

In His Own Words: Reflections on a Scholarly Career with Rene Lemarchand

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Abstract: What is the role of scholars in envisioning the continent and bearing witness to historic events? This paper is based on an interview with Professor Rene Lemarchand, renowned scholar of the former Belgian colonies of the African Great Lakes. His earliest book *Political Awakening in the Belgian Congo* is based on fieldwork conducted in 1960 as the country was undergoing decolonization and describes the political crises of early independence. In the 1970s, he explored the concept of clientelism and role of ethnicity in Central Africa. As events unfolded in Burundi and Rwanda, Lemarchand became an expert on genocide. His career as an Africanist has been devoted to understanding political violence in Central Africa while envisioning a better future for its people. The piece will explore reflections not only on his long career, but also its contribution to our understanding of the history of ethnic violence and genocide in the Great Lakes and beyond.

Keywords: Burundi, Congo, genocide, Great Lakes, Rwanda,

Introduction

In 2005, I began my doctorate in political science at the University of Florida, which I had chosen because of its impressive Center for African Studies with over 100 faculty from numerous disciplines and because I was offered a Foreign Language and Area Studies (FLAS) Fellowship to support my studies. I was so excited to be studying in a political science department with three or four Africanists on the faculty. As an undergraduate student, I had written an honors thesis on the conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and planned to continue that research for my dissertation. When I arrived at UF, it was to discover that Michael Chege had just left the department and that Goran Hyden was no longer directing dissertations (he would retire in a few years' time). I was able to take Hyden's last African politics seminar as he was completing *African Politics in Comparative Perspective* (2006). I began working with Leonardo Villalón—then Director of the Center for African Studies—who became my dissertation advisor, emotional support, and mentor. Even though Leo's research focused on the Sahel, we had much in common as I was a Peace Corps Volunteer in Niger prior to joining UF and we were both interested in the politics of Islam. However, I knew I wanted to go back to

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my undergrad research interest in the Congo. While there were no UF faculty focused on Central Africa at that time, I heard that Great Lakes expert and emeritus professor Rene Lemarchand still lived in Gainesville since retiring from UF in 1992. We soon began to meet for regular lunches to discuss all things Central Africa and he became an invaluable mentor for me during my graduate career.

Rene impressively continued to pursue scholarship and publish numerous excellent works, such as *The Dynamics of Violence in Central Africa* (2009), *Forgotten Genocides: Oblivion, Denial, and Memory* (2011), and *Remembering Genocides in Central Africa* (2021) to name a few. Now in his early nineties and gradually slowing down, I reached out in early 2023 to propose an interview with him about his life and career.¹ I planned to travel to Gainesville over the summer to spend several days conducting the interview with Rene. Unfortunately, some health issues meant he was not up to the task that summer. By the fall he was better, and I proposed that we could try to correspond electronically for the interview. I sent a list of detailed questions to Rene in August 2023, and he began to send back responses via email over several months. His prose is as eloquent and captivating as always, providing a first-hand account of a young French man who became a draft-dodger during the Algerian war, found himself in Congo at the moment of independence and secession by the Katanga province, a witness to the Hutu social revolution in Rwanda, and then called to study the Great Lakes region and the horrific genocides that would unfold there. One theme that emerges throughout Rene's writing is that of the role of racism, locally, internationally, and politically. From attending college in the segregated south, to a front seat to the hasty decolonization project in Congo and Cold War rivalries, to trying to establish a Center for African Studies in Jim Crow-era Florida and taking a stance against apartheid in South Africa, we see the continuity of the past with the struggles of today.



Discussing Burundi with Archbishop Desmond Tutu—Brussels, 1990s

The Interview

Ashley Leinweber: How did you get interested in Congo, a Belgian colony, rather than the numerous French colonies in Africa?

