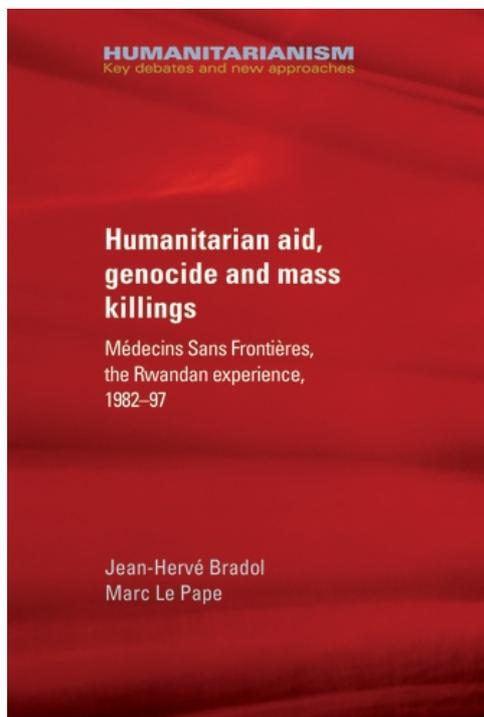


Chronicle of a genocide

Interview with *Marc Le Pape*

As sociologist, Marc Le Pape has conducted research in Algeria, Côte d’Ivoire, and Central Africa. His recent work focuses on the conflicts in the Great Lakes region of Africa. He has co-edited several books like *Côte d’Ivoire, l’année terrible 1999-2000* (with Claudine Vidal, Karthala, 2003), *Crises extrêmes* (with Johanna Siméant and Claudine Vidal, La Découverte, 2006), and with Médecins Sans Frontières, *Une guerre contre les civils. Réflexions sur les pratiques humanitaires au Congo-Brazzaville, 1998-2000* (with Pierre Salignon, Karthala, 2001). Marc Le Pape was a researcher at the CNRS, and is currently an associate researcher at the Ehess (Centre for African Studies). He has just published, with Jean-Hervé Bradol of Crash (Centre of reflection on humanitarian action and knowledge) a book reflecting on the genocide of the Tutsis in Rwanda, drawing from the archives of Médecins Sans Frontières.

Humanitarian aid, genocide and mass killings. Médecins Sans Frontières,

the Rwandan Experience (1982-97)

by Jean-Hervé Bradol and Marc Le Pape

Manchester University Press, 2017

Humanitarian Alternatives — *This book is published nearly 23 years after the genocide of the Tutsis in Rwanda. What prompted it?*

Marc Le Pape — It was just before the 20th anniversary of the genocide of the Tutsis in 2014, when Jean-Hervé Bradol and I asked ourselves what questions could most likely be raised – by journalists, or more generally, by people interested in the subject – on what *Médecins Sans Frontières* (MSF) had exactly seen and done during the genocide. And it was clear to us that we would be unable to answer such questions in a substantiated manner. Jean-Hervé himself admitted that during his time in the field, he did not have a global picture of the events and actions of the entire MSF movement. This, in a way, prompted us to learn more. We also had some more personal reasons for wanting to understand what MSF had experienced, not only during the 100 days of the genocide itself in Rwanda, but also in the preceding years, especially between 1994 and 1997 in the large refugee camps of Zaire [now the Democratic Republic of the Congo, ed.] and Tanzania. Jean-Hervé was in Rwanda when the genocide began, and it was for him, of course, a rather harrowing experience. As for me, I had already been to Rwanda, I had Rwandan

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friends, and with my companion, Claudine Vidal, a sociologist and a specialist on Rwanda, we used to talk at length about Rwanda. And right from the start of the genocide, we got the terrible news of what was happening and of the systematic killings. We were regularly informed of the deaths of Tutsis that Claudine had known through her job years earlier.

