

Don't blame the weather for Darfur

Right to
reply

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Europeans have known since the heyday of dependency theory in the 1970s that they are to blame for everything that went wrong and continues to go wrong in the world. So we should be pleased that Mahmood Mamdani ("Beware human rights fundamentalism", March 20) informs us that the mass murder, rape and pillage in Darfur in the Sudan was, after all, the fault of the "good old Brits" for racialising the population of the Sudan with a little bit of environmental degradation in the 1990s, Cold War politics and land reform thrown in for good measure. For who else but the Brits could have thought out such a devious little scheme? Never mind the widespread Arab supremacism of the governing elites in post-colonial Sudan, which played no small part in the civil war against the south, leading to the killing of about two million Sudanese from 1985 to 2005 in an attempt to impose sharia on Sudan's many non-Muslims. Never mind the fact that Alex de Waal and Julie Flint note in *Darfur: A Short History of a*

Long War (2005) that the emergence of Arab supremacist ideologies was a primary factor in the war in Darfur. As Ivor Chipkin notes in a piercing comment on Mahmood Mamdani in *Do South Africans Exist?* (2007), in his work, African agency "dissolves before the terms" of colonial power. Seen through the lenses of post-colonial Marxism, no post-colonials ever seem to have possessed the wherewithal to undo and unthink what colonialism had conditioned them to think and do. "Even our imaginations must remain forever colonised", as a post-colonialist par excellence, Partha Chatterjee, stated in *The Nation and Its Fragments* (2003). One could be forgiven for thinking this makes for extremely reductionistic and deterministic political anthropology.

Like Mamdani, I am no expert on Darfur, but it strikes one that the nomadic tribes of the Darfur region were not necessarily complete strangers to environmental degradation before the mass murderers unleashed their weapons in 2003, or for that matter, in 1987, when the first civil war in Darfur started. After all, we are talking about one of the most arid, harsh and inhospitable human environments on earth here. Readers of the *Mail & Guardian* interested in more serious research on the conflict in Darfur than that which Mamdani has to offer

may want to consult Alex de Waal's edited volume *War in Darfur* (2007) or MW Daly's *Darfur's Sorrow* (2007). In De Waal's volume they might want to refer to De Waal's introduction in which it is stated that "no serious scholar who has done field research in Sudan subscribes to the simple hypothesis that drought and environmental degradation directly cause conflict", plus a footnote informing the readers that "apologists for the Sudan government" have often propagated the notion of environmental degradation as a primary factor for the violence in Darfur. Blaming the weather for Darfur will, in other words, not do. The devil is in the details to which Mamdani continues to pay such scant attention. By dissolving the categories of moral responsibility, human agency and deeply troubling political leadership in a series of articles on Darfur and Zimbabwe, Mamdani does a great disservice to Africans, as well as to academic scholarship.

He should perhaps consider starting a PR consultancy: there are, after all, plenty of post-colonial dictators around in Africa and elsewhere who could do with a better image, and it would appear that post-colonial Marxists do this kind of thing very well. It is also with some interest one notes that

Mamdani now purports to defend the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, a model for political justice which he fiercely criticised while a professor at the University of Cape Town in the 1990s. But maybe consistency isn't a forte of his after all.

In a week in which the South African government has effectively barred the Dalai Lama from the country, it might politely be suggested that Africa could do with a little more, not less, respect for human rights.

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