi (or Twa, an insignificant minority). Henceforth, the Hutu would be the Rwandan nation and the Tutsi an alien minority.

One can today find two kinds of writings on Rwanda. The first is preponderant in the academy, the second in the world of journalism. Academic writing on Rwanda is dominated by authors whose intellectual perspective was shaped by sympathy with the Rwandan Revolution of 1959. They saw the Revolution and the political violence that effected it as progressive, as ushering in a more popular political and social order. Unable to see the dark underbelly of the Revolution, and thus to grasp the link between the 1959 Revolution and the 1994 genocide, this kind of writing portrays the genocide as exclusively or mainly a state project of a narrow ruling elite. In doing so, it totally avoids the question of mass participation in the genocide. In portraying racism and racialized identities as exclusively state-defined and state-enforced, it fails to explain how these same identities got socially embedded and were reproduced socially. In portraying the genocide as exclusively a state project, its singular failing is an inability to come to terms with the genocide as a social project.

But this claim is not easy to make. Massacres in the Rwandan genocide were carried out in the open. Roughly 800,000 Tutsi were killed in a hundred days. The state organized the killings, but the killers were by and large ordinary people. The killing was done mainly by machete-wielding mobs. You were more than likely to be killed by your neighbours or your workmates, or by your teachers or doctors or priests, or even by human rights advocates or your own husband. A few months ago, four Rwandese civilians stood trial in Belgium for crimes against humanity. Among the four were two nuns and a physicist. How do we explain their participation – and the participation of other sectors in civil society – in the genocide?

In contrast, journalistic writing focuses precisely on this aspect of the genocide. Its peculiar characteristic is to write a pornography of violence. As in pornography, the nakedness is of others, not us. The exposure of the other goes alongside the unstated claim that we are not like them. It is a pornography where senseless violence is a feature of other people’s cultures: where they are violent, but we are pacific, and where a focus on their debasedness easily turns into another way of celebrating and confirming our exalted status. In the process,
journalistic accounts also tend to reinforce larger claims: that the world is indeed divided into the modern and the pre-modern, whereby moderns make culture, but those pre-modern live by a timeless culture.

If the social science account is overly instrumentalist, accenting only the agency of the state and elites, journalists tend to lean heavily on a primordialist account that tends to explain contemporary conflicts as replays of timeless antagonisms. If social science accounts tend to explain mass participation in the genocide as mass obedience to rulers (for ordinary Rwandans, goes the most widespread explanation, an order is as heavy as a stone), for journalists it explains the agency of masses gripped in ancient passions and antagonisms. In the final analysis, neither the instrumentalist nor the primordial account is able to give a plausible historical explanation of agency in the genocide.

Politically, journalistic writing has given us a simple moral world, where a group of perpetrators face a group of victims, but where neither history nor motivation are thinkable because both stand outside history and context. When journalists did address the genocide as a social project, I thought they failed to understand the forces that shaped the agency of the perpetrator. Instead, they looked for a clear and uncomplicated moral in the story. In a context where victims and perpetrators have traded places, they looked for victims distinguished from perpetrators for all times. Where yesterday’s victims are today’s perpetrators, where victims have turned perpetrators, this attempt to find an African Holocaust has not worked. Thus I called my book: When Victims Become Killers.

How many perpetrators were victims of yesteryear? What happens when yesterday’s victims act out of a determination that they must never again be victimized, never again? What happens when yesterday’s victims act out of a conviction that power is the only guarantee against victimhood, so the only dignified alternative to power is death? What happens when they are convinced that the taking of life is really noble because it signifies the willingness to risk one’s own life and is thus, in the final analysis, proof of one’s own humanity?

I thought it important to understand the humanity of the perpetrator, as it were, to get under the skin of the perpetrator – not to excuse the perpetrator, and the killing, but to make the act ‘thinkable’, so as to learn something about ourselves as humans. How do we understand the agency of the perpetrator? Framed by what history? Kept alive, reproduced, by which institutions? Who did the Hutu who killed think they were? And whom did they think they were killing in the persons of the Tutsi?

