

Human Rights & Human Welfare

Volume 7

Issue 4 *May Roundtable: An Annotation of "The Politics of Naming: Genocide, Civil War, Insurgency" by Mahmood Mamdani*

Article 4

5-1-2007

The Moral Vocabulary of Violence

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Recommended Citation

Rice, David L. G. (2007) "The Moral Vocabulary of Violence," *Human Rights & Human Welfare*: Vol. 7: Iss. 4, Article 4.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/hrhw/vol7/iss4/4>



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The Moral Vocabulary of Violence

Abstract

What is at stake in labeling a particular incidence of large-scale violence “genocide”? Mahmood Mamdani rightly argues that “genocide” is an insufficient description of the conflict in Darfur. I would suggest that the problematic nature of that terminology goes back to its inception after World War II. Activists have inherited the concept of “genocide” from a particular historical moment. Now, “genocide” carries unique moral weight in the discourse of international politics. When violence against civilians has been widely accepted as a necessary outcome of the preservation of peace, activists find it necessary to imagine a worse evil than the mere fact of indiscriminate killing. The notion of “genocidal intent” fills that role. But the U.N. Commission’s inability to find “genocidal intent” in the killing of civilians in Darfur demonstrates the limits of that very notion. “Genocide” is considered the worst crime against humanity, but too many massacres and incidents of civilian casualties are not included under its rubric.

Keywords

Human rights, Iraq, Darfur, United States, Genocide, United States foreign policy

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The Moral Vocabulary of Violence

by David L. G. Rice

What is at stake in labeling a particular incidence of large-scale violence “genocide”? Mahmood Mamdani rightly argues that “genocide” is an insufficient description of the conflict in Darfur. I would suggest that the problematic nature of that terminology goes back to its inception after World War II. Activists have inherited the concept of “genocide” from a particular historical moment. Now, “genocide” carries unique moral weight in the discourse of international politics. When violence against civilians has been widely accepted as a necessary outcome of the preservation of peace, activists find it necessary to imagine a worse evil than the mere fact of indiscriminate killing. The notion of “genocidal intent” fills that role. But the [U.N. Commission’s](#) inability to find “genocidal intent” in the killing of civilians in Darfur demonstrates the limits of that very notion. “Genocide” is considered the worst crime against humanity, but too many massacres and incidents of civilian casualties are not included under its rubric.

The word “genocide” was coined by scholar and holocaust survivor [Raphael Lemkin](#) in 1944 to describe the crimes committed by the Nazis against the Jews. Although Lemkin was unsuccessful in his attempt to have the term adopted in the Nuremberg trials, it was enshrined in [international law](#) by 1948. “Genocide” began as an *ex post facto* description of a particular crime in a particular place and time, and subsequent applications of the term look back to Nazi Germany as the defining standard. The label “genocide” essentially says “this tragedy is comparable to the Nazis’ attempts to exterminate the Jews.”

In August 2006, I visited an [Anne Frank exhibit](#) in the city of Quetzaltenango, Guatemala. The exhibit drew explicit parallels between Anne Frank’s experience and the experiences of thousands of indigenous Guatemalan children who were massacred, orphaned, or disappeared by the army in the 1980s. The moral of the story: “Guatemalan children were victims of genocide, just like Anne Frank.” It seemed strange to me that human rights advocates in Guatemala found it necessary to rely on the moral authority of Anne Frank’s experience to educate Guatemalans about the violence in their own history. It was as though native Guatemalan stories, which are regularly denied or discredited by some elements of that country’s power structure, could be made more credible through a comparison with the well-documented horrors of the Jewish experience in Europe. The trouble is that the definition of genocide does not travel very well from Nazi Germany to Latin America.

Those who deny that “genocide” took place in Guatemala usually do not deny that many unarmed civilians, children included, were killed in the 36-year [“dirty war.”](#) Instead, they argue, with the language of the *Convention on Prevention and Punishment of Genocide* (1951) that, as required by the definition of “genocide,” there was no “intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such.” These apologists point to the ethnic composition of the country and the military, both of which are majority indigenous. The war, they say, was against communism, not against indigenous peoples. It just so happened that the leftist rebels drew most of their support from indigenous Mayans. Mayans were not the targets “as such,” they say. In the same way, apologists for the Young Turk rulers of the Ottoman

Empire during the First World War often argue that violence was not directed against Armenians “as such”—it was against Armenians who collaborated with enemies of the Empire.

That the language of “genocide” should invite denial is not surprising; any definition of a crime will spur attempts to deny the crime. The problem is that the defining feature of “genocide,” that it be directed against a “national, ethnical, racial or religious group, *as such*,” often makes the description inapplicable to real crimes against humanity. Why was such a strict standard included in the definition?

“Genocide” was first applied to Nazi actions, but not to the [deaths at Hiroshima and Nagasaki](#). There was an [Armenian “genocide.”](#) we are told, but apparently there was no “genocide” under Stalin or Mao. The French deny that [a massacre](#) took place in colonial Algeria. In each of these cases, a major world power is plausibly exempt from the charge of “genocide” because of the strictness of its definition. And to return to the case of Nazi rule, historians are forever reminding us that gays and communists were among the Nazi’s victims, but these non-ethnic victims are quickly forgotten when the language of “genocide” is invoked again. The very notion of “genocide” as a uniquely evil crime enacts its own kind of denial.

Mamdani argues that “genocide has become a label to be stuck on your worst enemy” (§24). In fact, “genocide” has been such a label from the beginning. We need a moral vocabulary of violence that enables us to mourn Sudanese, Guatemalan, and Iraqi children just like we mourn Anne Frank.

David L. G. Rice is a graduate student in political theory at Duke University, where he has worked on campus labor issues with the community organizations Duke Organizing and Durham CAN. He was a volunteer human rights monitor for the Guatemala Accompaniment Project from '03 -'04, and returned to accompany genocide witnesses and case lawyers in the summer of '06. His dissertation is on nonviolent and peacemaking practices.