

Genocide: a word with many meanings

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Le *Centre de réflexion sur l'action et les savoirs humanitaires* (CRASH) a été créé par Médecins sans frontières en 1999. Sa vocation : stimuler la réflexion critique sur les pratiques de l'association afin d'en améliorer l'action.

Le Crash réalise des études et analyses portant sur l'action de MSF dans son environnement immédiat. Elaborées à partir des cadres et de l'expérience de l'association, ces textes ne représentent pas la « ligne du parti » MSF, pas plus qu'ils ne cherchent à défendre une conception du « vrai humanitaire ». Leur ambition est au contraire de contribuer au débat sur les enjeux, contraintes, limites – et par conséquent dilemmes – de l'action humanitaire. Les critiques, remarques et suggestions sont plus que bienvenues, elles sont attendues.

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The Crash carries out in-depth studies and analyses of MSF's activities. This work is based on the framework and experience of the association. In no way, however, do these texts lay down the 'MSF party line', nor do they seek to defend the idea of 'true humanitarianism'. On the contrary, the objective is to contribute to debate on the challenges, constraints and limits –as well as the subsequent dilemmas- of humanitarian action. Any criticisms, remarks or suggestions are most welcome.

Genocide: a word with diverse meanings

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How should the atrocities committed in Darfur by the authorities in Khartoum be qualified? Ten years after the massacre of Rwandan Tutsis, the response seems obvious. Ethnic cleansing, genocide: the vocabulary of the struggle between races comes all the more easily to the fore at a time when the international community's culpable failure to act over the 1994 genocide is being recalled in this 10th anniversary year. The memory of such criminal indifference goes some way to explaining the degree to which an ethnic interpretation of the conflict has come to be seen as self-evident. But this sense of guilt only serves to strengthen the European colonial imagination, which, with its tribes and ethnic groups, still dominates people's minds where Africa is concerned. And this is precisely the view that sparked the stereotype of "Arab horsemen massacring African peasants", whilst in fact, they are all black, Arabic-speaking and Muslim. Politics, with all that it presupposes in terms of conflict over different forms of power, access to decision-making, the distribution of wealth and the relationship between the centre and the periphery, seems however not to feature in this reading.¹

Neither the strength of representations derived from imperial ethnography nor the fear of leaving the way clear for another genocide can account fully, however, for this problem of qualification. It is important to remember at this point that, far from being a question of hair-splitting, the discussion is fundamental to the nature of international reactions, and it is this status that is morally problematic. It seems as though a strategy of terror consisting of massacres, expulsions and the destruction of villages and crops can only really be taken seriously if it can be related to our own representation of absolute evil, in other words Hitlerian genocide. As in many other areas, the only effect of a Eurocentric interpretation of this kind is to conceal the complexity of the actual situation, replacing it with notions that are quite alien to it. Or rather, if it has any other effect, it is to make us gradually less sensitive to anything that is not seen as a Crime with a capital 'C' and which is then relegated to being just another miscellaneous item in the international news.

In practice, if we want to remind ourselves that peace and democracy are not just something that can be injected into a situation, the current imperatives are clear: continue to exert pressure on the Sudanese government (political condemnation, freezing of assets abroad, judgement of criminals, etc.) to disarm the militiamen, increase emergency aid and deploy significant logistical resources, which are still scandalously inadequate at the time of writing. An armed international intervention in this context would simply heap catastrophe onto catastrophe. It would ruin the possibility of providing more and better relief without offering any kind of political alternative that would support emergence from the crisis, which is the main reason we need to get away from the "all or nothing" approach inherent in a classification of genocide.

However, in legal terms, the Srebrenica precedent makes the accusation a tenable one. If the massacre perpetrated in 1995 was an "act of genocide", as was recently asserted by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, the same can be said of Darfur. But it is the weakness of the notion, and not the strength of the law, that is illustrated here. How many killings and acts of political violence, from Burma to Chechnya and Liberia to Angola, could be classified as "genocide"? Almost all of them, since this highly questionable interpretation reached by the ICTY. Justice gains nothing from maximalism of this kind, and one can only hope that the International Criminal Court will have the wisdom to resist it in future. It can be helped to do so by making political judgements something other than moral condemnation and/or legal verdicts.

¹ Cf. by contrast "Soudan, histoire d'une guerre sans fin", Alternatives Internationales no. 15 and "Le conflit du Darfour n'est pas racial", Marc Lavergne in <http://www.Afrik.com>