THE HISTORY OF VIOLENCE BETWEEN HUTU AND TUTSI

The significance of Fanon became clear to me as I tried to understand the history of political violence in Rwanda, specifically, of violence between Hutu and Tutsi. I was struck by one fact: I could not find any significant episode before 1959 where battle lines were drawn sharply between Hutu on one side, and Tutsi on the other. 1959 was the first significant episode where Hutu were pitted
against Tutsi in a political struggle, so that Hutu and Tutsi became names identifying political adversaries.

I thought this contrasted sharply with earlier political struggles, such as Nyabingi at the outset of the colonial period. Nyabingi was the name of a spiritual cult, also a political movement, in what is today northern Rwanda, the region incorporated into the expanding Kingdom of Rwanda at the beginning of the twentieth century. I thought two facts striking about this movement. First, when the Bakiga of this region fought the alliance of German imperial power and the Tutsi aristocracy of the Rwandan kingdom, they did not fight as Hutu against Tutsi. They fought the Tutsi in power, but in alliance with the Tutsi out of power, first under the leadership of a former Tutsi queen, Muhumuza, and then under the leadership of her son, Ndungutse.

Second, these mountain people did not call themselves Hutu, but Bakiga (the people of the mountains). Only when they were defeated, and incorporated into the Rwanda Kingdom, did they cease to be Bakiga, and became Hutu. For Hutu was not the identity of a discrete ethnic group, but the political identity of all those subjugated to the power of the Rwandan state. In Rwanda before colonialism, prosperous Hutu became Tutsi, over generations. True, the numbers involved were too few to be statistically significant. Yet, this was a process of great social and ideological significance. This process of ritual ennoblement, whereby a Hutu shed his Hutuness, even had a name: Kwihutura. Its counterpart, whereby an impoverished Tutsi family lost its status, this too over generations, also had a name: Gucupira.

Belgian colonialism did not invent Tutsi privilege. There was Tutsi privilege before colonialism. So what was new about Belgian colonialism? Not Tutsi privilege, but the justification for it. For the first time in the history of Rwanda, the terms Hutu and Tutsi came to identify two groups, one branded indigenous, the other exalted as alien. For the first time, Tutsi privilege claimed to be the privilege of an alien group, a group identified as Hamitic, as racially alien. Only with Belgian colonialism did Hutu become indigenous and Tutsi alien, the degradation of the Hutu a native degradation and Tutsi privilege an alien privilege. As Belgian authorities issued identity cards to Hutu and Tutsi, Tutsi became sealed off from Hutu. Legally identified as two biologically distinct races, Tutsi as Hamites and Hutu as Bantu, Hutu and Tutsi became distinct legal and political identities. The language of race functioned to underline this difference between indigenous and alien.

The point will become clear if we return to the difference between race and ethnicity in twentieth century colonial thought. I have pointed out that only natives were classified as tribes in colonial Africa, and as ‘ethnic groups’ in post-colonial Africa. Non-natives, those not considered African, were tagged as races. Tribes were neighbours, not aliens. In this context, ethnic violence is different from racial violence. Ethnic violence is between neighbours. It is about borders. It is about transgression across borders, about excess. In the conflict between neighbours, what is at issue is not the legitimacy of the presence of others.
issue is an overflow, a transgression. It is only with a race that the very presence of a group can be considered illegitimate, and its claim for power an outright usurpation. This is why when political violence takes the form of a genocide, it is more likely between races, not between ethnic groups.

The racialization of the Tutsi, and of the difference between Hutu and Tutsi, is key to understanding the political violence between Hutu and Tutsi. This was for one reason. It is the language of race that defined insiders and outsiders, distinguishing those who were indigenous from those who were aliens. Ultimately, it set apart neighbours from outsiders, and friends from enemies.

