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# An Abundance of Violence and Scarcity of Words (Book Review)

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## **An abundance of violence and scarcity of words**

Sandra F. Joireman

Gerard Prunier, *Darfur: The Ambiguous Genocide*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007). 236 pages.

de Waal, Alex, ed. 2007. *War in Darfur: and the Search for Peace*. Cambridge, MA: Global Equity Initiative. 431 pages.

Furley, Oliver and Roy May eds., *Ending Africa's Wars: Progressing to Peace*, (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing House, 2006).

It is hard to avoid knowing something about the conflict in Darfur. There are divestment movements, student campaigns, actors raising awareness and the 'genocide olympics' to remind us of the ongoing conflict. There is also an increasingly ugly exchange in which two sides are talking and neither is listening. This exchange is not between the combatants, as one might expect, but among activists and scholars who disagree on the best way to portray the conflict. While it is difficult to avoid knowing something about the violence in Darfur, finding a deeper analysis that goes beyond the attempts to gain attention and muster moral outrage is not easy. Two of the books reviewed here do much to fill this gap by providing rich historical background and resources regarding the political makeup of the area for those who want to know more about the conflict in Darfur. Prunier offers a detailed history of the Darfur region from the time of the Fur Sultanate (late 1600s) forward. The book situates Darfur domestically and within regional politics involving Chad and Libya. De Waal's edited volume provides a forum for voices from Europe and Sudan with a variety of foci but a unifying theme that what is happening in Darfur is a political conflict with specific historical causes. The third book, a compilation by Furley and May, addresses many of the other conflicts in Africa that have not yet reached the point of being labeled genocide.

Historically, Darfur has been marginalized, never reaching a level of importance to the Khartoum government. In North Darfur most Arab pastoralists are landless because they did not receive any rangeland when much of the customary land tenure system of hakura was established in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. When drought came in 1984 'Arabs' moved their herds into new territory in central and Southern Darfur, coming into conflict with farmers. Drought exacerbated the problems of land allocation and property rights which have been central to the African-Arab cleavage in Darfur. A lack of government intervention led to famine and a massive displacement of people as both farmers and nomads left their traditional areas in search of food for themselves and for their animals. Libya, seeking a foothold in Darfur, took advantage of this crisis and began arming the Baggara Arabs, a landless group of Chadian origins that had crossed over into Sudan. In arming the Baggara Arabs the Libyans introduced more weapons to the area than had previously been available, made an overt grab for territory and challenging the authority of the Sudanese state. At that time the state did not respond.

By the early 1990s, Arab identity became associated with pastoralism and African with settled agriculture, with corresponding political connotations as the 'Arabs' were associated with the Khartoum elite in a type of cooptation of the Arab identity and aspirations to power (Prunier 40). Labels of Arab and African are defined uniquely in the Darfur context; they are not based on physiognomic characteristics such as skin color. An illustration of this is present in the documentary, *The Devil Came on Horseback*, a film of Brian Seidle's experience in Darfur with the African Mission In Sudan. In the film Seidle interviews with 'Arab' members of the *jajawiid* militia who have black skin. Jérôme Tubiana, writing in the de Waal volume goes further in noting that the Arab-African divide is not based on skin color, religion or culture, and not even on livelihood, as there are non-Arab herders as well as Arab farmers in Darfur. Tubiana argues that Arab identity is entirely constructed and can be understood as a claim to membership in the ruling group. For Tubiana and others writing in the de Waal volume, the conflict in Darfur is a struggle between those who have land and those who do not in a marginalized part of Sudan that has never been important to the central state.

### *Genocide debates*

Both of the books on Darfur question the use of the word genocide in application to Darfur. They are not the first or the only ones to raise this issue. Mahmood Mamdani has publicly wondered about the appellation of the conflict in Darfur as genocide, while Iraq's conflict, which exhibits similar characteristics, is labeled an insurgency (Mamdani 2007). Calling the violence in Darfur 'genocide' requires identifying the targeted group and proving that it is targeted because of ethnicity, religion or race. Questioning the simplistic explanation that 'Arabs' are killing 'Africans', both Prunier and de Waal argue that the lines between 'Arab' and 'African' are not clear historically and are easily traversed.

