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BOOK AND MEDIA REVIEWS

A human rights sampler

Quataert, J.H., & L. Wildenthal. (Eds.) (2020). *The Routledge History of Human Rights*. London and New York: Routledge. 688 pp., GBP£190.00 (Hardback) ISBN: 9781138784338; GBP£35.99 (eBook) ISBN: 9780429324376.

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Editors Jean H. Quataert and Lora Wildenthal describe *The Routledge History of Human Rights* as ‘an open-ended and contingent history of human rights’ (p. 1). Both accomplished historians, Quataert and Wildenthal do not regard this volume as a definitive account, or even a consistent narrative. Rather, it is a collection of essays on ‘an array of human rights themes’, providing ‘a sampling of the state of the field in human rights history’ (p. 1). Designed for use primarily as an ebook, allowing faculty adopters to assign, or readers to purchase, any combination of chapters, the volume surely achieves these modest goals. However, the net effect is not unlike the published proceedings of an academic conference. The reader is treated to many excellent papers, grouped topically and chronologically, and each one reflects the exhaustive research of a fine scholar on an appropriately narrow topic. Importantly, the contributions are both geographically and thematically diverse. However, the final product is not as comprehensive as its title and length might suggest.

The editors write:

Our collection emphasizes non-linear versions of history, law, and the voices of globally dispersed activists. ... [I]t is important to us not to foreclose the significance of particular episodes by folding them into a larger narrative that could reinscribe familiar understandings and power relations, or imply inevitability. (p. 1)

They self-consciously avoid ‘narratives of seemingly inevitable progress’ and ‘turns of phrase that imply that human rights are passed like a torch from generation to generation, that is, remain stable in content over time and place’ (p. 1). Nobody would seriously advocate for such a static understanding of human rights discourse, but whatever imagined foil is here opposed, the editors provide little explanation of the narrative framework they seek to deconstruct. Most of the contributors see their essays correcting what they perceive to be a common point of view (e.g., the revisionist history of Samuel Moyn, 2012, 2019), or filling some lacuna in contemporary scholarship. However, more nuanced and synthetic histories of human rights, such as those by Jack Donnelly (e.g., 2013) and Micheline Ishay (2006), are, for the most part, not taken into consideration in this volume.

The editors offer assurance that the essays are ‘comprehensible to those encountering the subject matter for the first time’ (p. 1), but that gives the reader too much credit in many cases. These essays are not written for beginning students, at least not at the undergraduate level. Still, those who draw from *The Routledge History* while framing their own classroom discussions of human rights will find many excellent pieces from which to choose. Some of the standouts include Benjamin E. Brockman-Hawe’s chapter on 19th century commissions of inquiry in the Balkans, Mairi S. MacDonald’s work on human rights advocacy in the Congo, and Marie Sandell’s essay on transnational women’s activism between the World Wars. Rachel A. George’s contribution on Islam and the ratification of UN human rights treaties is thorough, carefully nuanced, and rich in practical implications, as is the paper by Eileen Boris and Jill Jensen on the International Labour Organization and women’s rights. Pitman B. Potter’s chapter provides an excellent overview on the state of human rights in the People’s Republic of China, and Afiya Shehrbano Zia describes human rights progress in Pakistan through the lens of Asma Jahangir’s work as an activist and attorney. Other readers will no doubt highlight different chapters, and that is one of the strengths of this volume. With its breadth of topics and customizable electronic format, the text is highly adaptable.

But why this text, and why these essays, rather than others? The editors do not claim that these selections are particularly special, providing only a ‘sampling of the state of the field’, but what might readers be expected to glean from this sample? The volume demonstrates that human rights scholarship continues to thrive within a wide variety of academic disciplines, though, as Sarita Cargas (2019) has argued, human rights is arguably emerging as a discipline of its own. The book also contains remarkable geographic range, which may be one of the best arguments for using it in the classroom, at least as a supplemental text, and recommending it to those studying human rights. Quataert and Wildenthal have assembled a diverse group of scholars whose work may be unknown to many of us in spite of their evident academic qualifications. They write with historical specificity, highlighting non-Western sources and struggles, and providing perspectives on human rights history that many of us would not otherwise easily encounter. At a time when both students and faculty are eager to include these kinds of sources in an anti-racist academic curriculum—all the more appropriate in the study of human rights—*The Routledge History of Human Rights* makes a substantial contribution. However, by assuming that readers are already familiar with more established narratives and self-consciously omitting classic texts, this volume will disappoint on its own. It will best be paired with other readings, like Ishay’s *Human Rights Reader* (2007) (also published by Routledge) for a more comprehensive approach.

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