

10 Years Later: What Everyone Should Know Now About The Darfur Genocide
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No one could call it a happy anniversary: roughly ten years ago, the Sudanese government embarked on a genocidal campaign in the Darfur province against local non-Arab ethnic groups, a decision which the U.N. estimated as taking around 300,000 lives. Today, violence is still ongoing in Darfur (albeit at a lower level) and, to make matters worse, the government in Khartoum is escalating a murderous military campaign against rebels and local civilians in two other provinces — South Kordofan and Blue Nile. While many experts will likely weigh in this week with detailed and knowledgeable assessments of the violence in Sudan past and present (CAP's Enough Project, for example, is doing a ten-day commemoration event), it's also worth exploring the values at work in anti-genocide campaigns. Because a concern with protecting international human rights, and legal accountability for their violation, has deep roots in the American liberal tradition — a point that should remind us why the suffering in Sudan today should be a critical issue for progressives today.

First, we must understand what's actually happening in Sudan today. In June of 2011, the Sudanese central government attacked the southern province of South Kordofan, home to a series of ethnic groups collectively referred to as the Nuba. The incursion spread to nearby Blue Nile in September. In a sense, the offensives were outgrowths of the semi-settled conflict with the recently independent South Sudan: the anti-government forces in both provinces, the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-North (SPLM-N), began as part the original SPLM, now better known as the South Sudanese Army. The government's move into South Kordofan and Blue Nile was an attempt to destroy the SPLM-N and exert total control over the provinces.

The government's murderous tactics in these fights have proven its leaders have learned the most terrible lesson of Darfur: you can kill civilians with impunity. Khartoum indiscriminately drops dumb bombs from Antonov cargo planes on heavily populated areas in both states. Human Rights Watch has found that "vast majority of bomb victims" in South Kordofan are civilians, largely "women, children, and the elderly." Government forces, who particularly target the ethnically distinct Nuba people, in the province have routinely "shelled and bombed residential neighborhoods, looted and burned down homes and churches, shot at civilians, killed civilians including UN staff, and arrested scores of people suspected of links to the SPLM." The story is the same in Blue Nile: one observer describes the government strategy as "controlling the population and its movement: sometimes by creating the conditions of famine; sometimes by forcing people to flee; and most insidiously, by encircling them to prevent them from moving into rebel-controlled areas or escaping to neighboring countries offering sanctuary." "The result," he writes, "has been immense suffering and slow death."

There's an impulse, particularly strong in certain conservative traditions, to respond to these horrifying events with "that's terrible, but it's not our problem." Whatever one might say about the merits of that position, it's certainly not a progressive one. The long run of left-liberal thought makes clear that that basic progressive commitments, consistently applied, require that the suffering of those outside our borders be treated as very much "our problem."

If there's a single distinctive idea that connects American left-liberal movements throughout the nation's history, it's a broad commitment to the equal treatment of all persons and their interests by the law. Historian Michael Kazin defines the "left" as those "dedicated to a radically egalitarian transformation of society;" drop the "radically," and Kazin's left includes mainstream liberals as well as the radical leftists he has in mind. Making egalitarianism in a broad sense the basic progressive commitment is what allows one to reasonably put the the broad reach of American emancipatory social movements, from abolitionists to progressives demanding a fairer economy in the late 19th century to today's campaigners for marriage equality, under a shared ideological roof.

The thing about egalitarianism, though, is that it's really hard to contain inside national borders. If one accepts the idea that people of all races, classes, genders, and sexual orientations should be treated equally, it's very hard to give a principled reason why one shouldn't extend the same equal moral consideration to people of all nationalities. "What makes it OK to discriminate against someone based on where they were born," the challenge goes, "but not OK to do the same based on their race or sex" — birthplace being, after all, as arbitrary a reason to discriminate against someone as their race or sex.

Like other American egalitarian advances, cosmopolitanism (the shorthand for the idea that moral equality applies across national borders) draws its local foundation from the incompletely-realized universal moral principles laid out in the Founding documents. Thomas Paine's claim that "the cause of America is in a great measure the cause of all mankind" betrays some recognition that what historian Bernard Bailyn calls the shared founding belief in "the abstract universals of natural rights" pointed down the line to a more international sphere of moral concern. As liberal and left thought grew both in the United States and other parts of the world, its scope internationalized, producing the (originally socialist) idea of international labor solidarity and the modern cosmopolitanisms you see from left-liberal philosophers like Peter Singer, Thomas Pogge, and Kwame Anthony Appiah.

But turning these moral ideals into practice requires creating political institutions capable of defending them. Hence the idea of international law and organizations aimed explicitly at vindicating rights across borders. International human rights law and organizations plays the same role globally as voting rights legislation or progressive taxation does domestically; they as the politico-legal mechanisms by which egalitarian moral ideals are realized. Woodrow Wilson, despite being a terrible racist, deserves credit for the first major effort to create such a regime, the League of Nations. Wilson explicitly understood the League as a means of "expressing [the world's] conscience in law," particularly with respect to defending the rights of self-determination colonized people assert against their colonizers. Today, we have the U.N. Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Criminal Court (ICC), and a growing recognition in international law of the international obligations outlined in the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine.

What does all of this have to do with the modern anti-genocide cause, which became organized during the Darfur crisis ten years ago? It suggests it's the frontline of the next logical extension of progressive commitments: the creation of a more cosmopolitan global order. The most basic universal right, presumably, is the right not to be killed without cause. Genocide is a political program whose entire existence spits in the face of that right; it declares that no human life of a certain kind, however innocent, has a right not to be killed. In essence, then, the campaign against genocide is the campaign for equal protection of all people's rights, regardless of their nationality, under law — making it the most recent in a long line of egalitarian political movements.

Sudan remains a critical test for this cause. Though Sudan's President Omar al-Bashir has been indicted for war crimes by the ICC, he still remains at large. While there's increasing evidence that human rights prosecutions are concretely helping advance rights protections, the fact that Bashir (the first sitting head of state indicted) can escape trial by virtue of his standing is clear evidence that these systems are in dire need of improvement.

Moreover, the escalation in South Kordofan (whose governor, Ahmed Haroun, has also been indicted for war crimes in Darfur) suggests the Sudanese government isn't fazed by the prospect of accountability for a renewed campaign of civilian slaughter. International law, despite several modern advances, simply isn't strong enough to deter human rights abusers in far too many cases.

What to do about this state of affairs is a fraught question. It's often assumed that the necessary

implication of the above argument is more military force in more cases, but that's not true: sometimes, military intervention can be counterproductive to humanitarian ends even if it's the right response in other cases. But one thing is for sure: figuring out what to do to make the international system more amenable to treating the citizens of Sudan with the same dignity and worth accorded American, Japanese, or Austrian citizens will be one of the critical questions progressives serious about the implications of their own value system going forward.

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