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Book Review

Gérard Prunier. *Darfur: The Ambiguous Genocide*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005. Pp. 212, cloth. \$24.00 US.

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Written by a noted expert on East Africa, the Horn, Sudan, and the Great Lakes region of Africa, *Darfur: The Ambiguous Genocide* is the first book to attempt to delineate and analyze the various historical antecedents, chronology of events, and ramifications of the current crisis in Darfur, Sudan. In doing so, Gérard Prunier, a research professor at the University of Paris, does a yeoman's job of wrestling with the complexity of historical figures, events, and the Byzantine twists and turns that have taken place within Sudan and Darfur over the past two centuries.

The book comprises six chapters:

- (1) "Independent Darfur: Land, People, History"
- (2) "Darfur and Khartoum (1916–1985): An Unhappy Relationship"
- (3) "From Marginalization to Revolt: Manipulated 'Arabism' and 'Racial' Anarchy (1985–2003)"
- (4) "Fear at the Centre: From Counter Insurgency to Quasi-Genocide (2003–2005)"
- (5) "The World and the Darfur Crisis"
- (6) "Conclusion: Darfur and the Global Sudan Crisis"

In chapter 1, Prunier describes what he calls "the lie of the land." Here he delineates the intricacy and complexity of the cultural and ethnic composition of Darfur and examines Darfur's years of being independent. With respect to the ethnic complexity of Darfur, Prunier asserts that

the present crisis has been presented in the media as consisting of a form of ethnic cleansing verging on the genocidal, as carried out at Khartoum's behest by "Arab" tribes against "African" ones. This is both true and false, and much of this book will be devoted to trying to disentangle the true from the false, the reality from the ideologically structured appearances. (4)

For anyone to even begin to understand what is behind the current crisis, such information is crucial. And at this, Prunier succeeds quite well.

Prunier goes on to state that

The population of Darfur is a complex and interwoven ensemble of tribes, both "Arab" and "African." The situation is further complicated by the fact that some of the "Africans" have lost their language and adopted Arabic, while others practice forms of entrenched diglossia and others still have retained their original tongue. Racially, to use this politically obsolete term, the mix is as complicated as linguistically. In terms of skin color everybody is black but the various forms of Sudanese cultural racism distinguish "zurug" [literally "dark blue," to connote darkness, commonly used as a pejorative to mean "black Africans"] from "Arab," even if the skin has the same color. Usually the difference has to do with facial features (shape of nose, thickness of lips). (4–5)

The above is simply a slice of Prunier's interesting and informative exposition on the issue of race, ethnicity, and "Arab" and "African."

As for the designations "African" and "Arab," it worth noting that during the recent crisis in Darfur, various scholars, investigative groups, and others have addressed the complexity of discerning who is "Arab" and who is "African." In doing so, they have discussed the artificial nature of such a distinction. That said, case law developed at the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) and the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) established that a subjective versus objective determination can be used to ascertain the status of a group. More specifically,

the objective criterion of a "stable and permanent group," which, if considered per se, could be held to be rather questionable, was supplemented in the ICTR case law (and subsequently in that of the ICTY) by the subjective standard of perception and self-perception as a member of a group. According to this case law, in case of doubt one should also establish whether (i) a set of persons are perceived and in fact treated as belonging to one of the protected groups, and in addition (ii) they consider themselves as belonging to such groups. In short, the approach taken to determine whether a group is a (fully) protected one has evolved from an objective to a subjective standard to take into account that "collective identities, and in particular ethnicity, are by their very nature social constructs, *imagined* identities entirely dependent on variable and contingent perceptions, and not social facts, which are verifiable in the same manner as natural phenomena or physical facts."¹

In chapter 2, "Darfur and Khartoum (1916–1985): An Unhappy Relationship," Prunier sets out to explain how Darfur, historically, was marginalized by those who ruled Sudan, be they the British or the *awlad al-Bahar* (literally "sons of the river," i.e., riverine Arabs, who perceived themselves as the "true Sudanese"). Here, Prunier addresses a host of complex issues, including colonial neglect, Darfuri and Sudanese nationalism, "the frustrations of democratic politics in Darfur" (36), how the deadly conflict between Chad and Libya led to an almost complete destabilization of Darfur, and the crippling and explosive impact of the famine that hit Darfur in the early 1980s.

