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Introduction by Sarah B. Snyder

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**Kathryn Sikkink. *Evidence for Hope: Making Human Rights Work in the 21st Century.***  
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**Introduction by Sarah B. Snyder, American University**

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Kathryn Sikkink's scholarship, in particular *Activists Beyond Borders*, written with Margaret E. Keck, *Mixed Signals*, and *The Justice Cascade*, has inspired a generation of scholars who have followed her efforts to analyze U.S. human rights policy, human rights politics in Latin America, and the influence of transnational human rights activism.<sup>1</sup> Her new book, *Evidence for Hope: Making Human Rights Work in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, further confirms her place as a major figure in the field. Future scholarship on the origins of international protection of human rights and the significance of those efforts will have to grapple with her new work. Sikkink divides her account into concerns about human rights' legitimacy and effectiveness, and I will discuss the reviewers' comments similarly.

All four applaud Sikkink's efforts, as David Bosco puts it, at "recovering the movement's diverse origins." She highlights the contributions of the Global South and particularly actors from Latin America to shaping human rights norms and mechanisms such as the 1948 American Declaration of the Rights and Duties of Man. In Michael Posner's view, Sikkink has written a "persuasive" "defense of the international human rights movement and the international legal order that lies at its foundation." Although there are differences among the reviewers as to how "US and Europe-centric" earlier scholarly accounts have been, all appreciate Sikkink's efforts to bring in varied actors and efforts "from former colonies and the developing world." Furthermore, the book's photographs highlight women—Madame Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit of India, Bertha Lutz of Brazil, Hansa Mehta of India, and J. Marguerite Bowie of the United Kingdom—who were deeply involved in these early international human rights efforts.

In terms of effectiveness, Sikkink wants us to think more critically about how we measure change. Posner writes that Sikkink's book is a "measured and carefully researched case for why the internationalization of human rights is making a difference in real people's lives." Sikkink demonstrates measurable progress in decreasing genocide, capital punishment, deaths from famine, and infant mortality, which she regards as indicators of political, civil, social, and economic rights. At the same time, she tracks improvements in women's rights in terms of girls' education. Like Sikkink, Posner emphasizes how much improvement has been made, pointing in particular to the contrast between today and the mid-1970s when he first became active on human rights.

Wendy Wong engages more with methodological questions and how the use of annual composite datasets may be skewing the effectiveness of human rights. In particular, Wong highlights Sikkink's discussion of the "information paradox," difficulties in measuring some types of human rights abuses such as torture, and "negativity bias." Sikkink's chapter on what works in promoting human rights synthesizes a wide range of research to emphasize the efficacy of decreasing violent conflict, promoting democracy, stifling dehumanizing ideologies, ratifying and enforcing human rights norms, enhancing accountability for violations, and bolstering human rights activism.

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<sup>1</sup> Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998); Kathryn Sikkink, *Mixed Signals: U.S. Human Rights Policy and Latin America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004); and Kathryn Sikkink, *The Justice Cascade: How Human Rights Prosecutions are Changing World Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2011).

*Evidence for Hope* seeks to rebut critics of human rights, including Samuel Moyn, Stephen Hopgood, and Eric Posner. She takes issue with their periodization, “comparison to the ideal,” and claims about the relationship between human rights and neoliberalism (47). As an exercise in academic debate, it is refreshing. Too often scholars tiptoe around their disagreements, leaving readers to wonder about the identity of the targets of their veiled barbs. In Bosco’s view, however, Sikkink goes too far in suggesting that such scholars should not have simply criticized human rights but should also have offered a “detailed alternative.”

The most substantial criticisms of *Evidence for Hope* come from Vanessa Walker and Bosco. In Walker’s view, Sikkink has not offered a “coherent definition” of human rights, leaving it unclear how Sikkink distinguishes among human rights, humanitarian, and social justice movements. Walker is similarly critical of Sikkink’s “vagueness” in terms of the policy recommendations that comprise the sixth chapter. According to Walker, Sikkink “offers little in the way of how to implement them.”

Bosco finds Sikkink’s description of the Cold War one dimensional and “blinkered.” In a similar vein, he challenges Sikkink to imagine a more ideologically diverse readership beyond “the disillusioned left.” As he puts it, “Keeping progressives engaged in the movement is important, but keeping the movement from being perceived as little more than leftist politics on the international stage may be more so.” Finally, Wong wonders if Sikkink’s optimism poses some risks of teleology. She notes that Sikkink’s focus on progress might lead her to drift toward comparisons against the ideal for which she criticizes other scholars.

In conclusion, all four authors praise Sikkink for writing a clearly argued case for the efficacy of human rights; indeed, Wong asserts that it is “sure to become a classic.” Beyond its clarity, the reviewers sympathize with the commitment driving Sikkink’s scholarship. As Walker characterizes it, Sikkink’s work is a “from-the-heart rally cry against pessimism and apathy of academics, the public, and activists themselves.” All four reviewers are convinced that the “gloom” surrounding human rights is overblown, and that, as Sikkink argues, there is “hope for human rights principles and practices.” For those who might still despair, perhaps they can take comfort in one of Sikkink’s principal arguments—that “human rights change takes time.” (195)

### **Participants:**

**Kathryn Sikkink** is the Ryan Family Professor of Human Rights Policy at the Kennedy School of Government, and the Carol K. Pforzheimer Professor at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study. Her book *Activists beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics* (co-authored with Margaret Keck; Cornell University Press, 1988) was awarded the Grawemeyer Award and the ISA Chadwick Alger Award and her book *The Justice Cascade: How Human Rights Prosecutions are Changing World Politics* (W.W. Norton, 2011) was awarded the Robert F. Kennedy Center Book Award and the WOLA/Duke University Award.

