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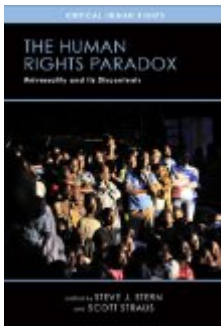

Steve J. Stern, Scott Straus, eds.. *The Human Rights Paradox: Universality and Its Discontents.* Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2014. 274 pp. $21.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-299-29974-3.

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Edited by historian Steve J. Stern and political scientist Scott Straus, *The Human Rights Paradox: Universality and Its Discontents* explores the concept of human rights at "the paradoxical intersection between the universal and the specific." In case studies spanning South and Southeast Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the United States, the authors tackle the complex reality that though "human rights are only imaginable with appeal to the global and the universal" they are "only concrete when they are local" (p. 4). Human rights may acquire their qualities from grand transnational ideas but fundamentally, abuse happens to individuals in isolated locales. While hardly the first to confront this tension between global ideas and local realities of human rights, the essays in this collection add further depth and breadth to our understanding of this complex relationship. [1] Refreshingly, the editors do not pretend to rewrite the field. As Stern and Straus explain in the introduction, the purpose is to open the door to more fruitful scholarship and innovative thinking about human rights. In this, the book succeeds overwhelmingly.

Historian Geoffrey Robinson examines East Timor's post-1975 struggle for national liberation within the contexts of Indonesian aggression and human rights abuse, the Cold War, and the era of international humanitarian interventions in the 1990s. Of particular interest to diplomatic historians is Robinson's portrayal of the West's indifference to the situation in East Timor. The local struggle may have coincided with the grand human rights decade of the 1970s but after the fall of Vietnam to Communism, no American administration would accept further loss of influence in South Asia. Presidents Gerald Ford, Jimmy Carter, and Ronald Reagan all preferred loyal strongmen to unstable and unpredictable independence movements in this part of the world. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Washington not only ignored the human rights violations perpetrated by Indonesian security forces but willingly supported the anti-Communist regime in Jakarta. As Robinson skillfully explains, once the Cold War drew to

a close, ideas of universal human rights eventually found broader favor across the international community and in Washington. Conscious of this changing mood, homegrown East Timorese activists aided by Amnesty International and the local Catholic Church began framing their struggle "as a matter of human rights through national self-determination" rather than a revolutionary war of liberation (pp. 43-44). Their embrace of the human rights language and covenants established by the United Nations ensured increased global attention and helped secure East Timorese independence in 1999. Robinson never quite persuades the reader that the adoption of universal UN ideals was more than a tactical method by those seeking independence but his effective overview of this process should nevertheless serve as a firm reminder that these ideals, at times, have brought tangible political results at the local level.

Political scientist Meghan Foster Lynch's essay about Burundi discusses an oasis of peace in a region characterized by human rights abuses. While widespread violence broke out in neighboring areas in the aftermath of President Melchior Ndadaye's assassination in 1993, the small commune of Rumonge remained fairly peaceful. Having witnessed extensive brutality and acts of genocide twenty years earlier, Rumonge's residents feared another deadly cycle of violence and retaliation. Relying largely on oral interviews, Lynch persuasively concludes that it was the residents' human instinct for survival rather than a belief in the sanctity of human rights that prevented violence from escalating here. Her hope that this case study may serve as a roadmap for the prevention of future human rights abuses is less convincing. Not only is her source base of only forty interviews too narrow to suggest such sweeping conclusions but her argument appears to be undermined by her own insistence that it was Rumonge's exceptional historical circumstances that kept the local area tranquil.

Bridget Conley-Zilkic's "Rights on Display" separates itself from the other contributions in an original way. A former director of the Committee on Conscience at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM), Conley-Zilkic explores museums' roles in the public memorialization of human rights abuses. Placing a particular emphasis on the USHMM and its mission, she examines how memorials can contribute to our understanding of past human rights violations and how they can also raise awareness about current conflicts. To her credit, Conley-Zilkic remains keenly aware that museums can also be used to endorse state sanctioned viewpoints or become platforms for political rhetoric. Her essay centers on the 1993 opening ceremony of the USHMM when President Bill Clinton declared America's commitment to stop human rights abuse absolute. The emptiness of that pledge, Conley-Zilkic points out in some detail, was obvious in Europe as Serbian forces simultaneously engaged in ethnic cleansing in Bosnia while the West stood idly by. Clinton's use of the USHMM as a stage to emphasize America's global role reflects the special place the Holocaust continues to hold in many people's imagination of genocide. This, in spite of scholars' and human rights activists' insistence that it is merely one genocide among many—past and present—that deserve attention well beyond mere rhetoric.