Rene Lemarchand: My career path as an Africanist was in part determined by circumstances over which I had no control, and in part as the result of deliberate choices. The fork in the road came in 1950 in the form of a Fulbright scholarship that made it possible for me to spend two years in Memphis, at a small Presbyterian college (Southwestern College—now Rhodes College). Memphis at the time was one of the most rigidly segregated cities in the US yet I look back at the years spent at Southwestern as a memorable experience. Quite aside from the wonderful friends I made among students and faculty, and experiencing an entirely new lifestyle, the years spent at Southwestern were in a real sense a voyage of self-discovery. As a Catholic-educated French youth of conservative dispositions, it did not take long for me to realize that only in the US could I find the opportunities for self-fulfillment and professional development which in post-war Europe seemed out of reach and out of sight.

By 1957 my decision to return to the US came into clearer focus. After applying to UCLA, I was accepted as a graduate student in political science, a choice dictated in part by the presence on the faculty of several distinguished Africanists, including James Coleman who ended up being my dissertation director. As fate would have it, my arrival at UCLA coincided with the outbreak of the war in Algeria. Suddenly, faced with the prospect of risking my life defending a course that I found morally indefensible (“Algerie Francaise”), I wasted no time requesting a deferment: but by the time it expired I had become, in effect, a draft dodger, and remained so for the entire duration of the war (1957-1962). It was in these troubled circumstances, and thanks to the unstinting support I received from Coleman, that I tried to make sense of what came to be known as the Congo crisis.

Let me add, for the sake of clarity, that my choice of the Congo as a dissertation topic may seem odd in view of my national identity as a French citizen (I have since become as US citizen), and when you consider the number of other possible candidates. The answer lies in the strategic importance of the Congo on the map of Africa, along with the fact that relatively little attention was being paid in academic circles to the geopolitical implications of this relative neglect (with the qualified exception of Crawford Young, who would emerge as a leading authority on the Congo). No one was more acutely aware of this paradox than Coleman, who spared no effort to make sure that my field work in the Congo would receive adequate financial support. He also went beyond the call of duty in making arrangements with the head of the law faculty at Lovanium University in Leopoldville (not yet called Kinshasa, a campus affiliated with the University of Louvain in Belgium) to legitimize my status as a graduate student doing research for a doctoral dissertation. These efforts to create a semblance of normality seem almost risible as I recall the chaotic years that followed the proclamation of independence in July 1960. Witnessing the collapse of the state at close range after the mutiny of the 23,000 strong army (the so-called Force Publique) is an experience I’ll never forget.

The Leap to Independence

AL: Do you agree with the timing and manner of independence? Having been an eyewitness to the process, what do you think could have been done differently/ better?

RL: Seen with benefit of hindsight, many of the problems facing the colonial authorities as they tried to manage the transition to independence were of their own making. For one thing the constitutional formula outlined in the so-called *Loi fondamentale*, a parliamentary system based on the division between the head of the government and the prime minister, replicating the Belgian system, was a recipe for disaster. It contained in germ the conflict that erupted between Lumumba, as prime minister, and president Kasavubu immediately after independence. On another level the utter lack of preparation for the responsibilities of self-rule among the Congolese elites (many of whom were recruited from Catholic seminaries) made the *décolonisation ratée* of the Congo almost inevitable.

Again, the role played by individuals cannot be overstressed, both among Congolese and Europeans. The often-quoted phrase written by the head of the Force Publique, General Janssens, to drive home to African troops that independence would bring no change to their status is a case in point. I am also reminded of the pathological dislike of Lumumba displayed by the minister-in-residence Ganshoff van der Merse, a sentiment shared by a great many colonial civil servants and most conspicuously by the CIA Chief of Station in the Congo, Larry Devlin. Among the many Congolese actors who played a key role during the crisis, Lumumba deserves pride of place. No matter how repugnant the circumstances of his death, there is no question that he was the central actor behind the intervention of Soviet elements at a critical juncture.