**Sarah B. Snyder** teaches at American University’s School of International Service and is the author of *From Selma to Moscow: How Human Rights Activists Transformed U.S. Foreign Policy* (Columbia University Press, 2018) and *Human Rights Activism and the End of the Cold War: A Transnational History of the Helsinki Network* (Cambridge University Press, 2011).

**David Bosco** is Associate Professor at Indiana University’s School of Global and International Studies. He is author of *Rough Justice: The International Criminal Court in a World of Power Politics* (Oxford University Press, 2014) and *Five to Rule Them All: The UN Security Council and the Making of the Modern World* (Oxford University Press, 2009).

**Michael Posner** is the Director of the Center for Business and Human Rights and the Jerome Kohlberg Professor of Ethics and Finance at NYU Stern. From September 2009 until March 2013, he served in the Obama Administration as Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor at the U.S. State Department. From 1978 to 2009, he was the Executive Director and the President of Human Rights First, a U.S.-based human rights advocacy organization. Posner holds a JD from the University of California, Berkeley Law School, and a BA with distinction and honors from the University of Michigan.

**Vanessa Walker** is the Morgan Assistant Professor of Diplomatic History at Amherst College. She is the author of several articles on the Carter Administration's human rights foreign policy, and is currently completing her manuscript on human rights activism and diplomacy in the Western Hemisphere during the Carter Administration, under contract with Cornell University Press.

**Wendy H. Wong** is Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Toronto. Her newest book, *The Authority Trap: Strategic Choices of International NGOs*, which was written with Sarah S. Stroup, is published by Cornell University Press.

Review by David Bosco, Indiana University Bloomington

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Kathryn Sikkink sees a global human rights movement under siege by critics and beset by self-doubt. *Evidence for Hope* is a bold, clear, and multifaceted effort to pull the supporters of human rights back from the brink of despair. Along the way, she challenges several of the movement's most prominent critics. In particular, she sets her sights on the historian Samuel Moyn, the political scientist Stephen Hopgood and, to a lesser extent, legal scholars Eric Posner and David Kennedy. All have penned critiques of the legitimacy and effectiveness of human rights on a variety of historical, empirical, and normative grounds.<sup>1</sup>

A central element of Sikkink's defense is recovering the movement's diverse origins. Critics have often depicted human rights as an exercise in the Global North imposing and exporting its values to the Global South. Sikkink, by contrast, insists that "the human rights movement, with its associated activists, ideals, and goals, is not primarily a product of the Global North" (25). Drawing on the negotiating history of the United Nations (UN) Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, she presents evidence that actors in the global south were decisive on key issues, including women's rights. She sees in these negotiations evidence that "the less powerful embraced the idea of the international protection of human rights in attempts to restrain the more powerful, not vice versa" (88).

Sikkink also works hard to link the human rights breakthroughs of the 1940s with the blossoming of the modern movement in the 1970s. Latin America is the focus, and Sikkink presents compelling evidence that there is connective tissue. The somewhat narrow and academic question of whether the human rights movement *truly* began in the 1940s or the 1970s has a broader significance here because it connects to the more salient question of whether the movement is the handmaiden of the United States and neoliberalism more broadly. Here Moyn's scholarship is Sikkink's primary target. In *The Last Utopia*, he argued that human rights emerged as the political left in the United States searched for an internationalist vernacular that was not (discredited) socialism. By demonstrating that the movement at key moments developed not at the behest of but in opposition to Washington, Sikkink can rescue it from a too-close association with the deeply flawed superpower.

Sikkink's second main task, which is quite distinct, is disputing those who see little evidence that the movement has succeeded in its aims. Surveying recent data and other research (including her own), she is convincing that the world is getting better in many, many respects.<sup>2</sup> But, as she acknowledges, the evidence is less compelling that international human rights instruments are themselves responsible for the positive

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<sup>1</sup> See Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010); Stephen Hopgood, *The Endtimes of Human Rights* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013); Eric A. Posner, *The Twilight of Human Rights Law* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); and David Kennedy, "The International Human Rights Regime: Still Part of the Problem?" in *Examining Critical Perspectives on Human Rights*, ed. Robert Dickinson et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Particularly relevant previous works by Sikkink include *The Justice Cascade* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2011); "Information Effects and Human Rights Data," (with AM Clark) *Human Rights Quarterly* 35:3 (2013); "Explaining the Deterrence effect of Human Rights Prosecutions for Transitional Countries," (with Hunjoon Kim) *International Studies Quarterly* 54:4 (2010): 939-963.

changes. This book helpfully summarizes some of the diverse scholarship on the effectiveness question and may help dispel some of the ahistorical gloom that surrounds human rights.

In search of an explanation for what she views as a confusing level of despair, Sikkink lands on several factors. Human rights, she argues, may be a victim of its own success. In exposing abuses that once were hidden it may have created the misleading impression that world is deteriorating rather than improving. (In her analysis of the distortions that may be afflicting the vision of the movement's critics, however, Sikkink barely alludes to her own likely bias: as someone who has invested deeply in the human rights movement, she has an enormous stake in defending its relevance and effectiveness.) But it's clear that Sikkink views much of the recent criticism as simply irresponsible. Her response to Moyn, Hopgood, and other critics often boils down to this: what is your alternative? She rails against criticisms that offer no alternative vision and no clear metric against which to measure the movement's effectiveness. "Those doing comparison to the ideal," she says, "have an obligation to tell us their method" (46-47). This point is understandable, but the demands Sikkink makes of the critics are not entirely fair. Requiring critics to construct a detailed alternative would decimate the criticism business, and that is not a development to be encouraged.

