

LAW AND HUMAN RIGHTS

G rard Prunier. *Dar Fur: The Ambiguous Genocide*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2005. xxiii + 212 pp. Glossary. Map. Table. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Cloth. \$24.00.

While Dar Fur in western Sudan is fast disappearing as a multiethnic and economically viable region, reliable and informative works in print about the region and its apparently unending conflict are disappointingly rare. This is why Gerard Prunier's *Dar Fur: The Ambiguous Genocide* is a welcome contribution. It is the first serious study of the internecine warfare that has devastated Dar Fur, that westernmost, landlocked part of the country which has suffered for decades from governmental neglect and underdevelopment. The author's goal is to explore the underlying causes that brought about what he calls the "explosion" in 2003. First he lists, and then implicitly dismisses as insufficient, several explanations commonly regarded in the media as triggers for the bloodletting in Dar Fur. These include the traditional local intertribal competition and warring over grazing rights and water holes (an explanation favored by the government of the Sudan and its allies), a government-sponsored counterinsurgency campaign that got out of hand (an interpretation put forth by some observers of Sudanese affairs), a deliberate pogrom of ethnic cleansing (an accusation nurtured by the insurgents themselves and the anti-Sudan government forces generally), or genocide (which is the official position of the United States).

Unlike previous fighting in the region, the current onslaught by Dar Furian "Arabs" on "Africans" is, the author contends, far from being local, spontaneous, or unplanned. Military campaigns against the insurgents appeared coordinated as government soldiers and warplanes worked closely with "Arab" militia to bring death and destruction to their enemies. The second explanation, that of a counterinsurgency campaign gone astray, is only technically valid, since there is no "clean counter-insurgency" (154) and the "hope that repression would be limited to combatants was completely unrealistic" (155). Thus this explanation, by itself, is still insufficient. That leaves only "ethnic cleansing" and "genocide" as possible explanations. The author condemns the fixation of the media and the politicians in the West on the terms "ethnic cleansing" and "genocide" because of their resonance with the public psyche, but he fails to say anything about the applicability or lack thereof of either term to the massacres in Dar Fur. The reason becomes clear in the concluding chapter, where he boldly, and for this reviewer, inaccurately, introduces *race* (emphasis added) to explain Dar Fur's "ambiguous genocide." He vigorously defends his choice of the word and its resurrection from oblivion at a time when all serious Africanists have abandoned the term as an explanatory tool in any historical context outside South Africa. According to the author, this "Arab racism" was imported into the region in the 1980s when Colonel Gaddafi

of Libya and Sudan's Prime Minister Sadiq al-Mahdi manipulated the ideology of "Arabism," a term Mr. Prunier appears to understand only as a biological phenomenon, to subordinate and fully incorporate Dar Fur into the Arab-Muslim world. Since that time the "Arab" Center (*sic*) in Khartoum, the Awlad el-Balad, almost always sided with their Arab kin in Dar Fur, the Awlad el-Gharib, in what was in fact a "low-intensity-racial conflict" (162).

The first five short chapters of *Dar Fur: The Ambiguous Genocide* are well-researched, carefully argued, and sufficiently documented. The author's contention that the inhabitants in the region of all ethnic backgrounds have had long and mutually beneficial intercourse is convincing, while his argument that the open military involvement of Libya and Chad is central to our understanding of the conflict in Dar Fur is well taken. What is less convincing is Prunier's interpretation of the crisis in Dar Fur as manufactured by Arab racism. Reference to *zurqa*, or Dar Fur "African blacks," is not uncommon among their enemies in Dar Fur, the so-called Arabs. But to claim that the multifaceted conflict is reducible to Arab racism whose destructive power was unleashed upon the innocent in Dar Fur is unwarranted. There are many "Arab" tribes in Dar Fur who have remained largely uninvolved in the carnage, while one of the rebel groups, the Justice and Equity Movement, includes "Arabs" among its members. The writer's position that the potential alliance between what he describes as the "despised" Dar Fur "Africans" and the "slaves" from Southern Sudan may prove fatal to the "Arabs" at the center (164) is correct, but not because of the Khartoum government's presumed racism, as he asserts. It is because the center is unwilling to share power and resources with the periphery. In the lexicon of the military dictatorship in Khartoum there is only one word: survival. They undoubtedly would have used the same disproportionate retaliatory force and brutality if the rebels were the Muslim and Arabic-speaking Beja from the east or their riverine kin, the Nubians and the Mahas from the north. By throwing his weight behind the specious notion of Arab racism, the author falls into the same trap of using the "Arab" versus "African" cliché in Dar Fur, an unhelpful reductionism of which he himself has rightly accused Western journalists in several places in the book.

Had the author resisted reading the Dar Fur crisis through the prism he used so successfully in writing his well-received work *The Rwanda Crisis: History of a Genocide* (Columbia, 1995), the book under review here would have achieved its goal of providing a balanced and informed exposé of the conflict in Dar Fur. Still, I would recommend *Dar Fur: The Ambiguous Genocide* to the specialist as well as the general reader, but strongly advise that they use lenses that are color- and race-blind. In Dar Fur these referents are always in the eyes of the beholder.

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