Joachim J. Savelsberg, *Representing Mass Violence: Conflicting Responses to Human Rights Violations in Darfur*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2015, 360 pp., £29.00 (paperback).

Reviewed by Louise Wise

Joachim Savelsberg's *Representing Mass Violence* is, to date, perhaps the most comprehensive and empirically detailed analysis of competing institutional and mainstream representations of mass violence and genocide in Darfur. Surveying the arenas of criminal law and justice, humanitarian aid, diplomacy and the media, the central question driving his analysis is: what accounts for the contrasting representations of violence and conflict emerging in each of these institutional domains?

His distinctive intellectual route into this question marshals an interesting synthesis of theoretical and conceptual tools, including theoretical criminology, field theory, neo-Weberian institutional analyses and classical works in the sociology of knowledge. The approach leads us to some fresh, although sometimes limited, insights about how "global actors, national contexts, and distinct fields interact to create at times conflicting social constructions of the reality of aggression and suffering in Darfur" (6). A related concern is to explore the "*degrees* to which representations of ongoing atrocities" are shaped by "universal standards, and cosmopolitan sensitivities" (18).

Engagingly written, the book is particularly impressive in its rich and extensive empirical documentation. With the help of a team of researchers, the author carried out an analysis of 3,387 newspaper articles from eight Western countries. He also conducted interviews with Africa correspondents, diplomats and workers from human rights and humanitarian INGOs. An illuminating section of the Introduction, which could be very helpful in teaching, is the analysis of some influential scholarship on Darfur, in which Savelsberg nicely teases out and draws into juxtaposition authors' contrasting interpretive frames and positions on the causes, responsibility and character of victimization. For example, whereas Hagan and Rymond-Richmond view the conflict through the lens of "crime" and "genocide" and connect this to the significance of policy responses grounded in international justice and individual accountability, Flint and De Waal privilege a "war" framing and Mamdani emphasizes the "counterinsurgency" character of the crisis. The latter two develop more historical analyses of conflict dynamics and "diffuse" interpretations of responsibility.

But Savelsberg does not take much of a position regarding the relative strengths of these different positions. And he leaves us hanging when it comes to his own view on these fundamental questions about the conflict. Moreover, despite rightly reminding us that these contrasting sets of authors are situated within "specific

locations in the academic field and in relation to other societal fields”, we could have had more explicit reflexivity from the author himself in terms of his own positionality and relationship to the various fields, forces and milieus that have shaped the book’s arguments and approach.

A number of observations emerge from the empirical research. Some of the most engrossing relate to variation in orientations towards the crisis across national contexts, especially in relation to the “willingness to subscribe to the crime frame” or apply the “genocide” label in Darfur (4–5). Savelsberg connects these contrasting approaches to the specificities of national histories, domestic contexts and collective memories. German reporters, diplomats and NGO workers, for example, tended to be more cautious and reluctant to do so. This was due in part to Germany’s complicated and institutionalized identity as a pacifist former perpetrator nation, and the impact of the long-term “cultural trauma of the perpetrator” (there was wariness about “relativizing” the Holocaust). Ireland’s focus on aid/humanitarianism in Darfur (and their similarly cautious, critical stance towards criminal framings) was rooted in collective memories of the Irish famine, conflict and poverty. In contrast, in the context of unprecedented celebrity-driven activism, the US was more assertive in its framing of the crisis as “criminal” and “genocide” (others have contrastingly and compellingly interpreted the US discursive response through the frame of “bullshit”: Seymour 2013). Interviews with practitioners across human rights, humanitarian and diplomatic domains support his assertion that national contexts significantly influence the shape of institutional framings of violence.

A further central claim, based on the book’s original research, is that “criminal justice actors” such as the ICC have had a significant impact (more so than the humanitarian or diplomatic fields) on the way the media reported the conflict in Darfur. Application of what Savelsberg terms the “crime frame” has “increased substantially” in recent years and this, he says, should be considered a “revolutionary achievement” (4). Part of the reason for this, he explains, is that the logics of the judicial field and the journalistic “rules of the game” and media market pressures intersect in their “need for dramatization and a focus on individual actors” (281). The trend towards greater adoption of the criminalizing frame can be seen not only in the realm of journalism, but also in the political sphere and civil society: “human rights, as a new principle of legitimacy, have come to challenge the notion of national sovereignty and advanced a move towards cosmopolitanism – that is, an incorporation of foreign and distant suffering (Boltanski 1999) into local and national considerations” (17). However, the book is less clear when it comes to thinking through the wider and longer-term ramifications of all this.