Sikkink is least effective in responding to criticisms of the human rights movement from what could be described as sovereigntist or nationalist quarters and the political right more broadly. Her chapter on the human rights movement during the Cold War is highly skewed. Che Guevara, a key figure in Fidel's Castro revolution and in the first years of his regime, is presented as charismatic, cigar-smoking figure while his adversaries on the right are described as protégés of dictators. America's sins are covered in detail, but there is barely a mention of Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin's gulags, Chairman Mao Zedong's forced starvation, the horrors of the Cultural Revolution, Castro's political prisoners, or the crushing of dissent in eastern and central Europe. This blinkered vision is no doubt a function of Sikkink's Latin American focus; as a scholar, she has had a front row seat to some of the sorriest episodes in America's Cold War foreign policy. But she could have transcended that limitation. When her historical chapter does venture outside of Latin America, it focuses on America's role in ousting Iran's president Mohammad Mosaddegh in the early 1950s. An uninformed reader might leave the Cold War chapter believing that the United States was the only important obstacle to the flourishing of global human rights during the Cold War.

As the book's Cold War history suggests, Sikkink does not really grapple with the most salient criticisms of human rights movement that derive from quarters other than the disillusioned left. That is a shame. As the Trump presidency sputters on amidst a broader resurgence of nationalism, international institutions face critical challenges from that direction. Some of the nationalist and conservative critiques come straight from the fever swamp, but some are important. Should international human rights instruments really be relevant in determining U.S. healthcare policy or its stance on the death penalty? Do African governments have a legitimate interest in keeping the International Criminal Court out of their affairs? How representative and accountable are the myriad international human rights bureaucrats that the United Nations and other regional organizations have spawned? Keeping progressives engaged in the movement is important, but keeping the movement from being perceived as little more than leftist politics on the international stage may be more so.

**Review by Michael Posner, NYU Stern School of Business**

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Kathryn Sikkink's *Evidence for Hope* is a timely and thoughtful book. Sikkink makes a persuasive case for why international human rights matters, especially in the Age of Brexit and Donald Trump. We are living in a particularly unsettling moment in our history, where the politics of fear and anger often dominate public discourse. In this environment, an increasing number of scholars and activists are voicing increased skepticism about the prospects for effective social change.<sup>1</sup> They point to the unraveling of democratic institutions in our own societies, and the ripple effect globally. As part of this larger discourse, critics, both from the political left and right, increasingly are challenging to effectiveness and even the legitimacy of a global human rights framework.

In *Evidence for Hope*, Sikkink comes to the defense of the international human rights movement and international legal order that lies at its foundation. Now almost 70 years old, the human rights movement emerged out of World War II and the Holocaust as a central component of the newly formed United Nations. The UN was borne in the aftermath of that war, where more than 65 million people died. World leaders came together to create this new international organization, with three central purposes: advancing global security and preventing future armed conflicts; enhancing global economic development and alleviating extreme poverty which often fuels conflict; and promoting universal human rights. Each of these core objectives were incorporated into the United Nations (UN) charter in 1945.

Today a growing band of critics argue that the UN's early commitment to human rights was a mistake.<sup>2</sup> Their critique rests on three premises. First, they see human rights as an ill-conceived Western invention, with little resonance in the rest of the world. Second, they look askance at human rights-related treaties that have been adopted since the late 1940s, and dismiss them as ineffectual and unsound. Finally, they look at the various conflicts and gross abuses in our contemporary world and find this to be definitive proof that the human rights system is a failure.

Sikkink smartly pushes back against each aspect of this narrative. First she makes a convincing historical case for the universality of rights, drawing mainly on her own personal and professional experience in Latin America, where these issues were being advanced on a parallel track in the 1940s. Countries like Chile, Brazil, and Mexico were all actively involved in developing regional political structures during this period, which included a distinctly Latin American approach to human rights. These same countries also significantly influenced the broader international discussion of human rights at the UN. Sikkink usefully cites a number of other leaders from India, Lebanon, and other countries in the global South who were centrally involved in the drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948.

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<sup>1</sup> Eric A. Posner, *The Twilight of Human Rights Law* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); Stephen Hopgood, *The Endtimes of Human Rights* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013); Sebastian Strangio, "Welcome to the Post-Human Rights World." *Foreign Policy*, 7 March 2017, <http://www.foreignpolicy.com/2017/03/07/welcome-to-the-post-human-rights-world/>.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012).

Secondly, Sikkink defends the importance of the international treaties and institutions, established since 1945, which have created the architectural foundation upon which the international human rights movement has been built. As my mentor, Professor Louis Henkin at Columbia Law School wisely observed, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights both internationalized human rights, meaning that how a country treats its own people became a legitimate subject for international diplomacy, and universalized the rights, meaning that it set substantive rights standards to which we are all entitled by virtue of our humanity.<sup>3</sup> These were fundamental shifts in the global order, and have provided legitimacy for a range of very practical steps that have been taken in the intervening period.

Finally, Sikkink offers a measured and carefully researched case for why the internationalization of human rights is making a difference in real people's lives. This is an optimistic book, as the title suggests, but it is rooted in careful scholarship, historical reference, and a sober look at the world in which we live. Sikkink may be an optimist, but she does not turn a blind eye to the many places in the world where rights are routinely being violated. She identifies deeply with the frustrations of activists like Heba Morayef from Egypt and Sergio Aguayo from Mexico, who struggle with the slow pace of progress in their own societies, and often have a sense of despair about the future. Sikkink takes an empirical look at the state of the world and concludes, I think rightly, that "an examination of global human rights trends reveals that the record is far more positive than current pessimism suggests." (141)

I began working on human rights in the mid-1970s, writing the first major human rights report on former President Idi Amin's reign of terror in Uganda.<sup>4</sup> There were no human rights groups in Uganda and very few in sub-Saharan Africa, where violations were massive and widespread. Apartheid was the rule of the day in South Africa, the 'troubles' were tearing apart Northern Ireland, military governments dominated most of Latin America, and totalitarian regimes dominated in the former Soviet Union and its satellites in Eastern Europe and elsewhere. The list goes on. Those struggling to overcome grave rights violations occurring in their own societies are more visible because of the legacy of the human rights movement, are able to root their struggles in international legal instruments developed over the last 70 years, and are more likely to prevail in a world where there is indeed evidence of hope.