As I reflect on the roots of the Congo disaster, I am reminded of the title of one of the many books written on this subject, *Le Pari Congolais* (The Congolese Gamble). In it the author captures the attitude of many colonial civil servants, suggesting that the best that one could hope in such dire circumstances would be for the Belgian authorities to surrender the formal control of the state while keeping their hands on the economic and financial levers. To expect a government lacking any significant experience in fiscal management and economic development to act as viable partner made no sense. Whatever the merits of the metaphor *pari congolais*, it turned out into a disastrous gamble.

The Congo Crisis in Perspective

AL: Were you in the Congo for the May 1960 elections? If so, where? What was the atmosphere like? Were you anxious for your safety? What was it like to be in Congo at independence?

RL: I arrived in Leopoldville in December 1959, shortly before the Brussels Roundtable conference, a last-minute initiative of the Belgian authorities to pave the way for the May 1960 elections. This was a unique occasion to meet scores of delegates who emerged as the new leaders of one of Africa's largest states. The atmosphere was festive. The syncopated rhythms of Joseph Kabasele's run-away hit "Indépendance Cha Cha" injected a note of joyful optimism. Few could have imagined that the gravest threat to the new state would emerge from what many considered its most stable pillar: the Force Publique.

Some of the images that still stick in my mind are the groups of soldiers running amok near the Palais des Congrès, the site of the new parliament; the sight of panic-stricken civilians trying to escape the mayhem; the last-minute efforts to evacuate the wives of academics at Lovanium (including my Danish bride who was promptly whisked away to a safer location by the Danish consul). Not until the arrival of Belgian troops in July did the climate of uncertainty and

insecurity appear to come to an end. But this brief respite proved only a lull in the accumulated anti-European resentments that now surfaced in other parts of the Congo. I remember vividly the sense of outrage and fear among my colleagues at Lovanium as most of them packed their bags and headed for the airport. Many made no bones of their decision never to return. In fact, almost all of them did return, alleging that their hasty departure was solely motivated by the timing of the “vacances académiques.”

The Provincial Arenas: Stanleyville, Bukavu, and Elizabethville

AL: Where did you do most of your fieldwork? Were there many other Europeans present in the area? How were you perceived being neither missionary, colonial administrator, or businessperson? Were you assumed to be Belgian?

RL: It was in these circumstances that that I decided, somewhat foolishly, to travel to those provinces that seemed reasonably safe, hoping to get a sense of the “lay of the land.” The first leg of my trip began in eastern Congo, in Stanleyville (now Kisangani), known at the time at the epicenter of the Lumumba’s Mouvement National Congolais (MNC). It did not take me long to assess the virulence of anti-European sentiment—as I entered the stadium, where thousands had come to listen to Lumumba’s speech, I found myself confronted with a large number of party militants clearly unhappy with the unexpected presence of a white man in their midst. Insults were hurled at me. As tension mounted the assembled crowd showed signs of impatience. I quickly headed for the exit. If nothing else, my visit to Kisangani enabled me to take the measure of the depth of the anti-European sentiment unleashed by the mutiny of the Force Publique.

In stark contrast with Kisangani, Bukavu, the capital of the Kivu province, seemed like a haven of peace. Contributing in no small way to this impression was the fact that I was the guest of the *Institut pour la Recherche Scientifique en Afrique Centrale* (IRSAC), conveniently situated a few miles from Bukavu, in Lwiro. I had the good fortune of meeting a number of Belgian colleagues who spared no effort to help me get acquainted with the political map of the region, and, more importantly, with the more complicated roots of conflicts in Rwanda and Burundi (of which more in a moment). The political landscape of the Kivu province was largely split between communities ethnically identified with one group of parties or another, with a substantial acreage of land still in the hands of a white plantocracy.

It was during my visit to Bukavu that I realized for the first time the gravity of the Hutu-Tutsi conflict unfolding in Rwanda, and how little attention it received compared to the events in the Congo. Having taken up the invitation of two Belgian colleagues to join them in a brief visit to Astrida (now Butare), as we made our way back to Lwiro we suddenly came into a scene of violence and arson that none of us had anticipated: huts going up in flames, children speared to the ground, and droves of Hutu arsonists under the watch of Belgian paratroopers. What we had witnessed was the first phase of the so-called “Rwandan social revolution,” leading to a huge exodus of Tutsi civilians to neighboring territories—mostly to Uganda but also to the Congo. Among the scores of Tutsi refugees fleeing the violence was a toddler following his mother’s footsteps into Uganda—his name was Paul Kagame.