Prunier argues that ultimately,

when the hope and promise of independence [achieved on 1 January 1956] came to nothing, somebody had to be made responsible. And suddenly, in the 1980s, Colonel Gaddafi [of Libya] and Prime Minister Sadiq al-Mahdi [who was British-educated, but deep down an oriental autocrat whose nepotistic and manipulative political style had a disastrous impact on Sudan and Darfur for forty years] gave an answer: Darfur was poor and backward because it was insufficiently Arabized. It had missed out in the great adhesion to the Muslim *umma* [community of believers in Islam] because its Islam was primitive and insufficiently Arabic. (162).

The decisions and actions precipitated by such a perspective resulted in even more agony for the various peoples of Darfur. Indeed, the entrance of Libya into the mix severely exacerbated an already tenuous and volatile situation:

In 1972, [Gaddafi] created the *Failaka al-Islamiya* (Islamic Legion), which in his mind was to be a tool for the revolutionary unification and arabization of the region [both Chad and Darfur]. In Darfur proper he supported the creation of the *Tajammu al-Arabi* (Arab Union), a militantly racist and pan-Arab organization which stressed the "Arab" character of the province. The first target of the *Failaka al-Islamiya* was to be Chad, the second the Sudan. (45)

As for the famine, it, too, produced seeds that ultimately resulted in violent conflict over the next twenty-five years (persisting today). On this topic, Prunier comments as follows:

As the rainfall diminished, the northern areas [of Darfur] slowly became impossible to cultivate, forcing the semi-nomadic tribes and their dwindling herds to become fully nomadic, encroaching more and more upon the remaining pasturelands belonging to the sedentary peasants.

... More boreholes were needed and few had been dug over the previous twenty years. ... Even the water system in the provincial capital of El-Fashir was so degraded that the town dwellers were increasingly getting sick from drinking water polluted by sewage. Funds earmarked for water projects had been stolen, miles of piping imported for Darfur had been lying for years in Port Sudan with nobody bothering to collect it, the rural water teams did not receive their salaries on time, and the relevant ministries in Khartoum simply issued glorified statistics bearing no relationship to reality. ... They [the Darfuris] needed more help from the government and this help was not forthcoming. ... By early 1984. ... large IDP [internally displaced persons] camps appeared in Darfur itself while 60 to 80,000 starving people walked clear across the country to sprawling camps on the outskirts of Khartoum. (49–50, 51)

While the first three chapters present a comprehensive overview of the history of Darfur and address a host of significant issues, the plethora of facts and details and the alphabet soup of groups and organizations—along with the tangled complexity of the issues—make for slow and somewhat tedious reading. Indeed, the sheer number of issues, the frequent shifts in power and leaders, and the innumerable names of individuals, groups, organizations, and dates makes one feel as if one is, at times, trudging through thick mud with loose boots on. Be that as it may, the patient and persistent reader will glean one interesting and significant insight after another.

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 are, by contrast, “quick reads”—highly informative, extremely engaging and thought provoking. Indeed, it almost seems as though the first half of the book was written by one author and the second half by another. To put it another way, the first half of the book feels as if one is working one’s way through a series of long, detailed, and dry encyclopedia entries; the last half feels as if it were written by someone who has been on the ground in Chad and Darfur, and the chapters seem not so much the result of laborious research as something that flowed from the pen of one who knows the issues at first hand and inside and out.