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<sup>3</sup> Louis Henkin, *The Age of Rights* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> "Violations of Human Rights and the Rule of Law in Uganda, A Study by the International Commission of Jurists," Geneva, May 1974, <https://www.icj.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/Uganda-violations-of-human-rights-thematic-report-1974-eng.pdf>.



Review by Vanessa Walker, Amherst College

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“Do human rights work?” This question that opens Kathryn Sikkink’s latest book, *Evidence for Hope*, is a fair one at a time when former a Nobel Peace Laureate is accused of turning a blind-eye to ethnic cleansing in her own country, when disparities in global wealth seem to be reaching new extremes, when the U.S. president champions techniques “a hell of a lot worse than waterboarding” (6). Sikkink herself notes in her introduction, that she “has never been so worried about how U.S. politics could negatively influence human rights at home and around the world” (6). Yet, as her title clearly proclaims, she does not write from a position of despair about the efficacy and future of human rights. Sikkink ostensibly sets out to demonstrate that human rights movements and institutions have significantly advanced human rights throughout the twentieth century with a scholarly analysis of the data available, while also exploring why the perception of failure is so strong in the face of clear evidence to the contrary. Yet the book is less about the dispassionate assessment of evidence, and instead is very much a from-the-heart rallying cry against pessimism and apathy of academics, the public, and activists themselves.

Sikkink identifies two central challenges to the current human rights regime: “legitimacy” and “effectiveness” (8). Sikkink explores challenges to the legitimacy based on the persistent notion that human rights are a product of the Global North, and therefore inherently Eurocentric. Sikkink draws on her previous research on Latin America and social movements to expose the “diverse origins of human rights” in the Global South.<sup>1</sup> This perspective challenges the notion that human rights are somehow foreign to the history and laws of large portions of the world. Second, Sikkink probes the question of “efficacy” and the perception that despite the astronomical growth in human rights laws, institutions, and consciousness in the twentieth century, human rights violations are on the rise. Here she utilizes large data sets to show that in key areas, human rights conditions have improved in recent decades. She seeks to explain why “people feel pessimistic about human rights, in spite of the ample evidence of progress,” by deploying new social science and psychological research about biases and cognitive heuristics. Based on this data, and historical analysis, Sikkink lays out recommendations for “making human rights work,” offering six “policy tools” or conditions that foster the promotion and protection of human rights (18-19).

Sikkink’s book is most compelling in its argument for legitimacy rooted in the “diverse political origins” of modern human rights frameworks (55). She argues that human rights progress in the past century derived from “long series of human rights struggles, often led by oppressed people, inspired by human rights ideas, and targeting powerful institutions and practices, including colonialism and deep exclusion and repression,” in which governments “were rarely the main protagonists” (11). Here she challenges scholars, notably Samuel Moyn, who have questioned the universality of human rights, arguing that their “flawed chronology” and “idiosyncratic history of human rights” is a product of an overemphasis on the Global North (29, 42). This leads them to overlook the critical, early contributions of governments, jurists and activists in the Global

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), Kathryn Sikkink, *Mixed Signals: U.S. Human Rights Policy and Latin America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), and Kathryn Sikkink, *The Justice Cascade: How Human Rights Prosecutions are Changing World Politics*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 2011).

South, particularly Latin America, in laying the foundations for contemporary human rights paradigms and instruments.

Sikkink perhaps oversimplifies the absence of the Global South from scholarship that is critical of the legitimacy of human rights, but it is undeniable that Latin America in particular was critical to the emergence of human rights norms and mechanisms. This will not be a new story for those familiar with Sikkink's other work, but it is one worth repeating given the lack of scholarly emphasis placed on early efforts by Latin American actors, despite some excellent research in the field.<sup>2</sup> Particularly important are both the influence of the American Declaration of Rights on the drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human rights and the *amparo* laws that were a central component Latin American legal tradition (78). In stressing these origins, Sikkink implicitly critiques the emphasis placed on the global north by many scholars of human rights, which have served to reinforce the notion of human rights as simply an instrument of the powerful over the weak. Rather, these very instruments constructed as a challenge and counterweight to U.S. hegemony and intervention. Highlighting the work of Latin American jurists such as Argentine Minister of Foreign Affairs Luis María Drago and Argentine legal scholar Carlos Calvo, Sikkink draws attention to the way that rights and sovereignty developed in tandem as a way to prevent powerful countries from abusing weaker ones. Critical to the evolution of this thinking was the doctrine of popular sovereignty, which "declared that sovereignty ultimately rested with the people" (61). This construction of sovereignty provided an important intellectual foundation for contemporary rights claims about the "Responsibility to Protect" doctrine (62).

Sikkink's criticism of many fellow academics in part reflects the broader debates in the field about when to mark the beginning of the modern human rights regime, and this book is unlikely to definitively settle the question. Sikkink demonstrates a coherent and concerted human rights effort even before the World War II "human rights moment." Yet she does not offer a coherent definition of "human rights" beyond a vague gesture toward the United Nations Declaration (11). Her capacious definition never distinguishes "human rights" actors and movements from other early humanitarian and social justice movements.

