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Mark Philip Bradley. "American Vernaculars: The United States and the Global Human Rights Imagination." *Diplomatic History* 38:1 (January 2014): 1-21. DOI: 10.1093/dh/dht123. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/dh/dht123>

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Mark Philip Bradley's article, which was first delivered as a presidential address at the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations annual meeting, is a bottom-up approach to understanding the increasing salience of human rights over the course of the twentieth century. Rather than examining high-level diplomats or officials, Bradley focuses on why average people became concerned with human rights violations at two junctures. In his telling, the increased importance of human rights was the result of changing understandings of the role of the United States and Americans in the world. His article is yet another example of the merits of adopting a transnational approach when considering questions of human rights.

In delving into debates about the chronology of U.S. attention to human rights, Bradley asks if the 1970s really was the 'indispensable' decade. Bradley is making a gentle suggestion that historians of human rights are too concerned with periodization, expressing concern that such undue attention leads their narratives to be too present-centered. Bradley argues that lost in debates about the relative significance of the human rights 'booms' of the 1940s and 1970s is an understanding of fundamentals. Bradley's principal focus is instead the foundation for these booms, arguing that important cultural developments made human rights 'believable' to Americans in these years.

His article turns many conventional narratives on their heads by offering new explanations for why Americans came to care about human rights in the twentieth century. Overall, Bradley attributes greater significance to cultural forms rather than diplomatic policy, sees the violations that mobilized Americans to be as often domestic as foreign, and depicts Americans as followers, not leaders in the human rights movement.

A significant segment of Bradley's article is reminiscent of Lynn Hunt's *Inventing Human Rights*, in that he explores the potential impact of 1930s photographs of poverty in America in shaping the ways Americans viewed their relationships to other people.¹ He argues that 1930s *reportage* exposed many Americans to the social and economic privations of their fellow citizens during the Great Depression, whereas many previous accounts have framed American awakenings to human rights in the 1940s as a response to events abroad.² Bradley explains the emergence of a human-rights consciousness in these years as due instead to distinctly domestic encounters. Interestingly, the implication of Bradley's argument is that domestic human rights violations of social and economic rights, rather than foreign political and civil rights abuses, prompted the American turn toward human rights in the 1940s. In advancing this interpretation, Bradley complicates and expands the existing debate regarding the influence of awareness of the Holocaust on U.S. support for human rights in the United Nations.³

Bradley similarly upends much writing about U.S. attention to human rights by suggesting the idea of human rights that captivated Americans in the 1970s was foreign in source; put another way, Americans imported their concern for human rights. Bradley writes, "it can be difficult to acknowledge the extent to which U.S. engagement with human rights in the 1970s was as much if not more the story of the importation of ideas into domestic space as the exportation of American values out into the wider world" (15). This is in contrast to the dominant narrative of the 1970s, and particularly of the Carter years, in which the United States championed its own values in campaigns for human rights abroad. Bradley cites as evidence not only the importation of European advocacy organizations such as Amnesty International but also the adoption of the language of human rights used by European diplomats and dissidents. In understanding how the American imagination was again piqued in the 1970s, Bradley pays particular attention to the 1973 publication of Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago*, arguing that Solzhenitsyn's trilogy fueled a focus on individual victims.⁴ In Bradley's telling, a shift away from scrutinizing social and political systems to understanding the plight of individuals or humans characterized Americans' thinking about human rights in the 1970s. His insight dovetails with the popularity of Amnesty International and its adoption

¹ Lynn Hunt's *Inventing Human Rights: A History* (New York: Norton, 2007) argued that eighteenth century epistolary novels inspired empathy in French citizens who read them.

² See for example, Elizabeth Borgwardt, *A New Deal for the World: America's Vision for Human Rights* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2005).

³ For an overview, see Daniel Cohen, G. "The Holocaust and the 'Human Rights Revolution': A Reassessment," in Akira Iriye, Petra Goedde and William I. Hitchcock, ed. *The Human Rights Revolution: An International History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 53-72.

⁴ Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago, 1918-1956* 3 vol. trans. by Thomas P. Whitney and Harry Willetts (New York: Harper & Row, 1974-8).

model— each adoption group took three political prisoners, one each from the Western world, communist bloc, and neutral camp – which suggested that every system had political prisoners. Certainly those attentive to human rights in the 1970s recognized that right-wing regimes targeted victims as much as left-wing regimes did. Bradley’s focus on the individual may, however, overlook the extent to which activists were also propelled by opposition to a leader, regime, or system.

Finally, Bradley characterizes Americans as following, not leading, the human rights movement in the 1970s: “[President Jimmy Carter] was right to suggest there had been a global explosion of interest in human rights in the 1970s. But Americans did not get there first. One might argue that they got there last” (14).

In seeking to explain what made human rights resonate more in the 1940s and 1970s than previously, Bradley gazes carefully at moments before human rights booms, focusing upon what came before, not after. Yet, he still relies on the idea that there were two key human rights booms – in the 1940s and 1970s rather than highlighting many smaller but nonetheless meaningful moments along the way.⁵ At least in terms of periodization, his argument remains committed to existing patterns.

One of the key arguments of Bradley’s address is the assertion that before the middle of the twentieth century, Americans did not believe that “the suffering of strangers ...matter[ed] as much as their own” (21).⁶ He does not demonstrate that such sympathy had not existed previously; the work of Julia F. Irwin and Gary J. Bass on American sympathies for Cubans in their fight against the Spanish, American responses to the 1821 Greek revolt against Ottoman rule, and Americans’ revulsion at reports of Armenian genocide in 1915 convincingly argues otherwise.⁷ Their scholarship and that of others demonstrates that Americans in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries cared about the plight of European pogrom, famine, and genocide victims – a contention with which Bradley must grapple in order to prove that American feelings in the 1930s and 1970s were fundamentally new.

⁵ For a discussion of human rights outside of the 1940s and 1970s, see Sarah B. Snyder, “Human Rights in the Cold War,” in *The Routledge International Handbook of the Cold War*, ed. Artemy Kalinovsky and Craig Daigle, (Routledge, forthcoming 2014).

⁶ Mark Philip Bradley, *The United States and the Global Human Rights Imagination* (forthcoming 2015).

⁷ Julia F. Irwin, *Making the World Safe: The American Red Cross and a Nation’s Humanitarian Awakening* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 12-7; and Gary J. Bass, *Freedom’s Battle: The Origins of Humanitarian Intervention* (New York: Vintage Books, 2008), 3, 95-9, 326-34.

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