POLITICAL IDENTITIES AND THE NATIONALIST REVOLUTION

Colonialism is the genesis of Hutu–Tutsi violence in Rwanda. But colonialism does not explain why this violence continued after the Revolution. If colonialism is the site of the origin of the Hutu–Tutsi problem as one of racialized political identities, then nationalism reproduced that problem. Here is the dilemma we must confront: race-branding was not simply a state ideology, it also became a social ideology, reproduced by many of the same Hutu and Tutsi branded as native and alien. That reproduction took place through the nationalist political project which translated the colonial identity of Hutu as the indigenous Bantu race into the postcolonial Rwandan identity, thereby translating the colonial race-branding project into the postcolonial nation-building project. To problematize the nation-building project is simultaneously to critique the revolution of 1959 and the popular agency that it shaped.

The Rwandan Revolution of 1959 was heralded as the ‘Hutu Revolution’. As the revolutionaries built Rwanda into a ‘Hutu nation’, they embarked on a program of justice: justice for Hutu, a reckoning for Tutsi. And in doing so, they confirmed Hutu and Tutsi as political identities: Hutu as native, Tutsi as alien. When does the pursuit of justice turn into revenge? The Revolutionaries turned the world upside down, but they failed to change it. The irony is that instead of transforming the political world created by colonialism, the world of natives and settlers, they confirmed it. Here then is the question for a postcolonial study of nationalism in Rwanda: Why did nationalism fail to transform the colonial political edifice?

Popular agency has been the subject of an ambitious project in history-writing in South Asia, called Subaltern Studies. Taken from Antonio Gramsci, the word subaltern signified popular strata as opposed to those who command. The great historical contribution of Subaltern Studies was to rescue the subaltern from the status of being a victim in world history by illuminating him and her as an agent in history, as one capable of changing things. The historical lesson of Rwanda suggests that we accept the limits of this contribution and recognize that subaltern agency too is undergirded by specific institutions. To accept the time-bound nature of subalternity – as did Fanon – is to begin to subvert it. To generate a perspective that can transform existing identities, we need to stand outside the
institutions that reproduce our identities so as to understand group identities as institutionally produced and thus of limited historical significance.

Is not every perspective, no matter how popular, locked in the narrow parameters of the relations that generate and sustain it? Untransformed, a subaltern identity is likely to generate no more than an aspiration for trading places, for hegemonic aspirations. This is why a subaltern identity can neither be embraced nor rejected unconditionally. Unless we highlight its historical boundaries and limitations, the subaltern struggle will be locked in a dilemma, a Catch-22. Without a recognition and subversion of limits, without an institutional transformation leading to a transformation of identities, every pursuit of justice will tend towards revenge and every reconciliation will tend to turn into an embrace of institutional evil.

Lenin once chided Rosa Luxembourg with being so preoccupied with Polish nationalism that she could not see beyond it and so risked being locked in the world of the rat and the cat. The world of the rat and the cat is the political world of Hutu and Tutsi as produced by colonialism and reproduced by the 1959 Revolution. For the rat, there is no animal bigger in the presence of the cat: neither lion, nor tiger, nor elephant. For the cat, there is none more delicious than the rat. The political world set in motion by the modern state and modern colonialism too generates subaltern identities endlessly, in binary pairs. For every sergeant, there is a subaltern; for every settler, a native. In a world where cats are few and rats are many, one way for cats to stabilize rule is to tag rats by tapping their historicity through a discourse on origins, indigenous and non-indigenous, ethnic and racial. This is why in a world where rats have belled cats, it is entirely possible that rats may still carry on living in the world as defined by cats, fired by the very identities generated by institutions created in the era of cats.

My point is simple and yet fundamental: you can turn the world upside down, but still fail to change it. To change the world, you need to break out of the world view of not just the cat, but also the rat; not only the settler, but also the native. Unless we break out of the world view of the rat, postcolonialism will remain a purgatory punctuated by nonrevolutionary violence. More than any other contemporary event, the genocide in Rwanda poses this dilemma more sharply than ever before.

THE CIVIL WAR AND THE GENOCIDE

For a political analysis of the genocide in Rwanda, there are three pivotal moments. The first moment is that of colonization and the racialization of the state apparatus by Belgians in the 1920s. The second moment is that of nationalism and the Revolution of 1959, a turning of tables that entrenched colonial political identities in the name of justice. The third moment is that of the civil war of 1990. The civil war was not born of a strictly internal process; it was an outcome of a regional development, one that joined the crisis in Rwanda with that in Uganda.