Chapter 4, “Fear at the Centre: From Counter-Insurgency to Quasi-Genocide (2003–2005),” as the title suggests, begins to explore the latest crisis in Darfur, including the question of whether the latter constitutes genocide or not. As part of this process, Prunier addresses the following issues: internal arguments among Sudanese Islamists and their ramifications for Darfur; the Naivasha agreement (which brought an end to the war in the south) and its impact; Khartoum’s reactions to the rebels’ actions in Darfur; murder and rape perpetrated by government of Sudan (GoS) troops and the Janjaweed (Arab militia); and “death by attrition” in Darfur.

Following a detailed discussion regarding the actions and results of the attacks by the GoS and Janjaweed—including the possible motives of the latter, as well as the intent that could be construed from their actions—Prunier notes that

the GOS then took measures which introduced genocidal proportions into the conflict by going deeper than the massacres themselves and targeting the very livelihood of the civilians who had survived the violence. ... On 15 November it blocked a first shipment of food aid for Darfur. ... A few days later Ibrahim Mahmoud Hamid, Minister of

Humanitarian Affairs, declared that there was no food shortage in Darfur. Death had moved to the administrative level. (108)

In chapter 5, “The World and the Darfur Crisis,” Prunier addresses the media coverage of the Darfur crisis; how and why the crisis was initially perceived and described as a “humanitarian crisis,” and the ramifications of that viewpoint; the reactions of the international community to crisis (e.g., that of the United States, the European Union, and the United Nations); and the role of the African Union. The chapter also features a lengthy discussion of the question, “Was there a genocide in Darfur or not?”

As for US Secretary of State Colin Powell’s declaration before the US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, on 9 September 2004, that genocide had been perpetrated in Darfur (a statement based on the Department of State’s Atrocities Documentation Project study²), Prunier notes Powell’s statement that this finding did not mean the United States was obligated to do any more than it already had. Continuing, Prunier observes that “President Bush [was trying] to be all things to all men on the Sudan/Darfur question. . . . What mattered was that attractive promises could be handed around without any sort of firm commitment being made” (140). Sadly, Prunier is absolutely correct in this assertion.

With respect to his own assertion that the situation in Darfur constitutes “an ambiguous genocide,” Prunier gives a long and detailed discussion of a host of issues, including but not limited to the issue of semantics (the distinctions between ethnic cleansing and genocide, and between crimes against humanity and genocide); the definition of genocide as found in the United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide (UNCG); the United States’ September 2004 finding that genocide had been perpetrated in Darfur; and the January 2005 finding of the UN’s International Commission of Inquiry on Darfur that crimes against humanity, but not genocide, had been perpetrated in Darfur. As for his own conclusion, he argues, in part, as follows:

As a rough differentiation we could take “ethnic cleansing” to mean massive killings of a certain section of the population in order to frighten the survivors away and occupy their land but without the intent of killing them all. “Genocide” is more difficult to define. The December 1948 International Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide says that what constitutes genocide is “deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction *in whole or in part*.” I personally have used another definition of the word in my book on the Rwandese genocide, namely a coordinated attempt to destroy a racially, religiously or politically pre-defined group in its entirety. I am attached to the notion of an attempt at *total* obliteration because it has a number of consequences which seem to be specific of a “true” genocide. First the numbers tend to be enormous because the purge is thorough. Second, there is no escape. In the case of a racially defined group, the reason is obvious, but if the group is religiously defined no conversion will be allowed. And if it is politically defined no form of submission will save its members. Finally, the targeted group will retain for many years after the traumatic events a form of collective paranoia which will make even its children live with an easily aroused fear.

. . . If we use the December 1948 definition it is obvious that Darfur is a genocide, but if we use the definition I proposed in my book on Rwanda it is not. (155–56; original emphasis)

Interesting, but practical? Sensible? This reviewer thinks not. First, many, including this author, would question Prunier’s definition of “ethnic cleansing.” For all intents

and purposes, his definition of ethnic cleansing is clearly part of the definition of genocide used in the UNCG. Second, Prunier brings the reader, and the international community, right back into the ongoing debate over the definition of genocide, one that is not going to be solved any time soon and one that is moot in a court of law until the definition in the UNCG is changed. Third, and Prunier admits as much, under the UNCG the current situation in Darfur does constitute genocide.