Sikkink's promise of six "policy tools" that "work" is similarly undermined by their very vagueness (19). To call them "tools" or "policy recommendations," as she does, implies instruments ready to deploy. Sikkink instead offers some very good broad practices that will surely contribute to the advancement and protection of rights: promote democracy; diminish war and seek nonviolent solutions to conflict; prevent dehumanizing and exclusionary ideologies; promote economic growth and equality; ratify human rights treaties and enforce international law; end impunity for violations; support and protect human rights mobilization (19). Yet the best means to implementing these practices bedevil modern national communities and international relations. Sikkink is right to highlight the utility of these practices, but offers little in the way of *how* to implement

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<sup>2</sup> Sikkink points to work like Mary Ann Glendon, "The Forgotten Crucible: The Latin American Influence on the Universal Human Rights Idea," *Harvard Human Rights Journal* 16 (2003): 27-39; Greg Grandin, "The Liberal Tradition in the Americas: rights, Sovereignty, and the Origins of Liberal Multilateralism," in *Human Rights and Revolutions*, ed. Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom, 2nd ed. (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007); and Joannes Morsink, *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights: Origins, Drafting, and Intent* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999) among others, noting that these works all demonstrate the deep and nuanced engagement with human rights in Latin America largely independent from European and American efforts. Yet prominent scholars have not given these works the same attention or engagement as more Eurocentric studies.

them. Of course, a comprehensive analysis of any one of these criteria would require several volumes more, yet their vagueness falls short of the book's promise of policy instruments.

Her argument for nonviolent solutions to conflict illustrates both the promise and the pitfalls of her analysis of “what does and doesn't work” (181). Here, Sikkink argues that the most successful human rights law “provides a model for deliberative, nonviolent, and noncoercive processes of global governance and change that could be useful for other areas. But exactly because it is deliberative and noncoercive, human rights change has been and will be slow” (16). Sikkink already demonstrates in previous chapters how this slow work has paid off in certain cases like Guatemala. Sikkink eschews the use of military force, and with solid evidence to support the argument that military interventions are frequently counterproductive for protecting human rights in the long run. “War,” she argues, “will always be a risky tool to diminish human rights violations” (190). She continues later, “the first and most important insight is that we need to continue to pursue the difficult, slow, and mainly nonviolent changes and processes that have contributed to many positive trends in the world” (221). In pleading for commitment to change and prevention over the long term, Sikkink sidesteps the moral question of how to address crises that have already erupted, that can no longer be prevented. Without the ability to engage unfolding crises in meaningful and substantial ways, the human rights enterprise ultimately loses legitimacy. Is it morally tenable in the face of massive oppression and violence, like the current Rohingya crisis, to affirm our commitment to building democratic structures over the next several decades? When faced with genocide, is it morally acceptable to simply hew to the long view of promoting an international society where law is respected? I do not think that Sikkink intends to foreclose the possibility of military force completely, but she also does not engage with the dilemmas of acting through the imperfect instruments we have when deterrence fails and the structures that “work” are far from being universally embraced.

Dr. Martin Luther King asserted that “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.” Whether or not this empirically true matters less than the desire to make it true. In some way, this is the same as the very notion of human rights—they have legitimacy because we believe that they do; they are, as Lynn Hunt argues, “self-evident,” which “relies ultimately on an emotional appeal.”<sup>3</sup> *Evidence for Hope*, similarly, makes an empirical case for what is, at its core, an “emotional appeal.” Sikkink's work demonstrates that just like violence and oppression, human rights advances are products of long historically contingent struggles and that quick fixes rarely provide long term solutions. This argument, however, still leaves us empty handed in the face of some of the most gut-wrenching problems we face today. There is plenty to debate and challenge in *Evidence for Hope*, but in the end, I found myself returning to Irish poet and anti-Apartheid activist Seamus Heaney, whose words the title evoked. In a 2002 interview, Heaney said “Looking at South Africa's future, I would have to use the word ‘hope’ in the way that Vaclav Havel used it. Not just optimism—hope is something that is there to be worked for, is worth working for, and can work.”<sup>4</sup> Sikkink reminds us that, despite its many flaws and contradictions, there is hope for human rights principles and practices.

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<sup>3</sup> Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007), 26.

<sup>4</sup> “Seamus Heaney: Hope is something that is there to be worked for,” *Independent*, 31 October 2002, <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/seamus-heaney-hope-is-something-that-is-there-to-be-worked-for-141727.html>.

**Review by Wendy Wong, University of Toronto**

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*Evidence for Hope Shows How Human Rights Have Changed the World*

Given the amount of work in the past ten years that has dismissed or discounted the role of human rights in international and domestic politics, the challenges ahead in Kathryn Sikkink's new book, *Evidence for Hope: Making Human Rights Work in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, are many. Sikkink does an admirable job of pulling together the most prominent critiques of what she calls "the optimists' view," using clear and straightforward prose to deftly and forcefully dismantle prominent logics that deny their influence. First, she responds to critics who decry the illegitimacy of human rights institutions by accusing its proponents of neo-liberalism or Western-centricity. Second, she addresses the researchers and policymakers who focus on the ineffectiveness of human rights developments. Within this section, Sikkink points out that many who are trying to understand the effect of human rights compare change to an ideal point, sometimes specified, sometimes implied, rather than to historical fact. She also makes an important advancement on the idea of information politics, which she first introduced in the watershed book she wrote with Margaret Keck, *Activists Beyond Borders*,<sup>1</sup> to demonstrate why it is that human rights proponents may be too successful in their work of awareness building and agenda-setting. Finally, another strength of this book is the way that Sikkink makes explicit some of the splits between researchers on human rights, especially the conjectural rift between qualitative and quantitative work. Sikkink establishes firmly that those with more sanguine takes on the human rights project are not wishful thinkers, suggesting they are more realistic in their expectations than their pessimistic, and even cynical, counterparts. Evidence for hope, in fact, can be found in some widely-available data, if the analysis is done with different (but no less rigorous) lenses. Sikkink's book is a noteworthy contribution that is sure to become a classic among human rights scholars, policymakers, and those who are passionate about social change.