The Tutsi exiles of 1959 found refuge in many countries, including Uganda. Living on the margins of society, many joined the guerrilla struggle against the
oppressive Obote regime in 1981-85. When the victorious National Resistance Army entered Kampala in January 1986, roughly a quarter of the 16,000 guerrillas were Banyarwanda. Banyarwanda had emigrated to Uganda throughout the colonial period. In the Luwero Triangle – the theatre of the guerrilla struggle – migrants were nearly half the population. The largest group of migrants was from Rwanda.

Every time NRA guerrillas liberated a village and organized an assembly, they confronted a challenge: Who could participate in an assembly? Who could vote? Who could run for office? The dilemma sprang from the colonial political legacy, which linked rights to ancestry; by defining migrants as not indigenous, it deprived them of political rights. The NRA’s answer was to redefine the basis of rights, from ancestry to residence. Simply put, every adult resident of a village was considered as having the right of participation in the village assembly. This new notion of rights was translated into a nationality law after 1986: anyone with a 10-year residence in the country had the right to be a citizen. The consequence was that the 1959 refugees of the Rwandan Revolution were now considered Ugandans.

This political inheritance was called into question with the NRA’s first major political crisis in 1990, triggered by an attempt to honour one of the ten points in the guerrilla program: the pledge to redistribute absentee-owned land to pastoralist squatters. When it came to distributing the land among a population of mobile pastoralists, there arose the question: Who should get the land? Who was a citizen?

The opposition mobilized around this question, aiming to exclude Banyarwanda as non-citizens. The magnitude of the resulting crisis was signified by an extraordinary session of parliament, lasting three days. At the end of its deliberation, parliament changed the citizenship law from a ten-year residence criterion to a requirement that to be recognized as a citizen you must show an ancestral connection with the land, i.e., show that at least one of your grandparents were born in the territory later demarcated as Uganda. In another month, the Rwanda Patriotic Front crossed the Uganda-Rwanda border into Rwanda. My point is that this was not simply an armed return to Rwanda; it was also an armed expulsion from Uganda.

To understand the explosive impact of the civil war on Rwanda, we need to understand the changing political position of the Tutsi from the First Republic inaugurated by the 1959 Revolution to the Second Republic that began with the 1973 coup that brought Habyarimana to power. We have seen that the First Republic was a culmination of the struggle between two lines in the Revolution. The victorious line, associated with the new President, Kayibanda, defined Hutu and Tutsi as two different races, two different nations: Tutsi were to be treated as aliens in Rwanda, the home of the Hutu nation. In Habyarimana’s Second Republic, Tutsi were redefined from a race to an ethnie. From resident aliens in the First Republic, Tutsi became a political minority in the Second Republic. Instead of the distinction between Hutu and Tutsi, the Second Republic highlighted the distinction between Tutsi in Rwanda and Tutsi exiles outside
Rwanda: whereas the former were politically elevated as a Rwandan minority that could legitimately expect minority representation in its political institutions, the latter were denationalized as perpetual aliens for whom there was no longer any room in Rwanda. During the Second Republic, the key political division inside Rwanda was not between Hutu and Tutsi, but within the Hutu elite, between those from the North and those from the South.

It was the military organization of the exile Tutsi as the Rwanda Patriotic Army (RPA), and their entry into Rwanda, which triggered the civil war. The civil war, in turn, had multiple political effects. To begin with, it allowed the Habyarimana regime to pose as the defender of the nation against what was said to be an attempt by exiled Tutsi to restore the colonial monarchy – a repeat of 1963 – at a time when the regime was under great pressure from the predominantly Hutu internal opposition to liberalize. Second, it allowed radical Hutu, hitherto marginalized under the Second Republic, to re-emerge in the political mainstream. Describing themselves as the defenders of ‘Hutu Power’, this tendency organized a variety of media, from radio and television to print media, which claimed that the gains of the Revolution were under threat from Tutsi who were indeed a race, not an ethnie; non-Rwandan aliens, not a Rwandan minority.