Prunier begins chapter 6, "Conclusion: Darfur and the Global Sudan Crisis," by noting that while he certainly cannot predict the future of Darfur, a best guess would be that, first, media coverage will wax and wane depending on other global events; and, indeed, that is exactly what has occurred, with Darfur falling off the so-called radar screen when the tsunami hit Asia (December 2004), when Hurricane Katrina wiped out much of New Orleans (August 2005), while Iraq continued to disintegrate as the United States fought its so-called war on terror there (beginning in 2003), with the disappearance of Natalee Holloway in Aruba (May 2005), and with a host of other notable and not-so-notable incidents and events that gobbled up space in newspapers and on radio and television. He also correctly posits that the international community will continue to wring its collective hands over the killing and death in Darfur but will also simply continue its slow and ineffective diplomatic efforts, thus avoiding military intervention. And, finally, he correctly surmises that the Sudanese government will likely "continue to procrastinate, lie and obfuscate in its usual fashion" (159).

As for the international community's blindness to the development of the crisis in Darfur, Prunier concludes with two cogent observations that merit considerable thought on the part of genocide scholars, human rights activists, and others concerned with issues germane to the protection of human rights across the globe. First, he notes, correctly, that

nobody was much interested in the slow development of violence in Darfur into an endemic situation. It was considered by the few people who knew about it as a typical African "ethnic" conflict with a low danger potential. The contrast with the South was reinforced by the spectacular quasi-genocidal policies carried out by the Sudanese government in that region. (161)

Of course, we have seen similar situations played out time and again along these very lines, and only after tens—and, in certain cases, hundreds—of thousands of people have been murdered has the international community finally awakened to the catastrophe. Such blindness and misinformed evaluation of various crises (inadvertent or otherwise) is bound to continue until a sophisticated genocide warning system is in place—and, preferably, under the operation of an independent anti-genocide regime.

Continuing, Prunier makes the observation that

One element which could have alerted foreign observers to the true nature of the Sudanese conflict was the genocidal violence carried out by the Khartoum regime in the Nuba Mountains after 1992. There, after duly proclaiming a *jihād*, it bombed and deported thousands of civilians, penning them up in concentration camps and selling them as slave labour to the large Arab-owned farms in Kordofan. The fact that many victims of this massive violence were Muslim was largely overlooked. Mosques were bombed, Muslims were deported or killed along with their Christian and "pagan" brethren... (161)

The message here, of course, is multifaceted: first, the denial of basic human rights by a government can, and often does, have prolonged, severe, and potentially catastrophic (i.e., genocidal) consequences for the targeted population; second, governments that get away with committing genocide may assume that this impunity gives them a green

light to continue their aberrant behavior at other times, in other places, against other peoples; and, finally, if the international community truly cares about preventing genocide, then it must bring the perpetrators to trial and punish them for the crimes they have committed.

Sadly, over the past decade and a half the international community has learned plenty of lessons about what does and does not work vis-à-vis the prevention and intervention of genocide. In light of the fact that few of those lessons have been applied in Darfur to halt the ongoing genocide, one has to wonder what it is going to take to finally, if ever, get the international community to act on what it has learned.

Notes

1. International Commission of Inquiry on Darfur, *Report of the International Commission of Inquiry on Darfur to the United Nations Secretary General* (Geneva: United Nations, 2005): 126–27.
2. See Samuel Totten and Eric Markusen, *Genocide in Darfur: Investigation into Atrocities in the Sudan* (New York: Routledge, in press); Samuel Totten and Eric Markusen, “The US Government Darfur Genocide Investigation.” *Journal of Genocide Research* 7 (2005): 279–90.