Where the book really shines is in its thorough assessment of the data used by quantitative, and mostly pessimistic, scholars. Sikkink systematically demonstrates the fallacies of relying on static, annual composite scores,<sup>2</sup> which are the most prominent sources that analysts use for scoring states on their human rights performance. In showing persuasively how these datasets, which rely on coder judgment, produce overly coarse and therefore misleading results for assessing the effect of human rights, she argues that using these sources in subsequent analyses provides a self-fulfilling prophecy for those convinced of the feebleness of human rights. Sikkink also reiterates a claim that other researchers have begun making about the changing nature of human rights work and data.<sup>3</sup> As human rights advocates succeed in persuading others of the need to include different rights into the notion of human rights, or as information about human rights violations grows because of greater transparency and data collection (see below on information politics), the basket of

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<sup>1</sup> Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> The Political Terror Scale and the Cingranelli and Richards (CIRI) Physical Integrity Rights Index.

<sup>3</sup> Christopher J. Fariss, "Respect for Human Rights Has Improved Over Time: Modeling the Changing Standard of Accountability," *American Political Science Review* 108:2 (2014): 297-318, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055414000070>.

things that ‘count’ as human rights expands. Thus, with increased reporting on more violations, it may seem that human rights are weakening or worsening, when in fact, human rights have grown in influence, and may even be improving over time if we use events-based measures that account for changing standards of accountability.

Sikkink’s fuller exploration of information politics is key to pulling together her critiques of commonly-used datasets. I cannot do justice here to the different facets of psychology and philosophy she draws on to make her claim, but in brief, the systematic study of human rights poses large problems for its proponents. First is the notion of the information paradox, which she has developed in other work.<sup>4</sup> Fundamentally, it boils down to ‘the more you know, the more you know what to look for, and the more you see.’ That nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and other human rights activists have been so successful in broadening the human rights agenda and alerting us to harm around the world creates a situation where we think there is more wrong in the world because we are suddenly made aware of these situations (152-156, 167-168). But second, many of the human rights violations in which academics are interested, such as torture, are difficult to detect by design (154-159), in part because of the strength of the norm and law against it, and therefore the data are not actual counts of what happened, but estimates made by NGOs (141-142, 168-178). Finally, because of the way human cognition works, negative information tends to stick in our minds, which also tends to make us overestimate the prevalence of negative things (161-162), such as human rights violations. She discusses additional psychological effects that temper the way we understand both improvements in human rights and our attraction to counterintuitive or negative findings.

Another contribution of the book is its recasting of human rights history as one shared by people in different countries, from all different political perspectives. In the first part, Sikkink walks us through neglected histories of figures and activities from former colonies and the developing world. While other works,<sup>5</sup> have also taken on these topics, Sikkink’s account is more analytical and pointed. When told from a U.S. and Europe-centric view, of course the human rights world looks like it was largely propagated by the West over the desires of the rest. But using archival materials that have been largely left untouched by mainstream social-science efforts, Sikkink reveals the wide base of human rights advocates who pushed for universal protections in the formative stages of international institution building.

While her historical data are convincing, and her assessment of the political climate around human rights as they grew and gained momentum as norms is illuminating, one concern is that the account risks dipping into teleology. This is not a concern unique to Sikkink’s book. Taking an “optimistic” view on human rights means that we are looking for progress. But progress towards what? Sikkink claims progress is moving away

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<sup>4</sup> Keck and Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders*; Ann Marie Clark and Kathryn Sikkink, “Information Effects and Human Rights Data: Is the Good News about Increased Human Rights Information Bad News for Human Rights Measures?,” *Human Rights Quarterly* 35:3 (August 9, 2013): 539-568, <https://doi.org/10.1353/hrq.2013.0046>.

<sup>5</sup> Susan Waltz, “Universalizing Human Rights: The Role of Small States in the Construction of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights,” *Human Rights Quarterly* 23:1 (2001): 44-72; Johannes Morsink, *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights: Origins, Drafting, and Intent* (Toronto: Scholarly Book Services, 2002); Paul Gordon Lauren, *The Evolution of International Human Rights: Visions Seen*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003); Mary Ann Glendon, *A World Made New: Eleanor Roosevelt and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, Reprint (New York: Random House, 2002).

from the poor conditions or abuses people have suffered in the past. Yet in some ways, it also falls prey to striving towards an ideal vision of human life. Leveraging the six policy tools she discusses in Chapter 6 to protect human rights gives us alternatives ways to ‘get there,’ but what is that destination? The assumption of progress in human rights runs into the danger of engaging in the kind of thinking Sikkink largely avoids—comparing the now to an ideal, rather than reality. This is not just an academic concern, because thinking about human rights as progress towards something overshadows the fact that the success of human rights can also be perverse. In her own account, Sikkink recognizes that autocrats have leveraged human rights to their own benefit, and their uses of human rights seem distant from the goals of twentieth-century human rights institutions. Certainly the ubiquity of human rights language and tools makes them susceptible to abuse. This misappropriation is problematic for human rights proponents, surely, yet it also reinforces the success of human rights through an “alternative spiral.”<sup>6</sup> The normative embeddedness of human rights is both what gives it normative force and leaves it open for unintended uses.<sup>7</sup>

*Evidence for Hope* provides what the title promises. Sikkink’s book takes on a wide variety of critics and skeptics, and shows the pitfalls of some of the most common sources for evidence in human rights research. Her discussion of the intellectual history of human rights, and her summation of previous work that shows how human rights have mattered provides a real service to academia, policymakers, and the general public. More importantly, perhaps, it shows activists that their efforts are not for naught, and that there are alternative tactics, based on social-science research, that should inform their work. This important book should be on a must-read list for anyone who has ever wondered about the effects of human rights and what the stakes are for dismissing their role in changing modern lives.

