

Book Review

Joshua James Kassner

Rwanda and the Moral Obligation of Humanitarian Intervention

New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2013

Reviewed by Howard A. Doughty

It has been about twenty years since the height (or depth) of the Rwandan genocide. In retrospect, world leaders of the day acknowledge a failure to have acted in a timely fashion to prevent or at least ameliorate the events in which no less than 500,000 and, more likely, as many as 1,000,000 Tutsis were slaughtered by members of the Hutu community. The carnage came after a ceasefire in a civil war that began in 1990. The ceasefire was arranged in 1993, but Hutu extremists believed too many concessions had been made to the minority Tutsi people (14% of the population). Then in 1994, Rwandan president Juvénal Habyarimana was killed when his airplane was shot down as it was preparing to land at the airport in Rwanda's capital city.

The genocide followed, carried out with the active involvement of an informal organization of Hutu extremists closely associated with President Habyarimana, his wife and a number of close friends and relatives. The apparent intent was to exterminate the Tutsis. The government and civilian supporters succeeded in killing as much as 70% of the Tutsi people in Rwanda. At the same time, Tutsi soldiers defeated the Hutu government troops and about 2,000,000 Hutu refugees, anticipating a revenge genocide, fled to neighbouring countries. Only then was a massive humanitarian mission organized. By 1996, the civil war spread to Zaire. Fighting continued until 2003 and militarized factions remain active today.

<p>As knowledge of the brutality spread, the international community actively sought to avoid any responsibility ... and did little more than make threats of future consequences.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">- Joshua James Kassner</p>

Much handwringing and a few platitudes have followed, some more sincere than others. Canadian soldier Roméo Dallaire (2003) counts as one of the former. At the time, he was commander of the United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda. He pleaded for additional UN support. He was largely ignored. Nonetheless, he has remained passionately committed to ensuring that the events in Rwanda remain to trouble the consciences of those whose moral failure allowed the butchery to continue. This is how he summed up the matter some years later (Dallaire, nd).

Too many parties have focused on pointing the finger at others, beyond the perpetrators, as the scapegoats for a common failure. Some say the example of Rwanda proves that the UN is an irrelevant, corrupt, decadent institution that has outlived its usefulness or even its ability to stop the genocide. Some have blamed the media for not telling the story, the NGOs for not reacting quickly enough, the

peacekeepers for not having showed more resolve, and myself for failing in my mission.

He explains the events this way:

There is no doubt that the toxic ethnic extremism that infected Rwanda was a deep-rooted and formidable foe, built from colonial discrimination and exclusion, personal vendettas, refugee life, envy, racism, power plays, coups d'état and the deep rifts of civil war. ... Still, at heart, the Rwandan story is the story of the failure of humanity ... The international community...failed to move beyond self-interest As a result, the UN was denied the political will and material means to prevent tragedy.

I

The Rwandan genocide is an example of humanity's failure to come to the aid of others of our species who have begged for help and who died hideous deaths because of the silence with which their cries were met. I repeat their plea to make the point that, although Rwanda has faded fast from the memory of people who should know better—perhaps repressed out of an inchoate sense of guilt, but also merely driven off the current news cycle by similar events, this time entwined with a combination of religious extremism and geopolitical ambition. In any case, I mention it mainly to say that, although Rwanda has been conveniently forgotten by the bulk of the developed world, the moral issues of obligation and betrayal have yet to be addressed.

French diplomats worked to shield the Francophone Hutu government from scrutiny. The eventual French intervention ... served to protect the fleeing *genocidaires*. The machetes used were smuggled in from China through Saudi Arabia to the ... Hutu militia responsible for orchestrating much of the killing. - Joshua James Kassner

The moral argument is the core theme of Joshua Kassner's book. Some readers have noted that *Rwanda and the Moral Obligation of Humanitarian Intervention* really doesn't have much to do with the Rwandan genocide itself. Arjun Chowdhury (2013), for example, says that "readers looking for new arguments or insights on that conflict are best served looking elsewhere" and states flatly that "the title of this book is misleading." That perceived fault, however, may be one reason to pay further attention to the volume. If events in the past decade have shown anything, it is that ignorance, brutality and self-righteousness are as definitive of geopolitics as they have ever been. Morality, where it is mentioned at all, is so horrifically distorted that it cannot be taken seriously as anything other than ideological cover for domestic self-promotion or foreign intimidation. Whether invoking a deity in support of brutality, appealing to fictions of freedom to warrant aggression or railing against others for their invasions while steadfastly ignoring one's own, the mere mention of morality requires an act of contrition on the part of world leaders in the faint hope of redeeming the word at all.

