

Thomas Werneke. *Die Stimme der Vernunft?: Menschenrechtssprache als Teil des Politischen während des Ost-West-Konflikts, 1961–1973.* Brüssel: Peter Lang/Brussels, 2016. 340 S. ISBN 978-3-0352-6614-6.

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From recent protests declaring “women’s rights are human rights” to George Bush’s justification of the invasion of Afghanistan in the order to “restore human rights [...] to the people,” George Bush, Proclamation 7584, August 2002. to public demands that Angela Merkel include a discussion of human rights in her recent trade talks with China: Political discourse in the latter half of the 20th and early 21st century is nearly unimaginable without the argumentative power of the language of human rights.

Thomas Werneke’s book “Die Stimme der Vernunft? Menschenrechtssprache als Teil des Politischen während des Ost-West-Konflikts, 1961–1973” (“The Voice of Reason? Human Rights Language as part of the Political during the East-West Conflict, 1961–1973”) is one of several works that has emerged in response to Samuel Moyn’s “The Last Utopia” (Harvard, 2010), which situated the birth of modern human rights politics in the 1970s within the decline of older forms of political idealism, and the rise of a new transnational cosmopolitan activism. Werneke’s able contribution attempts to untangle in detail the early establishment of this language by reaching into the 1960s in order to explain how and why human rights as a concept were able to coalesce into the fundamental political norm we understand it as today.

By focusing on a few crucial events – the building of the Berlin Wall in 1961, the drawn-out conflict in Vietnam, and the 1968 Prague Spring

(ending against the backdrop of the entry of both Germanys into the United Nations in 1973) – Werneke elucidates how these concepts were integrated into the value system of political speech in the “western integration zone” (p. 24). He approaches human rights not only as a legal and cultural concept but also as a “psycho-social” one. He follows Michael Ignatieff’s critique of the “idolatry of human rights,” in arguing that they “function as a verbal fetish in the culturally progressive self-depiction of Western society” (p. 26, translation mine).

Instead of simply tracing the meaning of the term human rights through this period of the Cold War, Werneke sets out to use Reinhart Koselleck’s “Historische Semantik” as a means of accessing a deeper understanding of how the orthodoxy of human rights emerged and was defined through political actors. Historical semantics, as pioneered by Koselleck, is a methodology that, building upon “Begriffsgeschichte” (history of concepts), focuses not only on how ideas were used argumentatively, but also how they are embedded in *topoi* (such as civilization and barbarism) – the deeper concepts that frame the debate (p. 50, 54). Deploying this methodology to investigate the language of human rights, Werneke expands his search field to include *Stellvertreterbegriffe* (placeholder / subordinate ideas) such as freedom/liberty, equal opportunity, plurality, standard of living, and self-determination (p. 24, 32). As such, this monograph

delves into governmental statements and debates (in the US: the Congressional Record, the Department of State Bulletin, and foreign policy statements; in West Germany: Bundestag debates, bulletins of the Presse- und Informationsamt der Bundesregierung), as well as the archives of Time Magazine, and Der Spiegel (p. 23).

Western officials linked their foreign policy to the pursuit of human rights by portraying their actions as a fight against barbarism and in support of the development of Third World nations. While the language of self-determination in connection with human rights is associated with anti-imperialism in this era, Werneke shows how this rhetoric was also employed to legitimize the military intervention in Vietnam and used to undermine socialist actions such as the construction of the Berlin Wall, and the invasion of Czechoslovakia.

Werneke concludes that the rise of human rights politics in the Cold War should not be seen solely as a reaction to human rights activism in the 1970s. Human rights were already part of the semantic conflicts of the Cold War beginning in the 1960s. This earlier era was also crucial in the development of how human rights were framed, evolving from a grounding in “standards of civilization” to “standards of living,” in which freedom and prosperity were linked together into the ideals of human rights. In turn, we can also see the rise of human rights activism in civil society as a reaction against such rhetoric, which was so often hypocritical and self-serving.

These conclusions are important and very timely: this era that has been underrepresented in the literature, in contrast to the focus on the crafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights or the human rights “booms” of the 1970s and the 1990s. Werneke’s work complements that of Roland Burke and Steven Jensen who have both argued for the importance of this period and for the issue of self-determination as central to the development of international human rights poli-

tics. For specialists who work on the Vietnam War, the German-German conflict, and the problem of decolonization and self-determination in the Cold War, this volume provides a wealth of close analysis on how the language of human rights evolved in relation to these topics.

A caveat nonetheless is that Werneke’s methodological choices limit the scope of his inquiry to governmental officials and major newspapers (with an online archive). As Meredith Terretta asks of Steven Jensen’s recent work on the same era, “Where are the Lawyers, the Activists, the Claimants, and the Experts?” Meredith Terretta on Steven Jensen’s, *The Making of International Human Rights: The 1960s, Decolonization, and the Reconstruction of Global Values* (Cambridge University Press, 2016), in “Where are the Lawyers, the Activists, the Claimants, and the Experts?” *Human Rights Quarterly*, Volume 39 (2017) 1, pp. 226–233. Employing a historical semantic structure has allowed Werneke to capture all of the various strands of semantic engagement among his subjects in fine detail, but this close textual analysis has come at the cost of examining the repercussions of these semantic struggles on a broader set of social actors. While he makes a number of interesting claims in the conclusion to that effect, one is left wishing to hear more of the author’s interpretations and analysis of the implications of these interconnections.

Ultimately, “Die Stimme der Vernunft?” shows how the methodology of historical semantics can be used to gain a deeper understanding of both how human rights have come to be so prominent in the language of international affairs and how the structures underlying their effectiveness have led to their adoption as part of the competition of the Cold War. This approach avoids the flawed assumptions of earlier works on human rights in the Cold War that take the contents and political power of human rights language for granted without analyzing the conflicts that led to its rise. As such, this monograph is a welcome addition to the

growing literature on human rights, the 1960s, and the Cold War.

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