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<sup>6</sup> Cristina G. Badescu and Thomas G. Weiss, “Misrepresenting R2P and Advancing Norms: An Alternative Spiral?,” *International Studies Perspectives* 11:4 (2010): 354-374, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1528-3585.2010.00412.x>.

<sup>7</sup> See: Doutje Lettinga, “How Revolutionary Are Global Human Rights?,” openDemocracy, 7 May 2015, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/openglobalrights/doutje-lettinga/how-revolutionary-are-global-human-rights>; Joel R. Pruce, “Human Rights Are Revolutionary—in Principle Not Practice,” openDemocracy, 19 June 2015, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/openglobalrights/joel-r-pruce/human-rights-are-revolutionary%E2%80%94in-principle-not-practice>; Wendy H. Wong, “Human Rights Aren’t Revolutionary? Good!,” Duck of Minerva (blog), <http://duckofminerva.com/2015/07/human-rights-arent-revolutionary-good.html>.

**Author's Response by Kathryn Sikkink, Harvard University**

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I am grateful to Sarah Snyder for organizing the roundtable and for her cogent introduction and summary of the debate. I also want to thank all the reviewers for their careful and thoughtful comments and for providing both lucid summaries of some of the arguments as well as responses and critiques. I appreciate their positive remarks and the ways in which the commentators highlighted quite different parts of my argument, but I will respond mainly to the critiques, since that will provide for a more interesting debate at the roundtable.

Let me begin with David Bosco's concern that the demands that I make of the critics are not entirely fair and would "decimate" the ability of scholars to critique human rights. My demand of the critics is actually quite simple, and, rather than decimating the possibility of critique, is intended to improve both the critical arguments themselves and our ability to evaluate them. I welcome criticism of human rights and think criticism has often contributed to improvements in human rights work and institutions. I simply ask for transparency. As is the standard practice for scholars, critics have an obligation to tell us their method. I believe one method many critics use is what I call "comparison to the implicit ideal"—the current situation is being compared to an alternative ideal, but that ideal is never stated. I am not asking critics to fully create or support an alternative, just to state briefly and explicitly the alternatives they had in mind when making their critiques. We routinely ask scholars to explain their methods and their reasons for comparisons. Scholars using the comparative method must justify why, for example, they are comparing Argentina to Brazil and not to Mexico. Scholars using quantitative methods face hard questions about why they are using one model instead of another. If an author is using comparison to the ideal, it is reasonable for the author to briefly state the ideal to which reality is being compared, and whether the alternative actually exists somewhere in the world, or whether it is a future aspiration. Such an expectation would not only hold critics to the same standards as other scholars, but it would also help critics state their ideas more completely and would help readers evaluate those ideas.

When we ask scholars why, for example, they believe that Argentina and Brazil are a good comparison for their work, the answer we get affects our evaluation of the work. Knowing more precisely the ideal to which the current situation is being compared would also help the reader evaluate the critique. Stephen Hopgood, for example, critiques the International Criminal Court (ICC) because it is "unimaginable" that the ICC will prosecute the head of state of a great power or of a client state of one of the great powers.<sup>1</sup> He is implicitly comparing the behavior of the ICC not to its own Statute, but to the ideals that he believes *should* have been incorporated in the treaty. He holds the ICC up to his own implicit ideal of international justice and finds it wanting. His method of comparison is valid, but it would be useful to have it stated explicitly. After reading Hopgood carefully, I figured out that he criticizes the ICC as hypocritical because it does not prosecute a country that has not ratified its statute and because it permits the Security Council to refer cases, which helped me evaluate his work. I concluded that his expectations that the creation of the ICC would somehow erase all power dynamics in the world and remake the United Nations were either disingenuous or highly idealistic.

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen Hopgood, "The Endtimes of Human Rights," in Doutje Lettinga and Lars Van Troost, eds., *Debating The Endtimes of Human Rights: Activism and Institutions in a Neo-Westphalian World* (Amnesty International Netherlands, 2014), 14, [https://www.amnesty.nl/sites/default/files/public/debating\\_the\\_endtimes\\_of\\_human\\_rights.pdf](https://www.amnesty.nl/sites/default/files/public/debating_the_endtimes_of_human_rights.pdf).

This leads me to Bosco's second point, which is that I fail to respond to the criticism of the human rights movement from sovereigntist or nationalist quarters and the political right more generally. More specifically, he suggests that the uninformed reader might leave the chapters on the Cold War thinking that the U.S. was the only important obstacle to human rights. The historical chapters of this book are not intended to be a comprehensive history of human rights during the Cold War. They have a much more specific purpose: to counter the claim that human rights come from the Global North. Because that was the research question, I spend more effort addressing Southern protagonism and the ways in which the U.S. worked at times to block human rights, rather than to promote them. If I had been trying to write a comprehensive history of human rights in the Cold War I of course would have devoted more attention to mass atrocities in the USSR, China, and Cambodia. With regard to the sovereigntists, much of what I and others have written previously has responded to these critiques.<sup>2</sup> As Michael Posner persuasively points out in his comments, the arguments of the sovereigntists were already being called into question in the 1970s by Posner's mentor, Professor Louis Henkin, who pointed to the ways human rights were shifting the global order. Human rights law explicitly alters sovereignty; by drafting and ratifying these treaties sovereign states essentially accept and even "invite" (Stephen D. Krasner's word in his book *Sovereignty: Organized Hypocrisy*)<sup>3</sup> international supervision of internal human rights practices. Given how long we have known this, I have little patience with states that still claim their sovereignty is violated when they are called upon or pressured to comply with human rights treaties they have helped draft and have consented to through legal ratification. I apply this same standard whether I am talking about the United States' use of torture or responding to arguments about the African bias of the ICC.