H. A. — *The book is distinctive in that it is based on MSF archival material. Why did you take this approach and what did you find that was novel or as yet unpublished in these archives?*

M. L. P. — We believed that those who had gone most unrecognised in MSF's action were the people working in field operations, that is, those who were able to take stock of situations and intervene, who determined which negotiations could be conducted with the authorities, which type and manner of relief could be delivered. Because, even though MSF is widely known for its critical outspokenness, the general public and outside specialists only have a vague idea of what fieldwork entails in this type of setting. This is why we decided to direct our focus on the reports from the field, and there lies the originality of our approach compared to most of what had been written up until then mainly in the areas of macro-policy, macro-humanitarianism, and in the case of Rwanda, for example, the role of the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda. At this micro-level, we could observe field operations as they developed over time and decide whether they should be maintained or discontinued.

We were also interested in the relationship between these fieldwork sites, national capitals, and head offices of the various MSF departments. So, we read the reports coming up from the field, and we saw how the association's head offices responded to them: the types of press releases that were written, and in the reverse direction, how the field reacted to these press releases. In my opinion, this is one of the book's unique features that was unfamiliar to a general audience. In the archives that we consulted, we saw how communication from the field can be reworded for political correctness by headquarters in its announcements, and how the field reacts to this, either by "defending" headquarters to help move things forward, or by objecting to headquarters for a position that it considers to be a source of difficulties or even dangerous.

H. A. — *What surprised you the most about the relationships between the field and the head offices?*

M. L. P. — You are right in using the term "head offices", because the Dutch, Belgian, and French sections were also involved during that whole period, and even during the previous seven years from 1990 to 1997, the ones for which we had the greatest number of records. We found correspondence between Paris, the Netherlands, and Brussels, and this fit our purpose that was meant to disclose not solely the French section's "historical" point of view. Otherwise, we would have seemed to be glorifying it at the expense of the others. No, we tried to write an unbiased account.

Now to directly answer your question, I would say that it depends on the moment in time and the various situations, even considering that the genocide, as such, happened at a very specific moment. And Jean-Hervé surely would not answer the same way as me. But as for me, the most surprising was the extraordinary significance – and the time it took – of counting people, those in the camps, those who had fled, and the victims, both the dead and the wounded. Counting became an obsession, obviously motivated for medical and political reasons. Medically, because of the need to determine the pathologies that had to be treated, the amount of food to supply, etc. But also politically, because it was important, to know through witness accounts how many people had been massacred, how many had fled. Let's not forget the controversy in 1996 when the camps in Zaire were going to be dismantled. Rwanda and the US, its ally, declared that, as all

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the refugees had returned home, the camps in the Kivu could be taken down. But even if about 600,000 refugees had indeed returned home, some 400,000 others were still wandering around homeless, and they needed protection. The point is that figures were immediately exploited by the different parties to come up with a political argument. MSF's desire to get the most exact figures possible came from its need to give convincing weight to its public announcements, press releases, and statements at the UN's Security Council, for example.

H. A. — *An extensive literature has attempted to look into the early warning signs of the genocide by retracing the history of Rwanda and more broadly of the Great Lakes. The strength of your book is drawn from archives going back to 1982 at a time when MSF was there. Did you note any factors that could have foreshadowed future events?*

M. L. P. — Not at that scale. In 1993, after the assassination of Melchior Ndadaye, Burundi's first Hutu president, many Burundians fled to camps in Rwanda where MSF was already working with Rwandan Hutus fleeing the RPF (Rwandan Patriotic Front). The Front had wasted no time in planning massacres later recorded by MSF. And I believe it was at that time that MSF realised that something even more tragic could happen. In 1993–94, the hospital in Kigali was making plans in the event of a major disaster. Massacres of the Tutsis were thought to be likely, but not on a systematic basis over the entire country. In any case, MSF did not really sense anything coming. I should point out that, at that time, MSF, and others as well, still took a rather ethnicist approach to events in Africa as the result of a slightly out-dated anthropological culturalist viewpoint where everything is interpreted in terms of ethnic conflict. Now with such an approach, it was just impossible to imagine that this genocide could occur as it had, that is to say, according to a comprehensive, very precise and ultra-political plan.

