
Saviors and Survivors

PETER WALKER

REVIEW OF MAHMOOD MAMDANI

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THE HISTORIAN'S TALE

In 1984, Orwell writes of Winston Smith's desperate search to learn the truth about the past. He descends into the bowels of the city to talk to the "proles," but all he gets is reminiscing about the price and quality of beer. A people who have been cut off from their history can be manipulated. This was the point Orwell was making—that a people's history is part and parcel of them. Take away their history and you have diminished the people. A public ignorant of history can be easily exploited and compelled to ignore, empathize with, love or hate "them," and all in glorious two-tone: black and white. Without an understanding of history, it is easier to fall into the trap of being either with us, or against us.

In *Saviors and Survivors*, Mahmood Mamdani shows how the colonial power in the Sudan (the Ottoman Empire and then the British) deliberately rewrote history to suit its own political and economic ends by inventing a native history more useful to them than the Sudan's actual past. He shows how these regions of Africa, which we now call Darfur

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and Sudan, have as vibrant and complex a history as anywhere else in the world. Mamdani tells a story that covers hundreds of years of the interplay of power, land, economics, and religion, and explains the movement of peoples and their changing relationships.

The point of his story is twofold. First, he wishes to quash once and for all the notion that there is some pre-colonial “correct” state to which Darfur should revert. As he shows, almost all our present day notions of what constitute local and community structures in Darfur have been invented and manipulated to suit external purposes. The idea for instance that every “tribe” has a homeland is an invention. It works reasonably well for settled peoples, but is irrelevant for pastoralist groups. Second, by revealing the longevity, vibrancy, and complexity of the Darfuri people’s history, he helps us to acquire an in-depth understanding of their reality. We can no longer see them as caricatures, as facsimiles for suffering, cruelty, oppression, or victimhood. After reading Mamdani, Darfur is no longer about Arabs attacking Africans.

Mamdani also does an excellent job of debunking the construct of race in the Sudan. He analyzes how the concept of race has been manipulated by external actors to allow outsiders to use other peoples’ suffering to support their causes. He shows how the tensions in Darfur are more between different livelihood groups, settled agriculturalists, cattle nomads, and camel nomads, and how these divisions do not split conveniently along racial lines. So to reiterate, Darfur is not about Arabs attacking Africans.

THE ADVOCATE’S TALE

The genesis, purpose, and evolution of the Save Darfur campaign, as described by Mamdani, reads more like a chapter in a John le Carré novel. It is a tale of melancholy, manipulation, and opportunism. It is melancholy because it paints such a dim picture of the intent of ostensibly reasonable people who are nonetheless content to use the suffering of others to further their cause. Manipulation because, as Mamdani sees it, they reduce history and truth to pornography and opportunism, allowing the campaign to be so neatly hijacked in the service of the Global War on Terror. He paints a picture of humanitarian organizers so caught up in their campaign that they have lost touch with reality. Ironically, the Save Darfur campaign, as painted by Mamdani, does just what the old colonial rulers did in Darfur; they blur history and reconstruct it to suit their own ends, in a stereotyping cartoon version of reality. Mamdani shows how estimates of the numbers of people killed have been misused. Advocacy campaigns have chosen to

consistently quote the highest estimates, and to suggest that all deaths in 2004-2005 were from violence and that all violence was by Arabs toward Africans. We now know that the often quoted figure of 400,000 deaths is in reality closer to 70,000 and that those deaths include killings on both sides and death from starvation and associated disease.

WHOSE JUSTICE?

Mamdani does a great job of laying out the dilemmas surrounding the three concepts of justice in Darfur: humanitarian, criminal, and political.

Humanitarian justice is what theoretically drives the humanitarian agencies. They choose to be neutral, to stand back from making judgments on the rightness or wrongness of any one party's case in the hope that this will increase trust and their probability of getting access to provide life saving assistance. But, as in so many crises, this creates real personal and professional dilemmas. If a humanitarian worker has seen atrocities or has good evidence of them, should he or she break the cover of neutrality and report these to the International Criminal Court (ICC)? Can one live personally believing in justice, but professionally practicing neutrality? Next is the criminal justice imperative, which holds that those who have committed crimes should be brought to justice. This imperative led to the ICC's indictment of the Sudanese President. Criminal justice holds that all are equal under the law and that prosecution is not affected by political relevance. Mamdani is not saying the Sudanese President is without blame, but he is questioning both the quality of the evidence being put forward to support the indictment and the serving of the indictment without reference to the larger picture of the future peace of Sudan.

Finally, there is the political justice imperative, which holds that the real issue is justice for the future and for future populations. How does Darfur move forward in a way that builds a prosperous and peaceful future?

If humanitarian workers report alleged war crimes to the ICC, does that rob them of their neutrality? It almost certainly does in the eyes of the Sudanese Government. Does the ICC's attempt to prosecute the Sudanese President for alleged crimes (and not press charges on others on the opposing side who may also have committed crimes) add to the prospects for a peaceful future driven by the Darfurian and Sudanese people, or does it salve the consciences of the liberal West but do little to help Darfur? Does a search for political justice, which plays down past atrocities and crimes, create a lasting climate of impunity or is it the only real way to move on?

In the end, this book is almost a collection of stories: the story of conflicting views of justice, the story of history—other peoples' history—and how desperately important it is to understanding the present. It is the story of the corruption of good intentions, both in advocacy and in practical action, and it is the story of the manipulation of information. Ultimately, although these stories are set in Darfur, they are not about Darfur. The same stories can be told about any major crisis, be it in Afghanistan, or in New Orleans.■

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