Human rights have transformed our sense of place. By the 1970s, faraway places such as Argentinean prisons or Soviet psychiatric institutions became part of a new political geography. They represented sites of oppression that helped constitute a global human rights imagination which often appealed to the collective conscience to take action. However, in a world where political power to a large extent has drawn its strength from sovereignty and territoriality, this new geography has faced formidable and often brutal barriers.

How then do you write histories of human rights? It is a question historians have been asking themselves with increasing frequency and intensity in the last decade. Devin O. Pendas has described the recent human rights historiography as “a paradigmatic site for the new transnational history.”[1] Of primary concern to this approach is capturing a diverse range of connections, links, and historical processes across time and space. However, reflections on the relationship between these transnational processes and the deeper meanings of distinct places have not featured strongly in human rights historiography. Methodological reflections on chosen narrative “sites” or vantage points have remained underexplored compared to studies of processes in a transnational domain.

In his most recent book, *The World Reimagined: Americans and Human Rights in the Twentieth Century*, Mark Philip Bradley presents a panorama of images, guiding the reader from, on page 1, a present-day Moscow Cathedral and a 1949 Parisian exhibition space to, in a final scene, a run-down Philadelphia neighborhood where children bounce off abandoned mattresses (p. 239). With each image, Bradley invokes an acute sense of place—its relevance to human rights unfolding in context—and sets out to explore three central questions: “What set global human rights in motion and made them believable for Americans after 1940?”; “How did human rights simultaneously come to reflect and shape transformations in broader American sensibilities of being in the world?”; and “Why have human rights be-
come a ubiquitous moral language today, and what are its limits?” (p. 3).

The United States has too often served as the default vantage point from which the human rights story is narrated but this history is best understood as having evolved through interdependent dynamics in a transnational domain and cannot be adequately captured through a singular US or Western perspective. The book helps with this rebalancing because in Bradley’s telling, the United States was a “late-comer” to the evolution of a global human rights imagination. He makes clear the need for “provincializing America” in our historical understanding of the evolution of international human rights (p. 9). It is a timely repositioning and one with which future scholars will now need to contend. To good effect he uses this historiographical insight to subtly structure his narrative. He applies a musical metaphor to explain the history of the United States in the making of the global human rights imagination, calling the relationship a “contrapuntal” one—a concept describing a musical composition where two melodic lines move separately but relate to each other across a sheet of music (p. 239). If the 1970s witnessed the emergence of an American human rights vernacular it was one “that took shape and form in a transnational imaginary” (p. 224).

_The World Reimagined_ is divided into two parts: part 1 focuses broadly on the 1940s, and part 2 covers the 1970s. This reflects a standard periodization in human rights historiography (which has tended to overemphasize these two decades). Bradley does, however, effectively capture the discontinuities and ruptures in the American human rights story by showing how the contraction and abandonment of human rights in the United States in the aftermath of the 1940s human rights engagements were and are integral to the wider story. Viewing the two decades as “contrapuntal moments” yet not connected in direct chronological terms, he presents their separate-ness as part of a larger story (p. 5). This is therefore not about the continued rise of human rights, as some of the earlier human rights histories led us to believe.

Part 1 (the 1940s) in actuality stretches from the 1930s to the early 1950s and this broad approach allows the consolidation of several important observations. To great effect Bradley weaves together Depression-era photography as a genre of social reportage, wartime rights debates, the experiential dimension of witnessing atrocity, and the legal reasoning introduced in a range of cases brought before US courts in the late 1940s that used the new human rights principles from agreed UN documents in so-called “global rights cases” (p. 99).

Economic and social rights are given their proper due in relation to civil and political rights (considered “coeval in the 1940s,” p. 221). Bradley effectively explains how integral they were to any elaborate framing of human rights at this stage. His arguments help illustrate what scholars are now increasingly pointing to; namely, that the Cold War narrative of the West promoting civil and political rights and the communist East promoting economic and social rights is misleading, if not an outright manipulated account. The real fault lines lie elsewhere.

Another fault line the author lays bare is the one which has too sharply divided human and civil rights. The American rights narrative has too readily defined these as opposites, without adequately accommodating the overlaps and, when viewed less normatively in varying historical contexts, their commensurable quality. This appreciation is often a hard sell in an American context but Bradley importantly argues, “human rights as a marker for the civil rights struggle resonated more broadly in the American domestic political culture of the late 1940s” (p. 102).