H. A. — *Some NGOs have brought evidence that there was a disconnection between the head offices and the field. The field, feeling adrift, was seeking guidance from the head offices, who, at least at the beginning of the genocide, were unable to fully take into account what was really happening. Was this also true at MSF?*

M. L. P. — Jean-Hervé would probably be in a better position to answer this question, since he was at the time either operating in the field or managing a desk at headquarters. As for me, I was mainly investigating the post-genocide period, the camps, and turn of events in Zaire at that time. But I did find records responding to this question. MSF did not detect any disconnection. Jean-Hervé's reports were listened to, because they knew that he quickly understood what was happening. It was the same with reports received from others, who were not necessarily from MSF. I am thinking of Philippe Gaillard from the ICRC in particular. They both realised that it was not a matter of chaos, but that, instead, the administration, the State, the military, all under the management of a hierarchy of command, were together instigating the genocide. These two well-known personalities were kept track of by their respective head offices, as evidenced by the press releases issued at the time and printed in many European newspapers.

H. A. — *After the genocide itself, after the flight of the Hutus, the reprisals by the Rwandan regime, and the situation in the camps of the Kivu, what did MSF archives tell us happened?*

M. L. P. — We learned of the work that had been carried out, in cooperation with other NGOs, to identify which authorities could be addressed to provide aid. As I mentioned, we saw at least 400,000 Rwandan refugees arrive in a matter of days to North Kivu, around Goma. They were also threatened by a cholera epidemic that had just broken out. Everyone wondered how a response was possible under such conditions, and tried to understand what was happening, that

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is because the perpetrators of the genocide, along with their teams and their networks of activists, were present among those refugees.

H. A. — *The controversy raged at the time, especially in the humanitarian community, because it was said that the camps were places where massacres could continue.*

M. L. P. — That's right. And there was a great division within the MSF movement around the usual question: do we leave or do we stay? It was not easy to understand, or at any rate, to make it understood that out of the 400,000 Rwandan Hutu fugitives in the Goma camps, not all were genocidal killers. Far from it. They were just a minority, and here we come back to another controversy, namely, that the escape of all the Hutus from Rwanda was described as having been generally planned. In fact, many people who were uninvolved fled, because their acquaintances, their neighbours, everyone in their village was fleeing, driven by rumours – sometimes true, sometimes unfounded – of massacres perpetrated by the RPF in northern Rwanda. We supplied food mainly to those who had fled, and not to a mass of genocidal perpetrators, as some said. MSF-France withdrew nonetheless from the camps in November 1994 because it did not want to contribute to strengthening the power of genocide agents.

H. A. — *What do you think humanitarians have learned from this genocide?*

M. L. P. — MSF came to really question its own practices. The genocide was an absolute shock that affected all practitioners and all organisations within the humanitarian community. This event is subject and continues to be subject to research, precisely because it was genocide, a term very frequently used to qualify massacres. But in Rwanda there was systematic dimension to the killings and executions that were accompanied by many kinds of cruel acts and, of course, by rape. For humanitarians, this distressing experience that lasted three months was made especially worse by a lack of information on what was happening elsewhere in the country. MSF had a team in Kigali that recorded what was taking place there, but elsewhere it was a matter of rumours. The rumour mill was central during this tragedy. It is something that struck me. I recall the rumour that was spread by someone saying that in a hospital located in a camp in Zaire, male nurses looked like Tutsis, and therefore it was likely that the hospital would be attacked to have those Tutsi nurses killed. What can be done with such a rumour? Whom can you believe? Many supposed Tutsi were murdered based on such rumours. These killings were a direct extension of the genocide, and went by practically unnoticed.

Interview by Boris Martin, Editor-in-chief

Translated from the French by Alain Johnson

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