Third, the more the civil war grew and the RPA gained ground, the more the internal opposition was discredited as a political fifth column tied to the RPA, and its democratic program painted as an anti-national agenda. Fourth, everywhere the RPA gained military control, the local Hutu population either fled or was expelled through administrative pressure. Most observers estimate that by 1994 as many as 15 per cent of the Rwandan population had been so displaced, some of them as many as four times. Most now lived in camps in and around Kigali and the southern part of the country. Some of the most enthusiastic participants in the genocide came from the youthful population of these camps. Finally, against the backdrop of the victorious march of the RPA, the plight of the displaced spread fear among those who were yet to be engulfed in the civil war. The ‘Hutu Power’ media warned them of a fate that the sight of the displaced only confirmed: if the Tutsi returned to power, they would lose both their land and their freedom – in short, everything.

The civil war of 1990-94 thus hurled Rwanda back into the world of Hutu Power and Tutsi Power. Faced with a possible return of Tutsi power, it provided radical Hutu, a marginal tendency in the Second Republic, with their first opportunity to return to the political centre stage as defenders of the 1959 revolution. Without the civil war, there would have been no genocide.

The Rwandan genocide, then, needs to be located in a context shaped by three related moments: the global imperial moment defined by Belgian colonialism and its racialization of the state; the national moment, which was the 1959 Revolution, and which reinforced racialized identities in the name of justice; and the postcolonial regional moment born of a link between the citizenship crisis in post-Revolutionary Rwanda and its neighbours. True, the crisis of postcolonial citizenship was regional in scope and led to civil wars not only in Rwanda, but
also in Uganda, and in Congo. But only in Rwanda did the civil war unfold in a context that could and did set alight a powder keg born of a distinctive colonial legacy, *race-branding*, that was reproduced as a revolutionary legacy of *race-as-nation*. Though not a necessary but a contingent outcome, it is imperative that we draw lessons from the Rwandan genocide.

**POLITICAL POWER AND POLITICAL IDENTITY**

My argument on the Rwandan genocide links the violence in the genocide to political identities that drove the violence, and the reproduction of these political identities in turn to a particular form of the state. Instead of taking group identities as a given, I have tried to historicize the process of group formation. By linking political identities to the process of state formation, it becomes possible to distinguish all pre-political identities – whether, cultural, economic, or biological – from political identities. In addition, it allows for an understanding of the dynamics whereby binary political identities, like Hutu and Tutsi, become polarized.

The Rwandan genocide raises three important issues for those who must live in its aftermath, as for those who study it. The *first* concerns the link between political identities and the process of state formation. To understand how Hutu became synonymous with indigenous and Tutsi with alien, I found it necessary to go beyond an analysis of the colonial state to a critique of the nationalist revolution of 1959 which embraced political identities created by colonial power in the name of justice. The *second* issue arises from the combined legacy of colonial rule and nationalist power. It is also the issue that represents the most troublesome legacy of the Rwandan genocide and has bitterly divided those who write on it. Was not the organization of genocidal violence from the summit of political power linked to mass participation on the ground? The evidence shows that this was indeed the case, which is why we need to understand the genocide as both a state project and a social project. The *third* issue highlights the citizenship crisis in the entire region. Just as the civil war that began in 1990 joined the citizenship crisis in Rwanda with that in Uganda, so the entry of Rwandan troops into eastern Congo in 1996 joined the citizenship crisis in Rwanda with that in Congo. If the 1959 Revolution and its aftermath underlined the difference between the colonial experience of Rwanda and that of its neighbours – that colonial rule in Rwanda created racialized, but not ethnicized, political identities – post-genocidal Rwanda underlines the similarities in the regional colonial experiences. I argued in my book that colonial Rwanda was like a half-way house between direct and indirect rule. Like direct rule, it generated exclusively racialized political identities; at the same time, like indirect rule, it legitimated the despotic power of local chiefs as a carryover of pre-colonial practices rather than a colonial reorganization of the state. The discourse on custom ties citizenship (and rights) to cultural identity and historical origins.