With Bradley’s excavation of points and fault lines, the reader arrives at a more nuanced understanding of the American rights vernacular of
the 1940s—and the powerful political forces that effectively closed it down—as part 1 recognizes the “diverse repertoire of rights claims that Americans advanced in the postwar period” (p. 99). The chapter “Conditions of Possibility” looks at a number of local- and state-level cases of great principle value that were brought before US courts in the 1940s. What makes these court cases stand out was that UN Charter provisions and standards from the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights were introduced to inspire new domestic judicial decision making. These efforts essentially failed. Racism remained such a powerful jurisprudential standard in the United States that it served as a veto in legal decision making. The attempts at promoting a modicum of legal internationalism collapsed under the weight of deep tradition and an emphasis on legal sovereignty. Bradley’s exposition of the 1953 Bricker Amendment and the consequential undoing of the human rights imagination draws on work by Danish scholars Thomas Blom Hansen and Finn Stepputat. He calls attention to Senator John Bricker’s necessity for “repeated performances of sovereignty to mask its inherent instability” (p. 111). Whatever the lack of conceptual stability, it was politically effective. With a fine line, Bradley traces the “American allergy to international human rights law” back to the Bricker Amendment process and in doing so sheds light on a political fracture larger than commonly appreciated (p. 230).

Part 2 of the book retreads relatively common ground when covering dissidents such as Alexander Solzhenitsyn or Vaclav Havel and other developments such as the 1970s human rights activism in Latin America, but the inclusion of these elements has its own logic as a counterpoint to the American reimagining Bradley presents. While he does not provide much new insight on the history of human rights elsewhere, he consistently brings its story back to how global events shaped American sensibilities. The transnational dimension supports a declaration of independence from an American-dominated view of the evolution of human rights and Bradley’s narrative eloquently shifts America’s place in this story from the driver’s seat to that of a fellow passenger. This may benefit the larger, transnational enterprise of human rights history, as it enables more space to rethink the role of other geographies.

Structural transformations and epochal changes in the political and economic world order, while present in the narrative, become more the backdrop to understanding the development of the human rights imagination. This approach has some commonalities with a history of emotions approach since the aim is “foregrounding shifts in global affect and feeling for the making of human rights history” (p. 8). Bradley focuses on social suffering, moral witness, and the testimonial turn—features not unknown in the wider human rights scholarship—with the latter two identified as dominating features of the 1970s political landscape, which saw a renewed interest in human rights. Here, it is noteworthy that the notion of the “experiential”—a phrase referred to numerous times throughout the book—is applied as a mediating concept for these explorations. This concept has slowly gained traction as a pedagogical principle in human rights education: the idea of drawing on people’s lived realities to invite further learning as opposed to merely discussing normative content. It has also made inroads in museology, where the concept of “experiential landscapes” has served to investigate “spaces of memory as intersections of both physical and cognitive landscapes.”[2] The World Reimagined shares an affinity with this latter approach. Its use of the “experiential” becomes a way—both in terms of method and interpretation—to reflect on the meaning of place and to grapple empirically with the relationship between power and meaning. Importantly, Bradley is not blind to the fact that focusing on experience may risk precluding “critical examination of the working of the ideological system”—a realization that sometimes
does not sit easily with the sensibilities of the so-called global human rights imagination (p. 148).

Toward the end, Bradley observes that after the 1940s human rights “have never come home again as a fully believable language at the grassroots level to address domestic rights issues” (p. 230). At the same time, he argues, it is still necessary to contend with “the enduring presence of human rights in the American cultural landscape” (p. 234). As this contrapuntal reimagining now faces a new chapter in American life, how history will inform this seemingly paradoxical relationship remains uncertain. Bradley has brought forward its transnational interfaces and its inherent tensions.

*The World Reimagined* is an artful book in all positive meanings of this word. The source material encompasses photography, theater, literature, and painting. It is therefore of little surprise that the concluding chapter, where Bradley places his study in the context of twenty-first-century human rights debates, takes its title from a literary work—Julian Barnes’s masterful 2011 novel, *The Sense of an Ending*. In the early stages of this novel a vital scene takes place in a history class at a British sixth form college around 1960, where a pupil declares with youthful exuberance: “History is that certainty produced at the point where the imperfections of memory meet the inadequacies of documentation.”[3] Mark Philip Bradley has done a remarkable job of addressing the imperfections of memory and the inadequacies of documentation as they relate to an important part of human rights history, justifying a readership well beyond academia. He has also succeeded in a subtle repositioning of that physical and imaginative place called America and its role in the global human rights story.

Notes


If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-diplo


URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=48191

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.