In "Consulting Survivors," a sweeping comparative essay of events in Cambodia, Uganda, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Iraq, Patrick Vinck and Phuong N. Pham examine perceptions of truth, justice, and victimhood at the local level. They demonstrate with authority that however laudable and necessary ideas of universal human rights and the commitment to the punishment of those who violate them may be, such principled positions often clash with local norms, cultures, and realities. Western perceptions of guilt and accountability may appear principally straightforward but in circumstances of escalating local violence and retaliation, where victims are also often perpetrators, the reality of culpability is often

opaque at best. Vinck and Pham emphasize the need for an improved investigative process to understand such complexities at the ground level. In particular, they call for better, safer, and more effective consultations with survivors. Whether in the form of key informant interviews, population surveys, or focus groups, such methods of consultation, the authors imply, might lend voices to survivors and thereby help cement a better understanding of events, of local needs and attitudes toward the reconstruction of societies, and even of the rehabilitation of certain individuals involved in what universally would be defined as human rights violations. Establishing such methods of consultation is an ambitious suggestion but one that the international community is far from institutionalizing. The authors' attempt to draw conclusions across such vast geographical boundaries and sociocultural contexts at times stretches the limits of representation. Even so, they raise questions that are of value to scholars of international relations, international law, human rights, and diplomatic history. Their essay also contributes to the expanding debate on the complexity of perpetrator history that now stretches from Holocaust studies, to studies of the Soviet Union, Africa, Southeast Asia, and elsewhere.[2]

In "Memoria, Verdad y Justicia," the anthropologist Noa Vaisman examines the contemporary human rights organization Hijos e Hijas por la Identidad y la Justicia contra el Olvido y el Silencio (H.I.J.O.S.) and its search for the truth about state-sanctioned violence during Argentina's military dictatorship in the 1970s and 1980s. The chapter contains a fascinating contextual discussion of the elusiveness of "truth" and the difficulties facing the present generation of Argentines as they seek to come to terms with the actions and fate of their parents' generation. Like Vinck and Pham, Vaisman highlights how complex the recovery of the past can be at the local level. She powerfully exposes the intricacy of national debates about human rights abuses—particularly the infamous forced disappearances—in a nation where ideas of commemoration inevitably clash with selective perspectives about what should be remembered and what justice means. Other scholars working on similar topics will be able to draw much from Vaisman's chapter, particularly as it relates to the painful processes of societal and national reconstruction after human rights abuses.

Political scientist Jo-Marie Burt explores issues of accountability and justice in the aftermath of former Peruvian President Alberto Fujimora's 2009 conviction for human rights abuses committed during his decade-long tenure. While most recent human rights cases are prosecuted under an international court, or at least an internationally sponsored purview, it was the Peruvian courts that convicted Fujimora. Rather than set a precedent for local prosecutorial success of universally defined crimes, however, Burt demonstrates how subsequent investigations of other human rights violators in Peru have been blocked. As the political winds that favored investigations in the early 2000s have shifted, acquittal rates have spiked, if cases go to trial at all. Military and government officials often refuse to cooperate with investigators, and activist lawyers and nongovernmental organizations seeking justice in the courts instead find themselves accused of persecution campaigns by powerful conservative forces that have increasingly found their way back into power. Like Vaisman, Burt highlights the enormously difficult task of discovering truth and securing justice when challenged by state opposition and denial about the past. Burt's personal involvement in the Peruvian cases ensures that the chapter is written with enthusiasm and commitment. A little more distance to her topic might have led her to consider whether general national fatigue with past events might also be a factor in the declining interest in these cases. More pertinently to the book's overall thesis, she would have done well to reflect further whether the Peruvian local difficulties reflect a need for *more* international over-

sight and involvement rather than a further expansion of national tribunals.