The third leg of my trip, from Bukavu to Elizabethville (now Lumbumbashi) brought me face to face with the Katanga secession. While I could have never anticipated the dramatic

events it set off (the armed intervention of UN troops, the bitter resistance of the secessionist government, and the death of the UN Secretary General in a mysterious plane crash), the immediate implications leapt to the eye: the secession of the Congo's richest province threatened the economic viability of the new government, it could set a precedent for other breakaways, and pave the way for a dangerous confrontation between the USSR and the West. In any event, the gravity of the crisis was hard to miss, it was evident in the efforts of the secessionist government to recruit an army, the presence of European civil servants coming from other provinces, soon to be joined by European mercenaries (including the legendary Bob Denard).

As I reflect on these long-ago events, I am struck by their enduring relevance to the Congo's inability to get its act together. To take one example: despite innumerable attempts at reform, the Congo is still without an army sufficiently efficient and disciplined to ensure a modicum of peace throughout the country. Instead, it must rely on the security assistance of an exorbitantly expensive UN-sponsored mission (MONUSCO) that is evidently unfit to restore order. This has been made plain on numerous occasions, though never more dramatically than during the complicated sequence of events following Rwanda's invasion of the Congo from October 1990 to April 1994. Which brings us to my 1960 improvised trip to Rwanda. Little did I imagine that I would see the day of Kagame's revenge when his battle-hardened troops would march into Kinshasa in June 1997. Not just to depose Mobutu but to transform the Congo into a client state.

The Mobutist Interlude

AL: What made you switch to focus more on Rwanda and Burundi than Congo? Was it that there were fewer researchers focused on the smaller countries? What was it like researching Africa during the Cold War?

RL: I am often asked why, after investing a fair amount of time and effort in analyzing the politics of the Congo, I suddenly switched my focus to its Lilliputian neighbors Burundi and Rwanda. The quick answer is that there is no way to make sense of their histories without taking into account the convulsions of their gigantic neighbor, and vice versa. But there were other reasons as well. Chief among them is the coming to power of the Mobutu dictatorship in 1965, thanks to the intervention and consistent support of the CIA. I still remember the disastrous impact of this pivotal event.

In the Cold War atmosphere of the 1960s, doing field work in or about the Congo became a dangerous enterprise. Within the US, public opinion about the appropriateness of supporting Mobutu tended to replicate the cleavage between Democrats and Republicans—within the Congo anyone suspected of anti-Mobutu sympathies could be faced with unexpected sanctions, as showed by Stephen Weissman in his excellent *From Congo to Capitol Hill: A Coming-of-Age Memoir* (2023). In such circumstances the better side of wisdom was to let others take the risks of falling foul of the Mobutist state.

Not until the 1990's did Mobutu fall out of favor with his former supporters in the US (including the CIA), only to be faced with an attack from Rwanda, now the main threat emerging from the east. It took a few more years for Kagame to claim a victory lap. And yet the inter-connections between the rise of ethnic conflicts in each of the former states of Belgian

Africa were already apparent. It took me awhile to disentangle the connecting threads, however—the most starkly revealing was the massacre of tens of thousands of Hutu civilians by Burundi’s predominantly Tutsi army in the spring of 1972.