Prunier refers to Darfur as an ambiguous genocide, qualifying the label by noting that while violence in Darfur may meet the standards of the 1948 Genocide Convention, it does not look like what we saw in Rwanda or the Holocaust - the attempt to totally eliminate an ethnic or religious group. Darfur lacks both a clearly distinguishable ethnic group and the meticulous planning of previous genocides. One can see his struggle over definition in the following statement.

“The practice of genocide or quasi-genocide in Sudan has never been a deliberate well thought-out policy but rather a spontaneous tool used for keeping together a ‘country’ which is under minority Arab domination and which is in fact one of the last multi-national empires on the planet.”  
(Prunier 105).

While Prunier uses the term 'ambiguous genocide', De Waal eschews the term 'genocide' altogether, calling the conflict in Darfur a war and provides a deep and detailed context for the conflict by examining land holding patterns, local governance, the genesis of the various armed factions and attempts at resolution. De Waal has come under harsh attack for his questioning of the use of the word genocide. John Prendergast

of the Enough Project attacks de Waal in a debate on Newsweek's website for not embracing the term with the lower standards of the genocide convention and he accuses him of parroting the rhetoric of the Government of Sudan and ignoring the targeting of ethnic groups (De Waal and Prendergast 2007). The Genocide Convention defines genocide as the targeting "with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group (*Genocide Convention* 1948)." Prendergast argues that the violence in Darfur meets the standards of the 1948 Genocide Convention and considers any other term not only inappropriate, but also irresponsible.

Genocide is the term that evokes outrage appropriate to the targeting of civilians in Darfur. But this sort of targeting of civilians occurs in multiple contexts around the world, not all of which are genocides. For example, violence in the Democratic Republic of Congo has killed millions of people, the majority of whom are civilians, yet this conflict receives much less attention. Prendergast agrees with Samantha Power, that we should be prompt to call conflicts genocides in order to overcome barriers to external intervention and actually protect the lives of civilians (Power 2003). Yet, use of the word genocide by both governments and activists with regard to Darfur has not led to the desired immediate and significant response.

The debate on terminology will be resurrected by events subsequent to the writing of these books. The Justice and Equality Movement, one of the contingent of Darfur insurgent groups, has launched attacks in the suburbs of Khartoum. Hassan al-Turabi, the movement's most powerful supporter, was put under house arrest and the government of Sudan has been lobbying to have the JEM listed as a terrorist organization. These events all give context to the issue of labeling. JEM would view themselves as freedom fighters and as responding to genocide while the government would call them terrorists.

### *Getting the Language Right*

Darfur is an example of a larger problem. We need better language to describe both the violence that we see around the world and its origins. Many conflicts do not meet the definition of genocide yet result in the deaths of hundreds of thousands or even millions of people. The targeting of civilians in postmodern wars with a variety of strategies and causes has complicated the articulation of both conflict and response. In *Africa's Wars*, Oliver Furley and Roy May decry the lack of adequate language to distinguish intrastate war from coups, genocides and organized crime. They even note the fuzziness of definitions of civil wars - a striking irony given that the measures we have for the presence of civil wars are more clearly established than for other types of conflict (Sambanis and Collier 2005). Conversely, we also refer to conflicts as genocides when they do not fit nicely into the definition of the genocide convention. The Cambodian genocide is one example. It began with the targeting of the so-called 'new' people, or urban dwellers and only later expanded to include the Vietnamese and the Cham. Although the violence eliminated around 50% of the Cambodian population it does not fit the convention's definition of genocide unless we start to call the 'new' people an ethnic group, which is certainly not how they conceived of themselves.