The final three essays expand the debate to include future human rights challenges. In one of the collection's best chapters, the sociologist Fuyuki Kurasawa examines the potentials and challenges that social media offers for human rights activism. The ability to capture images on cellphone cameras and the opportunity to instantly share these via Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and other web-based services enables a faster and unprecedented proliferation of stories of abuse. Evidence can now "go viral" and generate instant global awareness regarding human rights violations. One positive consequence has been that social media increasingly features as evidence against perpetrators in court. At the same time, the ability to share content across the globe raises concerns locally; what Kurasawa refers to as "irresolvable contradictions" (p. 180). For example, while the digital capture of human rights abuses may be driven by a desire to increase awareness, it also provokes questions about when and how it is appropriate to expose victims' suffering and humiliation. To whom do these images belong? When, to ask Kurasawa's question somewhat more succinctly, does a victim's right to privacy coincide with the world's need to know? Finally, what about violations that are not captured by social media? Is there not a real danger, he pointedly asks, that such events will receive even less attention on the global scale because they go unreported on Twitter? Because Kurasawa's emphasis is primarily on the contradictions caused by the technological revolution of social media, he never answers this latter question satisfactorily. It would likely have required more space than a twenty-five-page essay allows but a greater contextualization would have reinforced his points. One needs only to contrast the manner in which technology exposed events during the Arab Spring with the absence of local social media coverage of far too commonplace events in Africa to answer that question.

The volume's two remaining chapters explore the relationship between access to water and human rights principles. Philippe Cullet focuses his attention on India with its over one billion people for whom the problem of clean water will only continue to grow. In awareness of this, the Indian courts have ruled in a number of separate cases that the state's failure "to provide safe drinking water" to all its citizens is "a violation of human rights" (p. 207). Cullet demonstrates in some detail the evolution of the laws that buttress this legal commitment and the practical obstacles the law faces in a country with a weak infrastructure, and most interestingly he considers ideas regarding the right to water more broadly. This chapter is a solid stand-alone piece on Indian social and legal politics. The attempt to link this narrative to universal ideals of human rights is less successful. Cullet may be correct that "the human right to water is everybody's concern," but as he presents this case, the struggle about access to water in India remains a local issue (p. 220). Phrased slightly differently, it is not clear how this story would be any different if Indian citizens simply had a "right" to water rather than a "human right."

Political scientist Richard P. Hiskes rounds off this volume with a more theoretical essay about environmental human rights. Based on Thomas Hobbes's ideas about the connection between liberalism and mankind, Hiskes explores the potential for human rights principles to evolve from guaranteed individual rights to instead become broad collective rights grounded in social contracts. He sees the scarcity of clean water as an approaching frontier in the human rights struggle and one area where such social contracts established in law may prove necessary. Hiskes's argument presents a philosophical grounding for Cullet's case about India and readers may well find Cullet's essay easier to digest if they first engage Hiskes's argument. As the latter acknowledges, he

probably stretches Hobbes's ideas beyond their limits, but the link he draws between seventeenth-century philosophy on liberalism and the idea of access to water as a fundamental and established social right is original, interesting, and thought provoking.

Essay collections such as this one are often inconsistent in quality and usefulness. At times ***The Human Rights Paradox*** is no exception. While the individual chapters are well written, detailed, and solidly researched, the contributors' attempts to force their narratives into the book's broader framework of tension between the local and the universal at times make arguments appear overly forced. This should take nothing away from the fact that each essay adds considerably to ongoing debates about human rights across several different disciplines. Coming from a variety of fields, the authors deserve credit for having largely avoided the complex theoretical language of their disciplines to provide a readable and engaging collection. As a whole, this volume would be useful for upper-level undergraduate or graduate seminars on human rights. Individual chapters, moreover, could easily be adapted to classes on Asian or African history or courses engaging international law.

Notes

[1]. For similar discussions of the tension between local and universal, see in particular, Mark Goodale and Sally Merry, ***The Practice of Human Rights: Tracking Law between the Global and the Local*** (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007); and Rosalind Shaw and Lars Waldorf, with Pierre Hazan, ***Localizing Transnational Justice: Interventions and Priorities after Mass Violence*** (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010).

[2]. Christopher R. Browning, ***Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*** (New York: Harper Collins, 1992); Anne Applebaum, ***Gulag: A History*** (New York: Doubleday, 2003); David A. Anderson, ***Histories of the Hanged: The Dirty War in Kenya and the End of Empire*** (New York: W. W. Norton, 2005); and Nicholas Werth, ***Cannibal Island: Death in a Siberian Gulag*** (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

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