Public support for the ruling party—Bujumbura, 1973

My encounter with the “false twins” of Rwanda and Burundi is a tale that bears its own telling. It happened by a stroke of luck following the publication of my book *Rwanda and Burundi* (1970). In it I tried to come to grips with what I thought was the central paradox in the history of Rwanda and Burundi: how could two states so similar to each other in so many ways end up following such radically different trajectories? And given such similarities, how to explain the horrific killings of Hutu by Tutsi in 1972, which I later described as the first genocide committed in independent Africa? On this issue the government of Burundi had long been in denial, disclaiming all responsibility in the massacre of Hutu civilians. Its stance had already been made clear in the form of a white paper issued in the wake of the killings that can only be described as a tissue of lies. By inviting me to Burundi the aim was to enlist my support to bring an end to the avalanche of “fake news” surrounding the atrocities committed by the army. As I demonstrated in a report to the London-based Minority Rights Group (MRG)—described by journalist Bernard Levin as “exemplary in its objectivity, thoroughness and force”—there was nothing fake about the mass murder of tens of thousands of innocent civilians, or about the emergence of the Burundi army as an instrument of ethnic oppression.

There is no point to go into the details of this tale of woe, which I have had ample opportunities to discuss in any number of books and articles. The point here can be summed up in few words: to this day I am astonished by the contrast between the outpouring of media attention generated by the 1994 genocide of Tutsi in Rwanda, and the deafening silence of the international community over the killings of Hutu in Burundi two decades earlier. The

comparatively smaller number of victims in Burundi is no justification for this disparity. Nor is there any reason to keep under wraps the wanton mass murders committed by Rwanda's army during its march to Kinshasa. Nor is there any valid reason to deny the scale of massive human rights violations reported by the 2010 UN-sponsored Mapping Report.

There is more than a touch of irony in the emergence of Kagame as the donors' darling while taking full advantage of his privileged status to murder his domestic foes, plunder the Congo's mineral wealth, all along pretending not to be involved. All of which has been superbly demonstrated by Michela Wrong in her bestseller *Do Not Disturb: The Story of a Political Murder and an African Regime Gone Bad* (2021). Looking back at this episode, I am reminded of the expressions of sympathy voiced by a number of genocide survivors—including some with whom I have kept in touch over the years. I also keep some wonderful memories of the help and encouragement I received from friends and colleagues in the US, most notably from Leo Kuper, a sociologist of South African origins who shared with me his life-long interest in the analysis of genocide.

The University of Florida: 1962–1992

AL: How did you come to be the first director of the University of Florida's (UF) new Center for African Studies? What were the biggest challenges for getting the Center going? How many Africanists were at UF at the time? What was it like to be at UF and the Center in those early years? What are you most proud of from your time as Director?

RL: The name of Leo Kuper is associated in my mind with my brief and unlamented tenure as the first Director of the African Studies Center at the University of Florida, a position I held until my resignation in 1966. I received the news of a Center for African Studies at UF with mixed feelings. Not that I had any problem with the principle of promoting African studies, but the context seemed unpropitious. Teaching African studies on a southern campus, where Jim Crow was still in evidence, struck me as a long shot. Nonetheless the dividends accruing from this initiative were by no means negligible. Under the provisions of National Defense Education Act, department heads were given access to new sources of funding and the possibility of recruitment of new faculty.

In practice, however, things turned out far more complicated than I had imagined. For one thing, reaching agreement among department heads about candidates did not go without a fair amount of grumbling and discord. In the meantime, my offerings in African studies turned out to be a one-man show, with courses in African history, African politics, and political development. As for the allocation of resources (staff support) I must admit being utterly sidelined by the decisions made by the chair of the political science. The single most important issue, from my own perspective, was whether to recruit faculty from South Africa who were known for their middle of the road pro-apartheid stance (that was how Leo Kuper described to me their ideological commitments), and in so doing give the Center a distinctly conservative hue (to put it mildly). On that issue I had to concede defeat. There is no point in naming names. Suffice it to say that I found myself in vehement disagreement with the choices made by two department heads (geography and anthropology). In the political climate of the sixties, as the future of South Africa seemed inextricably tied up to issues of race and ethnicity, the political profile of the Center struck me as indefensible. I had no choice but to hand in my resignation.

