

Learning and Integrating the Quotidian:
Reflections of the 2004 Fulbright-Hays Rwanda Seminar

Patrick Cannon

Assistant Professor of Government

California State University, Sacramento

For many denizens of the Global North, violence, victim, killer and genocide represent the dominant images they associate with contemporary Rwanda. While these images depict a slice of that country's reality, they do not capture all of its reality. An important part of reality that is often ignored is how Rwandans attempt to live normal lives with dignity. By participating in the 2004 Fulbright-Hays Rwanda seminar, I sought to understand Rwanda on its own terms—its current and quotidian reality. How do people make a living? In what kinds of conditions do they work and live? Then, once I acquired this knowledge, how could I use it to inform and to enhance my quotidian reality, namely, the content of the courses that I teach, my research, and my teaching philosophy?

Within the context of the quotidian, I learned the most from three particular activities, which also comprise the highlights of my trip: visits to a fair trade coffee cooperative and cassava packaging plant; visits to two Oxfam conflict resolution projects; and a home-stay with a farmer and his family. On the visit to Maraba, the fair trade coffee cooperative, I had the opportunity to walk the (steep!) hills, observe farming techniques and talk to the managers and workers. On a subsequent visit, I interviewed the managers in more detail, asking questions about the financial aspects, as well as the decision-making and governance, of the cooperative. At the cassava packaging plant, I watched as the women weighed and packaged the cassava and listened to them tell me about their everyday lives. One woman walked two hours each way to her job and most

women said that even with a job, it was still not possible to afford school fees for their children.

At the sites for the Oxfam projects, I witnessed how the organization provides seeds, fertilizer and, in one instance, a cow, if the villagers participated in conflict resolution training, and I observed how the NGO organized and conducted conflict resolution training for widows whose husbands had been killed and women whose husbands were imprisoned for killing during the genocide. Finally, my roommate and I spent a day and night with a farmer, his wife and four children, including an infant. During the home-stay, I experienced not only how a fairly typical family lives, but I also was fortunate enough to learn about the cultivation and management of the family farm. Located way up in the hills, we visited the farm, walked its fields, discussed financial, irrigation and transportation issues, and met other villagers, some of whom had never before encountered anyone from outside the remote location.

No matter how much one reads about another country, its politics, and its culture, there is absolutely no substitute for experiencing—even if for too brief a period—the daily lives of the people who live there. These three highlights of my trip all allowed me to personalize the abstract, become familiar with the unfamiliar, and, above all, to establish an empirical reference to guide my ongoing commitment to and internalization of the neo-Kantian maxim of the equal moral worth of all humans.

The knowledge that I acquired from the above described highlights of the trip has influenced my quotidian reality, specifically, the content of the courses that I teach, my research, and my teaching philosophy. As an Assistant Professor of Government (at CSUS), I teach three courses: an introduction to World Politics, International Political

Economy (IPE), and Globalization. In the first course, World Politics, an introductory course mostly for non-majors, I have enhanced my coverage of peacekeeping with anecdotes from survivors of the genocide and with poignant pictures from various genocide memorials, especially Murambi. In IPE, I now use Rwanda as one example in my (critical) examinations of comparative advantage and neoliberalism, debt relief, and economic and social development. For Globalization, I use Rwanda as one example when I cover fair trade and global poverty. The knowledge that I acquired on the trip has deepened my understanding of these issues, especially how they effect the lives of ordinary people.

In addition to the content of my courses, my trip to Rwanda has also broadened my research interests. While much of my previous research focused on West Africa, I have now become intensely interested in Rwanda and the Great Lakes Region. To commence what I expect to become a life long curiosity (and perhaps research agenda), I have researched and written about the relationship between economic reconstruction, security and reconciliation; the political economy of reconciliation; and fostering social integration in post genocide Rwanda.

Moreover, my participation in the Rwanda seminar has reaffirmed my teaching philosophy. By teaching philosophy I mean the intellectual influences and real life experiences that shape my attitude in the classroom and my attitude toward the subject that I teach. Essentially, two political philosophers---Rousseau and Marx---have informed my teaching philosophy. Not Rousseau the romantic and certainly not Rousseau the totalitarian and not Marx the revolutionary; rather, as representatives of the metastatic tradition, I embrace the Rousseau and Marx that emphasize the interdependence of

human activity and organization and the individual and collective transformative capacity of humans. As a result of my time in Rwanda, I can use my teaching philosophy as a framework to comprehend, analyze and teach the struggles, failures and successes of Rwandans to live ordinary lives with dignity. Such a struggle pervades all of Africa and, according to Ousmane Sembene, explains why “the entire continent is still standing.”¹ In turn, that has made me a better teacher, researcher and global citizen.

¹ Ousmane Sembene is considered the father of African cinema. This quote is taken from an interview with Bonnie Greer in *The Guardian*, 8 June 2005.