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Authoritarianism through the Looking Glass: Alice in Rwanda

Marie-Eve Desrosier's book stands out in the crowded field of scholarship on Rwanda for choosing not to emphasize the country's exceptionalism and not to make either violence or ethnicity the central constructs through which to analyze its politics. Instead, she concentrates her considerable scholarly talent on what she sees as an unexceptional aspect of this small central African nation's history: its two post-independence - but pre-genocide - Republics (1962-1973 and 1973-1994). She treats the two regimes as a single case to develop and exemplify the concept of an "authoritarian trajectory" and in so doing takes aim at the expanding field of comparative authoritarian studies as well as the many area specialists whose understanding and presentation of pre-genocide Rwanda, she argues, require some correction if not outright revision.

Her theoretical point of departure is the conceptual frontier of comparative authoritarianism. Desrosiers traces the evolution in the field away from the notion of "authoritarian transition" with its assumption of democracy as the endpoint and emphasis on actors as agents of change, toward the idea of "authoritarian resilience" with its acceptance of the enduring nature of hybrid regimes and its focus on institutions. She argues, however, neither concept captures the reality of authoritarianism. Instead, she resurrects the idea of the "authoritarian trajectory". For Desrosiers, trajectory is the superior descriptor because it does not imply a linear path toward some particular outcome but instead allows for the possibility that authoritarian regimes dynamically oscillate between moments of greater hardness and greater softness. Regime behaviour shifts up and down over time, she argues: sometimes highly coercive and exclusionary; at other times more accommodating and inclusionary. The tendency in the field, she decries, is to focus overwhelmingly on highly pivotal moments when the regime is at its most authoritarian and the result is an unbalanced understanding – caricatures even - of authoritarian behaviour. She instead encourages scholars to look also at regimes outside of these extreme moments and at the quotidian political and economic "grind" of governing. The point, she argues, is that if we use a wider lens we will see that authoritarians rarely enjoy unquestioned political control and stability in the territories over which they rule. The metaphorical image for authoritarian governance she invokes is that of the character of Humpty Dumpty in the Lewis Carroll novel, *Through the Looking Glass*, who tries desperately to keep his balance while perched precariously on top of a thin wall. Authoritarians teeter because they have to balance competing forces but, eventually, they usually fall.

Examine the authoritarian grind is precisely what Desrosiers does in Rwanda for its first two post-independence republics. Her central argument is that scholars of Rwanda have over-estimated the reach and control the two regimes that preceded the genocide enjoyed over Rwandan society and politics. Control was never "achieved"; it was eternally "elusive". To make her point she treats her reader to possibly the most meticulously-researched and engagingly-written accounts of the period from the end of colonial rule to the onset of the genocide. Desrosiers brings fresh material to bear on each of the major events that define the time period leading up to 1994. Drawing largely on French and Belgian diplomatic archives, as well as 51 interviews with Rwandans old enough to recall this history, she re-interprets and

re-presents these events and, in some cases, reshapes our understanding of them. Her instinct for empirical richness and complexity comes through in her careful description and analysis of the Hutu revolution (1959-62) that ended the Tutsi monarchy and ushered in independence; the *Inyenzi* attacks of the 1960s that threatened the first Republic; the 1973 coup that led to the first Republic's downfall and rise of the second; and the 1990 invasion that marked the start of the civil war culminating in the genocide. The reader should be sure not to miss the powerful and harrowing first-hand accounts of the 1963 anti-Tutsi reprisal violence (pp. 212-15). They bear striking and chilling resemblance to survivor testimony from 1994.

In keeping with her own conceptualization of an authoritarian trajectory, Desrosiers does not limit her analysis only to these pivotal events. She casts light on the authoritarian behaviours between them as well. It is in this way that we learn, for example, that the first Republic was not as ethnocentric as widely believed. She shows the Kayibanda regime deployed rhetorical and ideological strategies to assure its legitimacy and position and did not believe it could rely solely on coercion to rule. The regime's language only became ethnically and aggressively inflected in times of elite insecurity; in the absence of crisis, its messaging was for peace, democracy, and "social tranquility". Similarly, Desrosiers argues the regime's limited control was reflected in what she describes as its failure to maintain a monopoly on legitimate violence in Rwanda. She points to the Kayibanda's regime's inability to prevent popular reprisal violence against Tutsi in the 1960s and to the Habyarimana regime's panic and exaggeration of the 1990 invasion as an effort to secure external support. The book interprets several other behaviours as evidence of elusive control in Rwanda: the circumvention of ethnic quotas; popular resistance to *umuganda*, the state's mandatory labour requirement; and variation in defiance of central authorities by local burgomasters.

Notwithstanding her superb scholarship and elegant argumentation, Desrosiers' central claim invites a puzzling question, however. The comment that follows, it must in fairness be acknowledged, takes inspiration from my own book, *The Path to Genocide in Rwanda*, that also appeared in Cambridge University Press' African Studies series shortly before Desrosiers'. Given the proximity in publication, it may be then she did not have the time to reflect on how its findings contrast with her own. For myself, the single most perplexing issue with Desrosier's book is its principal - and revisionist - argument that "Rwanda was never 'that strong'" (p.87). She claims the regime of the second Republic, the one responsible for the genocide, did not have an unusual level of control or reach vis-a-vis ordinary Rwandans. Yet, as I explicate in the second chapter of my book, it is the extraordinary scale of civilian participation, remarkable speed of popular mobilization, and extensive geographic ambit of the violence that distinguish the Rwandan genocide. How do we explain each of these exceptional characteristics of Rwanda's violence if there was nothing exceptional about the control and reach of the regime that organized and implemented it?

Part of the problem may be that there is sometimes slippage in Desrosiers' differentiation between the Rwandan state and the regime in charge of it. The Rwandan state *is* truly exceptional in a number of ways as I, and others, have identified. Rwanda either ranks first or second in sub-Saharan Africa for its population density, historical continuity in borders, cultural homogeneity, territorial smallness, and road network density, for example. It is these and other distinctive characteristics, I argue, that contributed to the Rwandan state's exceptional capacity to implement policies across its territory and to monitor popular compliance with them. These characteristics do not explain why the genocide occurred; but they do help explain why so many Rwandans participated in it, so swiftly, and in so many parts of Rwanda. Desrosiers does not recognize in her book the significance of Rwanda's distinctive socio-demography and physical geography and their implications for the regime's

control and reach over ordinary Rwandans. She appears to be caught between the imperative to argue her chosen case is typical and representative of other authoritarian regimes and the inescapable and troubling fact that Rwanda's violence and mobilization were extraordinary.

Notwithstanding this one critique, there should be no doubt this is the book to which anyone wishing to understand Rwanda's postcolonial, pre-genocide period should turn. There is no better account of this period of the country's history.