Today's "humanitarian intervention" is only the latest in a long tradition of political obfuscation. – Global Policy Forum

The degraded quality of our moral discourse is therefore the context and the justification for reading Kassner anew.

II

Kassner raises some issues that are familiar enough, but that seldom form the basis for decisive political deliberations. These include such matters as the use of the concept of national sovereignty (still summoned to excuse the refusal of the United States to join the International Criminal Court) to deny the principle of humanitarian intervention and the necessity to recognize international responsibility for creating local conflicts in the first place.

Prior to European colonization, the Tutsi-Hutu divide was about socioeconomic class, not ethnicity. It was the prejudices of the European colonizers that redefined the relationship between Tutsi and Hutu less than two centuries ago. - Joshua James Kassner

Kassner connects his case for humanitarian intervention to the sort of universal human rights long since established by the United Nations. The basic right to security, for example, involves not only the responsibility not to deprive others of their lives and livelihood, but also the duty to act collectively to protect others who would violate that right. In his arguments, Kassner is acutely aware of the limitations and occasional contradictions in human rights theory (whether asserted in the name of a divinity or of nature). He is also cognizant of inescapable pragmatics and understands well the "general consequentialist concern that the intervention may do more harm than good."

In sum, Kassner lays out a number of both philosophical and political objections to international intervention in the case of Rwanda, and he finds them all wanting. The service that he does, regardless of residual concerns about the particular event in question is to re-alert us to the general principles which are commonly used to accept or to reject intervention in the affairs of other nations. He offers "starting point for our discussion ... about the obligation and responsibility of the international community to protect the basic rights of all humanity." This obligation, however, is not to be confused with the provision of emergency assistance in the event of natural disasters such as drought, flooding, earthquakes and volcanic eruptions when individual countries, non-governmental organizations and international agencies seek to compensate for a shortages of food, clothing and medical supplies.

Humanitarian intervention is generally defined as the deployment of military force to ensure the protection of citizens who are threatened either by foreign invaders or their own compatriots in cases of authoritarian repression or civil war. Prompted by the mass killings in Rwanda and Bosnia in the last decade of the previous century, the Government of Canada established the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS) to determine the proper criteria for taking coercive action against another country in order to protect

the people of that country. Replacing the loaded term “humanitarian intervention” with the more congenial term “responsibility to protect” (R2P), the ICISS developed a R2P policy that has been approved by the United Nations and invoked on three occasions to date. It has most recently been given structure by the United Nations which identifies “the responsibility to protect populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity” (United Nations, 2012).

R2P is not without criticism. For example, international humanitarian intervention in the case of NATO’s bombing of Libya has widely been seen as “imperialism cloaked as humanitarianism” (Keeler, 2011). Its flaws have been identified (Pingeot & Obenland, 2014) as including analytical gaps, problematic assumptions and controversial solutions, naivety and a failure to “ask the right questions.” So, Pingeot and Hare ask: “How can we build an international system that can address violent conflicts and crimes when major powers—in particular the permanent five members of the Security Council—have no interest in stopping the violence, or an interest in keeping it going?”

III

Joshua Kassner is not a geopolitical strategist, nor a formal political scientist of any sort. He holds both a Juris Doctor and a PhD in philosophy. He is Associate Professor in the Division of Legal, Ethical and Historical Studies at the University of Baltimore, where he specializes in international law, ethics and political theory. With this background and a self-referenced “passion” for ethics, he stands apart from the majority of well-connected international relations specialists who, in one way or another, enjoy being categorized as “realists.” This doesn’t mean, of course, that they have an objective grasp of global relations or that they can be trusted to come up with successful strategies and tactics to advance national interests.

The absurdities and failures that have dogged foreign and military policies in the United States, Russia, the United Kingdom, China, France and even such smaller countries as Canada are ample grounds for judging their connection to “reality” as ever so slightly inadequate. On the contrary, all that realism seems to betoken is an indifference to ethical and moral concerns and an embrace of power as the chief determinant of right and wrong. They display an affinity for Thrasymachus with a dash of Leo Strauss, duly distorted by some of his more ambitious acolytes such as Paul Wolfowitz, William Kristol and the members of the American Enterprise Institute who became the chief intellectual forces behind the American administrations.

