Genocide and State-Induced Famine: Global Ethics and Western Responsibility for Mass Atrocities in Africa

Rhoda E. Howard-Hassmann

Abstract

This article considers Western responsibility for genocide and state-induced famine in Africa. It discusses colonial genocide in South-West Africa and Congo; post-colonial genocide in Rwanda and Darfur; and state-induced famine in Ethiopia and Zimbabwe. The article differentiates core, contributory, and circumstantial responsibility for genocide and famine, arguing that except for the two colonial genocides, African political actors bear core responsibility. Nevertheless, the West is responsible for protecting the human rights of all Africans, regardless of which political actors caused their suffering. The article concludes by discussing empathy and interest as means to persuade Western actors to devote more attention to Africa.

Global Ethics and Western Responsibility

It appears in the early twenty-first century that economic globalization is accompanied by an increasing sense of ethical globalization. Individuals

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2 Canada Research Chair in International Human Rights, Wilfrid Laurier University (Waterloo, ON, Canada).
are ever more aware of the global causes of human suffering, and more insistent on global responsibility for it. A social movement to ameliorate suffering everywhere has swept the globe since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was proclaimed by the United Nations in 1948. This social movement insists that governments, social organizations, and individuals are responsible for the policies of their real or institutional ancestors, and must make amends. Increasingly, concerned Western citizens believe that even the most faraway instances of genocide and famine are, at least in part, their own responsibility. The world social movement for human rights stretches its responsibilities to encompass the entire globe.

I address these citizens’ concerns in this article with reference to Africa. I consider two examples of colonial genocide, in then South-West Africa (Namibia) and the Congo; two examples of post-colonial genocide, in Rwanda and Darfur; and two examples of state-induced famine, in Ethiopia and Zimbabwe. The discussion below does not refer to any events that occurred after May 31, 2005. In this discussion, I refer generally to “the West,” by which I mean North American and Western European states, institutions, and citizens, differentiated where appropriate. I am a Western scholar concerned with international obligation, and I address a primarily Western audience. This does not mean that I excuse any other international or national actors from their own responsibilities. In particular, as the discussion below will show, the actors who bear core responsibility for post-colonial genocides and state-induced famines in Africa are members of the African political class.

My discussion is based upon a set of assumptions about the nature of responsibility. Thomas Pogge (2002) asserts that citizens ought to bear universal responsibility to protect each other’s human rights. He rejects communitarian arguments that individuals have greater responsibility to their families, communities and nations than to strangers with whom they have no, or very tenuous, connections; in effect, the “concentric-circle” theory of obligation. I agree in principle with Pogge that all states, institutions, and individuals have a responsibility to protect everyone’s human rights. This is how I interpret Article 28 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states that “Everyone is entitled to a social and international order in which the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration can be fully realized.” This is an early instance of global ethics.

Nevertheless, common-sense morality—the intuitive morality that guides citizens making decisions about their own responsibilities—often accepts the concentric-circle theory of obligation (Howard-Hassmann 2003: 200-