The proliferation of political minorities in the contemporary African context is not a necessary reflection of the cultural map of Africa. Rather, this prolifer-
ation is the outcome of a particular form of the state, the indirect rule state, whose genesis lies in the colonial period. The real distinction between race and ethnicity is not that between biology and culture, with race a false biological identity and ethnicity a true and historically created cultural identity. Rather, both race and ethnicity need to be understood as the politicization of identities drawn from other domains: race a political identity of those constructed as not indigenous (settlers), and ethnicity an identity of those constructed as indigenous (natives). Africa’s real political challenge is to reform and thus transcend the form of the state that has continued to reproduce race and ethnicity as political identities, alongside a discourse on nativism and ‘genuine’ tradition.

Colonial power not only shaped the agency of popular strata. It was also stamped on the agency of the intellectual. Colonial power was etched not only on the boundaries of the public sphere, it was also imprinted in the table of contents of scholarly works. Just as colonial power set into motion, first the settler and then the native, in the public sphere, so it preoccupied the intellectual imagination with the question of origins. How origin was understood depended on the language of power, specifically, on how power framed agency through customary law.

In the African context, customary law framed agency – and ‘custom’ – as ethnic. In another context, such as India, that agency was framed as religious. Is it then mere coincidence that if the postcolonial African preoccupation is with who is a native and who is not, the postcolonial Indian preoccupation has been with who is a convert and who is not? Is it any less surprising that if the native imagination in postcolonial Africa tends to absorb the immigrant into a script of invasion, the native imagination in postcolonial India seems to view the agency of the convert as veritable treason, as a transgression so subversive that the convert is seen as forever lacking in authentic agency?

Why is it that when it comes to postcolonial political vocabulary, Hindu and Muslim in India, or for that matter Sinhala and Tamil in Sri Lanka, like Hutu and Tutsi in Rwanda, are political synonyms for native and settler? The challenge, I have argued, is neither to deny separate histories, nor to build on this separation. It is, rather, to distinguish our notion of political community from that of cultural community and, as a consequence, separate the discourse on political rights from that on cultural or historical origins. The point of difference between cultural identity and political communities is sharpest when we contrast diasporic with immigrant communities. Diasporic communities share a common history, but not necessarily a common future. Immigrant communities, in contrast, are dedicated to build a common future, but may not necessarily share a common past. To distinguish between cultural and political communities is to distinguish between the past – several pasts – and a single future. The single uniting feature of a political community is the commitment to build a common political future under a single political roof. This recognition should be an important step to creating a single political community and citizenship from diverse cultural and historical groups and identities.
NOTES

1 See, for example, Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996.


4 Ibid.

5 Herbert Spencer wrote in *Social Statics* (1850): ‘The forces which are working out the great scheme of perfect happiness, taking no account of incidental suffering, exterminate such sections of mankind as stand in their way’. Charles Lyall pursued this train of thought in *Principles of Geology*: If ‘the most significant and diminutive of species … have each slaughtered their thousands, why should not we, the lords of creation, do the same’? His student, Charles Darwin, confirmed in *The Descent of Man* (1871): ‘At some future period not very distant as measured in centuries, the civilized races of man will almost certainly exterminate and replace throughout the world the savage races’. ‘After Darwin’, comments Sven Lidquist in his survey of European thought on genocide, ‘it became accepted to shrug your shoulders at genocide. If you were upset, you were just showing your lack of education’. See Sven Lindqvist, ‘*Exterminate all the Brutes*, *One Man’s Odyssey into the Heart of Darkness and the Origins of European Genocide*, New York: The New Press, 1996, pps. 8, 117, 107.

6 This paragraph is based on Sven Lindqvist, ‘*Exterminate all the Brutes*, pp. 141, 119, 149-51.


8 Except where indicated, this paragraph is based on Sven Lindqvist, ‘*Exterminate all the Brutes*, pp. 158, 160.


Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*; also see David Macey, *Fanon*, p. 22.


Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, pp. 33, 66, 68, 73.


I write this without any intent to romanticize the domain of consent or to detract from the existence of power relations in the domain of culture.


The most compelling journalistic account is to be found in Philip Gourevitch, *We Wish to Inform You that Tomorrow We Will be Killed with our Families*, New York: Picador, 1999.