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The Essential Decade for Human Rights?

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The Breakthrough: Human Rights in the 1970s. Edited by Jan Eckel and Samuel Moyn. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014, 339 pp., $79.95 hardcover (ISBN-13: 978-0812245509).

The 1970s has long been a forgotten decade among historians, sandwiched in between the ostensibly more noteworthy 1960s and 1980s, with those writing about it forced to claim that "something happened" (Berkowitz 2006). Recently, the decade has garnered more attention in its own right, particularly with the publication of *The Shock of the Global: The 1970s in Perspective* (Ferguson et al. 2010). One of the factors driving concentration on the 1970s has been the increased attention devoted to human rights in that decade by elite and non-governmental actors. To explore human rights politics in the 1970s in greater depth, Jan Eckel and Samuel Moyn have put together a volume that examines the decade as the time of a "moral breakthrough of human rights" (p. 3). The collected essays are written by a diverse range of contributors, based in the United States and Europe and at various stages in their careers. The authors examine human rights activism in at least ten countries and focus on broader themes such as the influence of decolonization, globalization, and détente on developments in the decade.

This book's target audience is at specialists in the history of human rights. As such, it assumes knowledge of the historiography and key terminology. For a book focused so heavily on periodization, however, the coeditors do not explicitly define the 1970s, leaving the authors of each chapter to explain the relevance of the decade to their case studies. For example, Benjamin Nathans shows that in the Soviet Union and much of Europe, the 1970s may have begun with the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. However, with the notable exception of Simon Stevens' contribution on British anti-apartheid activism, too few contributors make their conception of the 1970s clear.

Many of the volume's contributors grapple with Samuel Moyn's book, *The Last Utopia* (2010), particularly with his contention that human rights "emerged in the 1970s seemingly from nowhere," and his assertion that the 1970s moment was distinct from that of the 1940s. Several authors, however, do not see the 1970s as a crucial decade for the issue areas on which they focus. For example, Ned Richardson-Little sees limited influence for the Helsinki Final Act and human rights more broadly on the German Democratic Republic in the 1970s, which he attributes to the government's successful co-option of the rhetoric of human rights in preceding years. Similarly, Celia Donert argues, "the 1990s rather than the 1970s appear to be the heyday of human rights mobilizations for women's advocacy groups and NGOs" (p. 86). For her, the 1970s was the origin of the "boom" that would come two decades later. Stevens' chapter looks at two anti-apartheid campaigns, both of which essentially took place outside the 1970s: the Stop the Seventy Tour, designed to prevent South Africa's cricket team from touring Britain, was launched in September 1969 and achieved its objective in May 1970, while the City of London Anti-Apartheid Group was not formed until

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January 1982. In his chapter, Eckel is less strident about the 1970s as a point of origin than Moyn has been; however, a more rigorous discussion of the meaning of the decade could have explained the place of these seeming exceptions in the collection as well as clarified the key distinctions between the 1970s and late 1960s, which seems just as compelling as a turning point for human rights.

Mark Bradley (2014) has recently suggested that the focus on the 1970s by human rights historians is too present-centered. Similarly, he has warned that being overly concerned with periodization makes one potentially lose sight of the fundamentals. In the context of *The Breakthrough*, the danger is a failure to explain what might have made the 1970s a key moment in global human rights history. Only a few contributors take on the question of why attention to human rights flourished in the 1970s. Patrick William Kelly argues that human rights gained increased salience in the 1970s due to a corresponding rise in border crossings of exiles in that period. Alternatively, Daniel Sargent argues that globalization, détente, and "individualist liberalism" fueled the rise of human rights. Sargent's interpretation suggests that in a world made seemingly safer by détente, people could turn their attention to smaller ills such as human rights abuses. In Nathans' view, the key shift of the decade was the development of empathy for others or the "kindness of strangers" as he puts it. In the final chapter, Eckel argues that a litany of factors such as decolonization, détente, mass media, new social movements, empathy, changes in leftist politics, and transformations of Protestant and Catholic churches led to the emergence of human rights in the 1970s.

One of the most impressive chapters is Lasse Heerten's exploration of the intersection between the Biafran War and what he calls the "1970s human rights moment" (p. 16). Historians of human rights have ruminated over this question before, with one of the volume's coeditors arguing the war did not serve as a catalyst for human rights activism. In a brilliant discussion, Heerten argues that Biafra did indeed influence a turn toward human rights, even if the new direction in human rights politics inspired by the war—this being genocide prevention—did not become a principal focus of human rights discussions at the time. Heerten explains how different audiences viewed the war and that in the United Kingdom, Biafra was seen by many outside the government in human rights terms, as genocide against the Ibo people. One important question he raises about the 1970s is whether what was new in that decade was that people were noticing human rights violations, which had after all long existed, or rather whether they felt compelled to act in response to human rights abuses for the first time.

Sargent's and Kelly's chapters are two of the other highlights of the collection. Sargent's piece moves across the decade adroitly, grappling with big questions such as how we define human rights, and whether those definitions change over time. In his contribution, Kelly makes an important distinction between human rights talk, which he sees as an "activist language" in this period, and human rights action. He could, however, have done more to define terms such as solidarity, or to explain how opponents of the Brazilian government's emphasis on torture meant that they were not using the "language of human rights" (p. 91).

Greater editorial intervention in organization and defining terminology could have lent more coherence to the volume. In addition, the authors could have made more connections across chapters. For example, how did the national Polish circumstances that Gunter Dehnert describes fit into the broader trends that were significant for Sargent? Nonetheless, the book is an important intervention in ongoing debates over how to write the history of human rights. In addition, it heralds the next generation of stars who will write it.

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