The infusion of new blood in in 1967, with the appointment of a competent historian (Hunt Davis—later to become director of the Center) followed by other recruitments resulted in shifting the center of gravity of the Center away from its South African biases. On reflection, with the passage of time, my decision to resign strikes me as open to debate—though my motives were dictated by my political convictions, a more subtle handling of the issues at stake could have yielded different results. The same point was driven home to me by my chair years later when he revealed to me that I stood at the bottom of the heap, salary wise, compared to my peers. As is usual in such circumstances, a committee was appointed to assess the merits of my case. Colleagues were consulted outside the department; letters of recommendation exchanged; a salary raise, however modest, was unanimously recommended. It was precisely at this juncture that I received the happy news that my application to a position at the US Agency for International Development (USAID) had been accepted. I never imagined that it would turn into an opportunity to reinvent myself.



Hitching a ride from a UN helicopter—South Kivu, 2009

USAID: 1993-1998

AL: What did you like most and least about working for USAID?

RL: I remember the years I spent working for USAID, first in Cote d' Ivoire, and then in Ghana, as the most challenging of my career. In my capacity as a consultant on democracy and development I was able to travel extensively through West and Central Africa, to reach out to local communities, to look at issues of development from the ground up, to meet a wide range of colleagues who shared my interests and my sense of commitment to democracy. Much of my work consisted of in-depth reports requested by US embassies. For example, one of the first among many others came from the US Embassy in Kinshasa, inviting me "to review US options concerning electoral assistance to Zaire, and when elections can be realistically envisaged as a way out of the current impasse." All in all, I must have penned a dozen reports covering a wide range of issues. The kudos I received at the time make for strange reading in the light of the recent events that have swept across the Sahel. Not that they are undeserved, but they seem to belong to a different era where hope springs eternal. One example is the commentary scribbled in the margins of my report on Niger, in April 1993: "Lemarchand's paper is superbly written, very informative and provocative..." Seen in the light of recent events this assessment rings hollow, to say the least. Like many others.

On a different plane I am reminded of the frustration I experienced while grappling with what was known at the time as the Logical Framework or log frame—officially described as "a methodology mainly used for designing, monitoring and evaluating international development projects." This one-size-fits-all model struck me as largely irrelevant to the analysis of ethnic conflict. It seemed to be surrounded by a halo of optimism that ruled out the possibility of failure. What made recourse to this model especially incongruous was that its merits were bandied about in 1994 precisely when thousands of Hutu were being massacred by Kagame's army. To this day I find it hard to understand the logic associated with this model. Once this is said, much of what I learned about the politics of the Great Lakes region I owe to my work at USAID. For all the reservations I made in some of my writings—notably in *Remembering Genocides in Central Africa*—I would be unfair if I didn't recognize the huge benefits drawn from my experience at USAID. These proved invaluable as I entered the last phase of my academic career, as a gypsy scholar.

Coming to Terms with the Politics of Mass Murder

AL: What are you most proud of from your career? A particular article/ book/ concept? Which Africanist researchers did you most admire at various points in your career?

RL: My work at USAID enabled me to think critically about the roots of genocidal killings in each of the states of Belgian Africa. Even before the end of my contract I had received an invitation from Smith College to teach a seminar on the Rwanda genocide. Others followed. I keep a wonderful memory of the invitation I received from Concordia University in Montreal thanks to my friend Frank Chalk. The same is true of the graduate seminar on comparative genocide I taught at Berkeley for which I thank my colleague Scott Straus, author of an outstanding book *The Order of Genocide: Race, Power and War in Rwanda* (2006). This was followed by multiple invitations from my long-time friend and colleague, Filip Reyntjens, to

teach graduate seminars at the University of Antwerp, and from Holger Hansen, head of African studies at the University of Copenhagen.