What we may hope is that Kassner and others in the same tradition can assist in the restoration of clear moral thinking in decisions about war and peace, global economics and tyranny at home and abroad. Speaking as a citizen of a modern liberal democracy which has become embroiled for little apparent good purpose in the creation of the failed state of Libya and in what seems to be a state of permanent war in such precarious nations as Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria, we could use some reschooling in the ethics of international affairs.

Kassner’s book is putatively about a humanitarian disaster in Rwanda. Despite ample evidence, the world’s nations allowed genocide to continue unchallenged. On the other hand,

some of those same nations have, on far flimsier evidence and with no solid moral foundation, engaged in “regime change justified as one version of humanitarian intervention.” It moves beyond being yet another “case study,” a simple report on failure. So, Kassner moves the discussion up a notch. He argues that national sovereignty is a conditional right or, more accurately, a “presumption” that applies long as the state does not violate the rights of its citizens to physical security.

Critic Arjun Chowdhury complains that Kassner has added nothing new to the ICISS proposal and to the principles of R2P, nor to previous authors on the same theme such as Martha Finnemore (2003). He therefore dismisses Kassner’s contribution as “anachronistic.” I respectfully demur. Chowdhury himself acknowledges that Kassner has added proposals such as the devolution of decision making on humanitarian intervention/R2P to regional actors. That step alone might have put the responsibility for Rwanda directly on the Organization of African Unity and, in Kassner’s opinion, made a timely intervention more likely; in the alternative, such a devolution might have avoided the catastrophic incursion into Libya and the embarrassment of Hillary Clinton’s jocular comment regarding the torture and brutal assassination of Muammar Qaddafi: “We came, we saw, he died” (Daly, 2011).

More importantly, the fact that internal violence and lawless external interventions—whether humanitarian or not and whether undertaken as a responsibility to protect or a desire to dominate—have plainly not become anachronistic. The lessons to be learned from the Rwandan debacle, the several continuous struggles in North Africa, the Near and the Middle East remain our most compelling international political problems. The case of Rwanda cannot just be put away in the moldy file cabinet of history or flushed permanently down our collective memory hole. As we are learning every day, since we don’t properly remember that history, we seem condemned to repeat it.

Joshua Kassner offers us an opportunity to give the matter sober second thought. That, after all, is what philosophers *do*. Whether people in positions of authority will pay attention is, of course, another matter.

About the Reviewer:

Howard A. Doughty teaches cultural anthropology and political economy at Seneca College in Toronto, Canada. He can be reached at howarddoughty67@gmail.com

References

Chowdhury, A. 2013, June. Review of Kassner, Joshua James, *Rwanda and the moral obligation of humanitarian intervention*. Accessed May 28, 2015 at: www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=31860.

Dallaire, R. 2003. *Shake hands with the devil: The failure of humanity in Rwanda*. Toronto, Canada: Random House.

Dallaire, R. n.d. Rwandan genocide. Accessed May 18, 2015 at:
<http://www.romeodallaire.com/index.php/rwanda-genocide/>

Daly, C. Clinton on Qaddafi: “We came, we saw, he died.” Accessed April 22, 2015 at:
<http://www.cbsnews.com/news/clinton-on-qaddafi-we-came-we-saw-he-died/>

Finnemore, M. 2003. *The purpose of intervention: Changing beliefs about the use of force*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Keeler, C. 2011. The end of the responsibility to protect? *Foreign Policy Journal*. Accessed May 12, 2015 at: <http://www.foreignpolicyjournal.com/2011/10/12/the-end-of-the-responsibility-to-protect/>

Pingeot, L. & W. Obenland. 2014. In whose name? A critical view on the responsibility to protect. Bonn, Germany: Global Policy Forum. Accessed April 10, 2015 at:
https://www.globalpolicy.org/images/pdfs/images/pdfs/In_whose_name_web.pdf

United Nations. 2012. July 25. Responsibility to protect: timely and decisive response – Report of the Secretary-General. Accessed August 1, 2015 at:
[http://www.responsibilitytoprotect.org/UNSG%20Report_timely%20and%20decisive%20response\(1\).pdf](http://www.responsibilitytoprotect.org/UNSG%20Report_timely%20and%20decisive%20response(1).pdf)