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Inventing Human Rights: A History by Lynn Hunt
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International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-), Vol. 83, No. 6, Africa and Security (Nov., 2007), pp. 1193-1194
Published by: Wiley on behalf of the Royal Institute of International Affairs
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/4541918
Accessed: 23/05/2014 13:12

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Book reviews

Human rights and ethics

Inventing human rights: a history. By Lynn Hunt. New York: W. W. Norton & Company. 2007. 272pp. Index. $29.95. ISBN 0 393 06095 0.

Contemporary human rights scholarship suffers from two major flaws. First, it is trapped in an intellectual tradition of linear progressivism that tends to hinder proper understanding of the nuances inherent in the idea of human rights. The trend has been to present human rights—despite frequent setbacks and many contradictions—as part of the saga of relentless human progress. The second flaw is the overwhelmingly presentist character of human rights scholarship, reflected in an inordinate preoccupation with the here and now.

Lynn Hunt's *Inventing human rights* addresses both flaws. It marks an important addition to the growing body of scholarly works that seek to bring distinctly historical perspectives to the subject of human rights. Focusing on the American and French Revolutions and the Declarations they inspired, Hunt traces the impact of enlightenment ideas on the social and political expansion of human rights. The equality, universality and naturalness of rights gained direct political expression for the first time in the American Declaration of Independence of 1776 and the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen of 1789. These developments underscore a 'sudden crystallization of human rights claims at the end of the eighteenth century' (p. 20).

What this book so eloquently reminds us of are the tensions and contradictions that have historically underlined ideas about human rights. Those who confidently declared rights to be universal in the eighteenth century turned out to have something much less all-inclusive in mind. They excluded those without property, slaves, women and religious minorities from full participation in the political process. Hunt takes the position that while we should not forget these glaring restrictions placed on rights by eighteenth-century men, we should not stop there. The book explores how these men, living in societies built on slavery, subordination and seemingly natural subservience, came to imagine men (and sometimes women) not at all like them as equals. This, the author argues, is crucial to the history of human rights.

One of the most interesting contributions in this study is the connection that it makes between changes in social attitudes and the expansion of human rights. Drawing on Benedict Anderson's *Imagined communities* (1991), Hunt argues that 'imagined empathy' served as the foundations of the social and political transformations that revolutionized the notion of human rights. The notions of bodily integrity and empathetic selfhood have histories not unlike those of human rights, to which they are intimately related (p. 30). Learning to empathize, along with new concern for the human body, led to the public rejection of judicial torture that opened the path to human rights.

While most of Hunt's arguments are convincing some seem far fetched. One example is her suggestion that reading of accounts of torture had 'physical effects that translated into brain changes and came back out as new concepts about the organizations of social and political life' (p. 33). This claim appears to dabble into the realm of psychoanalysis that is hardly the province of the historian. Another shortcoming that some will find with this book is that it is decidedly Eurocentric. By

International Affairs 83: 6, 2007
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limiting a discussion on the 'Invention of human rights' to the history of the western world, Hunt lends credence to the construction of human rights as something invented in the West and exported to the rest of the world. Unless used figuratively, the term 'invention' clearly gets in the way of a full historical understanding of the complex cross-cultural processes by which human rights ideas have evolved. It implies too one-sided a happening. In all, however, this book brings a welcome and refreshing perspective to human rights scholarship.

Bonny Ibhawoh, McMaster University, Canada

Ethics in action: the ethical challenges of international human rights non-govermental organizations. Edited by Daniel A. Bell and Jean-Marc Coicaud. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2007. 320pp. Index. Pb.: £19.99. ISBN 0 521 68449 1.

This edited collection examines some of the dilemmas faced by non-governmental organizations (NGOs), funding foundations and national human rights institutions based in developed states that work in the area of human rights protection and promotion at the international level. While a number of contributions stem from individuals working in academia the book predominantly features perspectives from professionals in the field.

Broadly speaking, four questions seem to have concerned the authors over the different sections of the book. The first is the issue of how NGOs raise funds, in particular whether publicity campaigns exploit and misrepresent the helplessness of the people they are intending to assist. The portrayal of individuals in developing countries as powerless victims, it is said, encourages a 'pornography of poverty' (p. 23) which propagates inaccurate stereotypes among the public in developed states, as well as failing to direct attention to the complicated root causes of poverty and inequality. These contributions highlight an important long-term barrier for NGOs working to generate stable income from a public which has not been educated in the systemic injustices existing in the relationships between developed and developing states. However, several of the authors appear overly convinced of their own point of view without considering that in certain situations the portrayal of individuals as helpless (e.g. as a result of large-scale natural disasters) or as victims (e.g. of a tyrannical government) may actually be accurate.

Second, the book explores the problems that NGOs encounter when they decide to collaborate with regimes well known for human rights abuses in the hope that they may make a small short-term or great long-term improvement. The current dilemmas facing NGOs cooperating with the US in Iraq and with the Chinese government provide very interesting examples. Third, the book examines the alleged bias of NGOs in favour of civil and political rights and away from economic and social rights. While some of these contributions merely repeat the existing debate among academics about the value of economic and social rights a particularly interesting chapter by Kenneth Roth discusses the practical application of the methodology applied by Human Rights Watch to 'investigate, expose, and shame' violators of economic and social rights (p. 172). The other question addressed in the book concerns the way that NGOs should allocate their resources. In a particularly sophisticated (and complicated) chapter Thomas Pogge sets out a proposal for NGOs to dedicate their funds in such a way as to help the greatest number of individuals escape the greatest amount of harm. While the discussion is extremely interesting it is difficult to imagine NGOs actually using this kind of ethical sausage-making machine. Nevertheless, the complexity of the equations used by Pogge does a lot in itself to highlight the absurdity of the existing gap between rich and poor states.

With some notable exceptions, the collection's forte could not be said to be academic rigour. Many of the chapters are almost entirely descriptive and several of those that attempt to explore the ethical questions do so in a rather journalistic tone. However, this is not to say that the book does not make an important contribution to academic study and debate in this area. Its strength is the wealth of information it provides on the experiences of NGOs, funding foundations and national human rights institutions which would only otherwise be available to a researcher through interviews. As such it allows those studying the practice of human rights NGOs to acquire a taste of the activities they are involved in and the political, practical and ethical problems that they face in

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