The analysis also draws out tensions between different institutional fields. The discussion of Medecins Sans Frontiers (MSF) and Amnesty International (AI), for

example, highlights how the former's self-consciously "neutral" commitments to aid and humanitarianism come into conflict with the latter's commitments to human rights and justice. While AI staff depicted the crisis through a "criminality" frame, highlighting individual accountability and the significance of justice for future prospects for peace, MSF staff privileged the goal of aid delivery, and were more likely to view the conflict through the frame of counterinsurgency, emphasizing complex historical and political causal factors. INGOs are also situated within specific national contexts that "interpenetrate" the logics of each field, demonstrating the multiple, layered influences shaping their respective narratives around Darfur. For example, in the US, AI workers adapted their linguistic and organizational strategies to navigate tensions between the national environment of vocal activism and AI's centralized/hierarchical organizational structure.

The book also develops a discussion of how tensions between peace and justice play out in diplomatic and foreign policy arenas. Diplomats were cautious and sometimes even hostile towards the concerns of justice and human rights, which tended to be prioritized below peace negotiations and humanitarianism. Analysing various diplomatic and political actors, Savelsberg argues that "dedramatising rhetoric" – in this case, *not* using the word "genocide" and focusing on long-term or structural conditions rather than individual accountability – is not so much a product of "rational" calculus to avoid normative pressures to intervene, but rather a reflection of the "habitus of diplomats, cultivated in a field in which representatives of the perpetrating state are central players" (28).

One of the most valuable messages emerging from the analysis is that representations of violence are deeply "consequential". There are, of course, many different ways in which we might interpret the meaning of "consequences" in the context of representations of conflict. The one that Savelsberg appears most concerned with is the "willingness of the international community to intervene, and to do so either with diplomatic, judicial, humanitarian, or military means" (5). This brings us to an understated but central theme of the book – the ostensible advancement of what Sikkink (2011) has termed the "justice cascade". According to this, the increase in holding individuals accountable for serious human rights violations in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries not only promotes transitions to democracy, but can also lead to a "cascade" effect whereby, as prosecutions become the norm globally, potential high-level violators will increasingly be deterred by the international legal consequences of their actions.

Savelsberg argues, not entirely convincingly, that the case of Darfur provides evidence in favour of the justice cascade because interventions of the ICC and UNSC "contributed to a depiction of leading actors of the Sudanese state, all the way up to its mighty president, Omar al-Bashir, as criminal perpetrators" (278). However, despite injecting a degree of caution into the discussion about the

“justice cascade” in Darfur towards the end of the book, the “justice cascade” concept is never subjected to any real critical scrutiny (278).

Indeed, the book seems motivated by a normative investment in the “criminalising frame”, despite also wanting to take it as an object of analysis. This underlying normative arc emerges clearly in the Postscript, where Savelsberg likens the task of those working for and “dedicated” to the institutions he examines to Sisyphus pushing his rock up the hill. Just like Sisyphus, they “will continue their desperate fight for humanitarianism, peace, and justice”. They will continue in the face of “mighty forces” and “in the face of a seemingly hopeless struggle” (286).

Ultimately, Savelsberg’s argument is about much more than representations of violence. Instead, it amounts to a somewhat critical, yet hopeful liberal statement about the potential of international institutions to promote peace and justice globally. Accordingly, he suggests “that the building of global judicial institutions has the potential of contributing to global pacification at the international and national levels” (281–2). Dubious (imperialist, surreptitiously violent) notions of liberal “pacification” aside (see Jahn (2013) and for a recent discussion, Baron et al. (2019)), we get only a vague sketch of the means to realizing these goals, centred on appeals for greater tolerance, cooperation and management of conflicts between different “fields and nations”, and more resilience in the face of “inevitable failures and frustrations” (282). Moreover, Savelsberg does not really step into the thorny terrain of the messy, political, complex and often-dangerous realities of various forms of international interventions, or the ideological underpinnings of such interventions. Nor does he discuss in much detail the ambiguous results and legacies of multiple forms of intervention that have already taken place in Darfur, including the fraught involvement of the ICC.

“Distant suffering”, Savelsberg writes, must be “observed” in order to “advance the search for remedies” (286). This may be the case, but the very possibility of a politics that translates observation by global institutions into benign and meaningful action remains assumed rather than argued. Moreover, for a book explicitly about the processes by which representations and forms of knowledge are produced, the overwhelming focus on Western, external actors (and scholarship) as agents of observation and representation is problematic and ultimately limits the discussion. Although this focus is explained via an understandable methodological rationale, inevitably, Darfur, the actual site of conflict under discussion, becomes a passive object – observed, assessed, adjudicated on – rather than itself a site for the generation of knowledge “about Darfur”. What might we miss when we overlook or fail to centre the perspectives of the multiple (complex, political, sometimes conflicting) actors in Darfur? What are the ethical, political and epistemological implications of such a detached vantage point? Engaging with such questions might open up more critical routes into this important topic.

Nevertheless, the book's specific focus on how distinct social fields produce diverse representations of, and knowledge about, mass violence and genocide is highly welcome. Indeed, the effect is productively destabilizing. The way the author draws together multiple competing domains of representation powerfully illuminates the contingency of depictions we often take for granted, and will undoubtedly be an important building block for future work in this area.

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