Richard Jackson writing in the Furley and May volume blames theoretical models for contributing to the language problem, arguing that commentators caught in a neorealist framework are unable to identify orthodox warfare techniques and strategies when they are used in conflicts that have been labeled 'tribal' or 'ethnic'. Perhaps there is some solution in the language of "Crimes against Humanity" used by the International Criminal Court. The term is sufficiently dire without some of the definitional difficulties of genocide.

While there is a poverty of our language with regard to violence, that of guilt attribution is far richer. Freedom fighter, revolutionary and terrorist all refer to the same person depending on one's perspective. Those familiar with Rwanda are aware of the way in which language is used to describe what happened there in 1994 with Tutsis referring to 'the genocide' and Hutus situating it in a wider context and calling it 'the war'. Calling it 'the war' blurs the edges of its horror, intentionally so in language used by the group that carries the blame as perpetrators. Genocide attributes guilt and demands a response in a way that ethnic conflict, insurgency or even war do not. But what if genocide is not completely accurate? Should it be used anyway?

#### *Public interest verses accuracy*

There appears to be a tradeoff between public interest in a crisis and accuracy. If we believe accounts from experts, it is not entirely correct to say that people are being targeted for death in Darfur because of ethnicity or race. Does it matter? Invoking genocide provides far more energy in advocacy than an examination of a complex history of political neglect coupled with a resource conflict over land. How many countries can we name in which resource scarcity and a lack of representation feed off of one another until they ultimately result in armed conflict of some sort: DRC, Ethiopia, Sri Lanka. Perhaps this too, needs its own label.

In the case of extreme violence against civilians, as has been occurring in Darfur, it appears that we should err on the side of caution and use the most extreme descriptors of violence which we have. Yet, use of this language may impede adequate solutions to complex problems. In the case of Darfur, if the intent was genocide in the way Prunier discusses it, as total obliteration of a group (as opposed to the looser definition of the Genocide Convention), then this suggests three different options to bring about an end to extreme violence against civilians. One option would be a program of mass re-education of the population which draws attention to the historically variable nature of ethnic difference in Darfur, and promotes greater mutual understanding of difference in the present. Another option would be external military intervention to act as a neutral arbiter and regulate interactions between the warring factions. A third option would be the partition of Darfur and forced resettlement into ethnically homogeneous regions. None of these options seems particularly feasible or, in the latter case at least, ethically desirable. If the violence is, however, genocidal then there is a compelling case for one of these options, regardless of their feasibility. The texts reviewed here, however, suggest that the underlying issues are conflicts over land and democratic representation. This suggests that it is possible to bring an end to extreme violence against civilians, but only if the

underlying issues of political representation and land reform are dealt with. In the case of Darfur there are calls for dealing with these underlying issues as a way forward. The Enough Project brief on Abyei, after violence there in May 2008, calls for all who care about Sudan to consider the interests of the entire country, the conflict in Abyei and the implementation of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, as the context in which a solution to the violence in Darfur could be reached (Winter 2008). This suggests that a resolution of the underlying issues is necessary in order to ensure long-term peace.

### *A call to scholarship*

When the argument over what to call Darfur's conflict is over and attention to the area wanes, students, activists and policy makers will move on. Indeed, some have already done so. We have learned from Darfur that calling a conflict genocide does not lead to the immediate intervention called for in the Genocide Convention. Yet, scholars should take note. A large contribution to the study of political violence could be made by the development of language to describe the types of postmodern warfare that we are seeing. Kaldor (1999) and others have helped us in developing a terminology for conflicts that target civilians, but the issues of intent and intensity of the conflicts have yet to be sufficiently labeled. We should be concerned about violence against civilians and mass killings whether the intent is genocide, political retribution or territorial acquisition. Language frames how we understand conflicts and what we see as potential solutions. Language also frames the attribution of guilt. Without specific definitions and language to assist us in understanding causation in conflicts, responding to them is made more difficult.

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