The impact of genocidal violence in the wake of the 1994 Rwanda killings went far beyond the boundaries of the Great Lakes region. In several institutions of higher learning in Europe and the US courses were offered on the theme of comparative genocide. It was my good fortune to cross paths with scholars in the US and Europe who shared my interest in the Great Lakes region, including Reyntjens at Antwerp, Jacques Semelin at Sciences Po, Chalk at Concordia University, and Hansen in Copenhagen. In the US, I became part of a network of genocide scholars, most of them associated with the Institute for Genocide Studies (IGS), headed by the late Helen Fein. To her I owe a huge debt for guiding my early steps towards the comparative study of genocide. Her pioneering contributions are found in a number of publications, including her edited volume *Genocide Watch* (1992), to which I was honored to contribute a chapter on Burundi.

From Bordeaux to Helsinki, from Vienna to Sarajevo, from Oslo and Bergen I ended up offering lectures and seminars that went far beyond the Great Lakes region of Africa, or for that matter the African continent. My principal motivation for getting involved in this exercise stemmed from the anguish I experienced over the years as I watched at close range the expansion of mass murders. It is a sad commentary on the spread of genocidal violence that the “never again” injunction has never been invoked more often than when genocides were being committed.

Perhaps the most difficult challenge I faced while I tried to make rational sense of senseless violence in ex-Belgian Africa came from journalists and politicians who, for reasons best known by themselves, simply refused to accept the evidence of crimes committed by Rwandan President Paul Kagame. In the US, many became associated with what was known at the time as the Washington Consensus. One of the most vocal was the journalist Filip Gourevitch, a close friend of Kagame and one of many who I am tempted to describe as “true believers.” But perhaps the most consistently pro-Kagame cheerleaders were the group of French intellectuals, politicians, and journalists associated with the organization *Survie*. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that by 1994 it had evolved into an association blindly committed to the defense of the victims of the Rwanda genocide—in short, a pro-Tutsi, anti-Hutu, stridently pro-Kagame association. That Kagame’s forces did in fact commit horrific crimes against humanity, as has been demonstrated time and again, was never explicitly acknowledged, even by those who should have known better. This includes Samantha Power, who as US Ambassador to the UN, after her visit to the Central African Republic (CAR) and “convinced that the potential for genocide was real” went out of her way “to reach out to Rwanda president Paul Kagame and got his agreement to send Rwandan peacekeeping troops to CAR.”² She does not tell the reader whether her failed attempt to enlist the support of a key *genocidaire* to thwart another genocide had anything to do with the more successful performance of Russian militias in the CAR. The dividing line between idealism and naiveté is easily crossed.

Looking Ahead

AL: Given democratic backsliding, resurging coups, and the return of conflict and civil war in recent years, do you find yourself more of an optimist or pessimist about the future of African

politics? Do you subscribe to the Africa Rising narrative? Do you believe the continued struggles can still be wholly or partially blamed on the colonial period?



Where memories and events collide—Rwanda, early 1990s

RL: As I am writing these lines, as if to remind me of the flurry of coups sweeping across the Sahel, now reaching the proportions of an epidemic, at the latest count at least seven countries, including Gabon, Burkina Faso, Mali, and even more importantly Niger, have experienced military take-overs. This is not the place for a discussion of the many factors that lie in the background of this unprecedented crisis, including the intrusion of the Russian-backed Wagner militias. Suffice it to underscore the critical importance of the French imperial legacy, the seeming unstoppable proliferation of jihadist elements, the complexity of intergroup rivalries, all of which contributed to the rise of anti-French sentiment. For an outstanding effort to disentangle the many threads of the Sahelian conundrum I can do no better than to refer the reader to the encyclopedic compilation of my friend and colleague Leonardo Villalón, *The Oxford Handbook of the African Sahel* (2023), a testament to his lifelong dedication to explain the politics of the Sahel. Should the ongoing crisis be seen as a brief moment in a long-term reshuffling of regional alliances? A more enduring settling of accounts with the former colonizer? A critical threshold between East and West, a replay of Cold War tensions in a new key? Those are some of the questions that crossed my mind as I tried to speculate about the future of the continent.

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Notes

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² Power 2020, p. 397.