Politics of Naming and Politics of Responsibility

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Abstract

Mahmood Mamdani is right to complain that the American—and international—public is unaware of the political complexity of the Darfur conflict. He is also right to point out that selective or inconsistent uses of the terms "genocide," "civil war," and "insurgency" can mask covert, or even overt, political agendas. His comparison of Darfur to Iraq is telling. And he is right to point out that even with the best of humanitarian intentions, the presentation of a simplified version of Darfur, in which "Arabs" persecute "Africans," can play into the "war on terror," insofar as, in the minds of at least some of the Western public, "terrorist=Muslim=Arab."

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Mahmood Mamdani is right to complain that the American—and international—public is unaware of the political complexity of the Darfur conflict. He is also right to point out that selective or inconsistent uses of the terms "genocide," "civil war," and "insurgency" can mask covert, or even overt, political agendas. His comparison of Darfur to Iraq is telling. And he is right to point out that even with the best of humanitarian intentions, the presentation of a simplified version of Darfur, in which "Arabs" persecute "Africans," can play into the "war on terror," insofar as, in the minds of at least some of the Western public, "terrorist=Muslim=Arab."

Mamdani criticizes Nicholas Kristof for presenting the Darfur conflict as, in effect, a morality play. It is indeed unfortunate that public attention to severe political conflicts is often determined by who reports on them, and that the public prefers "good guy/bad guy" scenarios over complex analysis. But Mamdani himself, as a scholar writing for a sophisticated readership, does not present the complex analysis one expects from him. He explains the "community-level split inside Darfur," showing that the terms "Arab" and "African" simplify more complicated relations and identities in Darfur. But we do not learn any details about the "struggle for power within the political class in Sudan," which might help us make sense of Darfur. Which factions in Khartoum are struggling, over what, and how does Darfur fit into all this?

Mamdani also criticizes those who suggest that armed warfare is the only way to end the Darfur tragedy. He believes that armed intervention would only increase the likelihood of a more general Sudanese civil war. While the public might liken Darfuri "Arabs" to terrorists, the U.S. government knows that the Sudanese government has proclaimed itself an ally of the Americans against al-Qaeda. The real question right now is whether the Sudanese government will permit United Nations troops to enter Darfur to support the African Union troops already there. The Sudanese government is playing a cynical game, pretending to co-operate with the U.N., then continually stalling or reneging on its agreements. Whatever name we give to it, real people— whether 70,000 or 200,000—have been raped, tortured, mutilated and murdered in Darfur. All sides who commit war crimes and crimes against humanity should be punished, be they the Sudanese government, its proxy *janjaweed* militia, or rebel groups. But in the meantime, the Sudanese government ought to be doing everything in its power to stop the crimes, and it is not.

Mamdani attributes too much responsibility to outside powers, and too little to Africans themselves. Whatever outside powers do about Darfur, whether they are the U.N. or NGOs, Sudanese actors are responsible for what is happening there. Similarly, it is not correct to claim that in Rwanda, the Rwandan Patriotic Front or RPF was a mere "proxy" of the U.S. The U.S. may well have given the RPF the green light: the fastest way other than armed outside intervention to stop the genocide was to let the RPF win the war. But the RPF was acting in its own interests. It was not a proxy army acting in U.S. interests.

Mamdani is correct to draw our attention to the terrible civil/international war in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Feeling guilty about the Rwanda genocide, the Western world has allowed Paul Kagame and the RPF-led government of Rwanda free reign in Congo. Uganda, too, is one of the West's most favored African countries; Yoweri Museveni, its President,

"stabilized" Uganda after a period of intense conflict from 1972 to 1985, and he has followed the West's prescription for economic growth. But, as Mamdani does regarding Sudan, he tells us which outside interests are involved in Congo, but not what the internal politics are. Who are the Hema and the Lendu? Which factions struggling for control of all Congo, or to split Congo into two or more territories, are backed by which outside powers, and in their turn back armed militias within Eastern Congo?

I agree with Mamdani that is it is dangerous—to Africans, if not to Westerners—to pick some leaders as "good guys" and then ignore their internal politics. The International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda should not have been limited to crimes committed only in 1994, and Carla Del Ponte, its chief prosecutor, should not have been dismissed when she tried to prosecute members of the RPF for crimes against Hutu. Neither the southern Sudanese rebels of the earlier civil war in Sudan, nor Darfur's rebels today, were or are innocent of war crimes and crimes against humanity. Perhaps if Robert Mugabe had not been allowed to get away with slaughtering 20-25,000 minority Ndebele in the early 1980s, only two years after he took power in Zimbabwe, he would not be so easily persecuting his own people now. The politics of responsibility supersede the politics of naming: the decisions African leaders take have real, often horrific, consequences, regardless of the labels that outsiders give to those consequences.

One final comment on the politics of naming: Mamdani claims that the "Zionist lobby" is part of the Save Darfur Coalition. Presumably, he means the pro-Israel lobby. He then mentions organizations such as the American Jewish World Service and the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, as part of the coalition. Mamdani is too good a scholar not to be aware that not all Jews are Zionists, and that it is not the purpose of all Jewish organizations to promote Zionism or support Israel. In any case, even if one is a pro-Israel, Zionist Jew, one can also experience empathic feelings toward, and have humanitarian concerns about, people suffering from genocide, ethnic cleansing or war crimes. Jews, like non-Jewish Americans, non-Jewish Africans, Muslims, and everyone else, have complex motives and complex interests.

Rhoda Howard-Hassmann is Canada Research Chair in International Human Rights at Wilfrid Laurier University, where she is affiliated with the Global Studies Program and the Department of Political Science, and is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada. She has published on human rights in Africa and Canada, on women's rights and gay and lesbian rights, on economic rights, and on various theoretical and methodological aspects of international human rights. Her current research project is on Reparations for Africa. She has also established a website on political apologies and reparations.