The arguments critical of human rights from the disillusioned left, on the other hand, are newer and taken much more seriously by human rights movements and institutions themselves. They are internally corrosive in a way that differs from the familiar sovereigntist or nationalist arguments. As such, I felt they deserved a targeted response and spent more time in the book on this topic. But I agree with Bosco's broader point that "keeping progressives engaged in the movement is important, but keeping the movement from being perceived as little more than leftist politics on the international stage may be more so." This is one reason why in the book, and in my day-to-day work, I critique Cuba for not allowing democracy and dissent and Venezuela today for creating a democratic façade for authoritarian rule. Yet another way that human rights could open itself for dialogue with more conservative or communitarian sectors is to rediscover the issue of human rights *and* responsibilities. It would be useful to return to the American Declaration of Rights and Duties of Man of 1948, and the African Charter of Human and People's Rights, and use them to resurrect

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Kathryn Sikkink, "Human Rights, Principled Issue Networks, and Sovereignty in Latin America," *International Organization* 47:3 (Summer 1993): 411-441, and Kathryn Sikkink, "Reconceptualizing Sovereignty in the Americas: Historical Precursors and Current Practices," *Houston Journal of International Law* 19:3 (1997): 705-729.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen D. Krasner, *Sovereignty: Organized Hypocrisy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).



the idea of how individual human duties work together with human rights. This is the topic of a recent article and my next book.<sup>4</sup>

Wendy Wong's point that my account "risks dipping into teleology" is one I hear frequently and to which I tried to respond in the book. I do believe human rights were designed to lead to the ultimate goal of human emancipation, but I try to separate this belief from my descriptions or explanations of their effectiveness. I do not posit any kind of inevitable process by which human rights movements, law, or institutions actually lead to emancipation. Instead, I draw on Albert Hirschman's philosophy of possibilism, and try to distinguish between the 'possibilist' history I tell in the book and a teleological or triumphalist history. Human rights progress has often been the result of activism and struggle, and progress is not at all inevitable, but contingent on continued commitment and effort. With possibilism, Hirschman wanted to draw attention to what was possible rather than what was probable, and to stress the importance of "widening the limits of what could be perceived as possible."<sup>5</sup> This is exactly what the human rights movement has done, repeatedly. By widening the limits of the possible, the human rights movement has sometimes changed what is probable. This book is about what has happened in the past and what is possible in the future, with continued commitment, struggle, and fortuitous circumstances.

Wong also points to the genuine problem of the misappropriation of human rights ideas. While I agree, I would warn against blaming human rights ideas for their misuse by self-interested actors. Just because President George W. Bush sometimes justified the invasion of Iraq in 2003 on human rights grounds does not make him a spokesperson for or personification of human rights. If I make any point in this book, it must be that the term 'human rights' or the notion of a human rights movement should not be conflated or confused with the foreign policy of the U.S. or the UK, even when these powers invoke the concept of human rights.

I appreciate that Michael Posner was included in this roundtable, because he brings a rich perspective of someone who has been participating in the human rights movement for many decades and from diverse institutional locations: non-governmental organizations (NGO), government, and academia. His points about what it was like to be working on human rights in the 1970s provide exactly the kind of longer term view that is important when we try to understand what has changed over time. Posner's career also illustrates how important it is to distinguish between those individuals in governments that misappropriate human rights ideals, and those who, like Poser, were able to serve in government and still be part of the broader transnational advocacy network on behalf of human rights that he himself had helped to create many years earlier.

Vanessa Walker argues that my six policy tools are too vague. I agree. Luckily, people have written entire books on each of these tools. For example, I wrote a book, *The Justice Cascade*, on one of my six policy tools:

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<sup>4</sup> Fernando Berdion del Valle and Kathryn Sikkink, "(Re)discovering Duties: Individual Responsibilities in the Age of Rights," *Minnesota Journal of International Law* 26 (January-February 2017).

<sup>5</sup> Jeremy Adelman, *Worldly Philosopher: The Odyssey of Albert O. Hirschman* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 453; Albert O. Hirschman, *A Bias for Hope*; Hirschman, *Journeys toward Progress; Studies of Economic Policy-Making in Latin America*.

end impunity by supporting domestic and international accountability for mass atrocity.<sup>6</sup> In this new book, I could not do justice to the literature on each of these policy tools, but I wanted to highlight that social science literature actually has reached some consensus on the risk factors for repression and the corresponding policies that could contribute to improvements. I hoped to direct my readers to this literature through footnoting and the “Suggestions for Further Reading” Section. We are not in the dark about what needs to be done.

This leads to Walker’s final question, which is the hardest one of all: how to address crises that have already erupted. I think she is correct to say that the human rights enterprise loses legitimacy when it appears unable to engage unfolding crises in meaningful and substantial ways. Here the movement should be honest with itself and with its supporters. Human rights change is a long-term process—improvements do not happen quickly and cannot be imposed from the outside. We should not give the misleading impression that there is a magic bullet through which the Rohingya genocide or any human rights crisis of such scale can be easily resolved, and in particular, we should not suggest that military intervention is a short-term solution that will inevitably lead to improvements in human rights. When the concept of human rights works, it does so by consistently supporting people’s aspirations and movements for rights over the long term, not by rapid imposition of rights from an external actor. You cannot bomb a country into protecting rights. There are no short-term solutions to human rights; there are only long-term, ongoing struggles, which over time can and have yielded positive results, but, in the end, human rights is only a process, not a finished product. Walker is completely right in ending her review with the definition of hope as used by Vaclav Havel—“hope is something that is there to be worked for, is worth working for, and can work.”

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<sup>6</sup> Kathryn Sikkink, *The Justice Cascade: How Human Rights Prosecutions Are Changing World Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2011).