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Sovereign Emergencies: Latin America and the Making of Global Human Rights Politics

By Patrick Kelly, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. Pp. 318, Paperback £21.99, ISBN: 978-1316615119

REVIEWED BY PHILIPP KANDLER

Human rights have been for quite some time an important factor in international politics and a research interest especially for political and legal scholars. Historians, however, have only since the 2000s dedicated themselves to a more detailed analysis of this concept and its history. A main debating point has been the question of the "breakthrough" of human rights—the moment when it gained international importance. But only recently have scholars started to focus on the concrete historical conditions and trajectories that accompanied this process and to paint a more nuanced picture of the "breakthrough moment," or rather moments. This is especially true for accounts that do not concentrate primarily on Western countries. An important step towards closing this gap is the new book by Patrick Kelly. In *Sovereign Emergencies*, Kelly examines how human rights violations by South American dictatorships in Brazil (1964–1985), Chile (1973–1990) and Argentina (1976–1983) contributed to the emergence and expansion of transnational human rights activism and changing interpretations of this concept. Kelly illustrates that these South American narratives form a crucial part of the often cited "breakthrough" of human rights in the 1970s.

In seven chapters, Kelly shows how the interactions between a range of actors from Western countries and Latin America led to the formation of transnational networks that spanned these regions. Further to this, these networks succeeded in putting pressure on the dictatorships in South America and ultimately led to a variance of local human rights vernaculars. These actors included emergent organizations for the protection of human rights under dictatorship, exiles from the regimes, more political, leftist and often anti-imperial solidarity groups in western countries, and transnationally working, but western-based human rights organizations such as Amnesty International. Kelly's three case studies stand—maybe at times too ideally—each for one phase in this process. The Brazilian case was "one of the first workshops of human rights practice" (p.29). Exiles and their supporters in the Global North started experimenting with human rights language and campaigning, but had only limited repercussions in western public opinion (chapter 1). The Chilean one was the "breakthrough moment" when human rights became a widely used language by different activist groups from the Americas and Western Europe (chapter 2). And the Argentine case stands for the adaptation of human rights language to a context, where the distinction between "good" and "evil" was less clear cut. This complexity arises because the enforced disappearances made

invisible the human rights violations that had led to outrage in the cases of Brazil and Chile (chapter 6). Intermediate chapters deal with the consequences of these changes for other actors: for groups of activists, that were not genuinely human rights activists, but came to use their language such as religious and solidarity groups or the Ford Foundation (chapter 3); for the human rights systems in UN and OAS up to the mid-1970s (chapter 4) and the late 1970s, as well as for the Carter-administration in the USA (chapter 7) and for the "breakthrough" of human rights activism in the USA (chapter 5). In the epilogue, Kelly makes some observations on the widening of the definition of human rights after the collapse of the South American dictatorships from the mid-1980s onwards. Here he argues that discriminated groups and movements—feminists, LGBT and indigenous people—took advantage of the significance of the human rights discourse in Latin America to insert their own demands for recognition.

Kelly draws on material from an impressive number of archives in Latin America (the countries of his three case studies and Mexico), the USA, and Western Europe, especially from the United Kingdom. This allows him to give a rich account of the complexities of the networks of activists in Latin America and the Global North, their various usages of human rights language and what they meant (and what not) when they evoked human rights norms. However, there is one conspicuous gap in his source material. Kelly refrains from using material from the dictatorships themselves. Whereas this might not have been a problem if the author had stuck strictly to the activist side, it does affect his study, when he comments on the dictatorships' reaction to the activism. By limiting himself to published material and secondary literature, he does little more than repeat—the little—that can already be found elsewhere in said literature. He does not even take into consideration material that is available online such as the protocols of the juntas in Buenos Aires and Santiago or declassified documents from the Argentine Foreign Ministry. From my own research I can say, that Argentine and Chilean foreign propaganda was more complex and there were more actors involved. It is, to be sure, not part of Kelly's main argument. Since he brings the topic up, however, and dedicates quite some space to it, he misses the opportunity to bring a new perspective to this topic.

In presenting his material, Kelly opts for following the actors instead of a strict bottom-up or top-down approach. In terms of storytelling, this definitely pays off. For each organization, he starts by narrating an episode out of the lives of central actors. It is the focus on personal biographies and interactions that allows Kelly not only to connect his three case studies to North America and Western Europe, but also to each other and to Mexico, one of the hot spots for exiles from South America. However, there are also two problems with his approach. First, it counters partially his effort to tell the story of human rights activism from a Global South perspective, since the actors he introduces are often from the Global North.

A second problem is that of accurate representation. Since Kelly is rather on the narrative than on the analytical side of history writing, the reader is repeatedly left wondering if the personal trajectory he just read about is rather exceptional or typical of a certain type of organization or activism. In his chapter on human rights activism in the USA, for example, Kelly spends considerable space on a solidarity group called Community Action on Latin America (CALA), introducing the section with a brief sketch of the motives of one of its first directors, Al Gedick, who he has interviewed. Though the author hints at one point that there were other solidarity groups (p.173), he does not name even one. It is therefore unclear if CALA stands in representation of them or was in some way special.

However, those should be considered only as minor shortcomings in an overall well-researched and written book. There are especially three contributions that stand out. The first one is about questioning the central place the USA occupies in human rights history. Existing scholarship, and especially works from the US, has extensively or even exclusively focused on specific presidential terms. This is probably a consequence of Samuel Moyn's influential, but empirically doubtful tying of the "breakthrough" of human rights to the inauguration of Jimmy Carter as president in 1977.[1] Kelly, however, following a cue by Mark Bradley,[2] who argues that the US was actually a latecomer to human rights in the 1970s, shows that it was in other regions, especially Latin America, where human rights was first used widely as language and basis for activism to protect individuals from repressive regimes. Actors in the US rather responded to this development and jumped on the bandwagon. In any case, this process had already gained force well before 1977.

The strongest point of Kelly's work, however, is his careful distinction and nuanced analysis of the different facets of human rights as a historical concept. Instead of insisting on a general and rather unspecific "breakthrough," he shows that there were especially two aspects that came to the fore in the 1970s: human rights activism and human rights language.

Human rights activism experienced a boost due to a number of structural developments—affordable long-distance travel, improved long-range communication, the cooling down of Cold War tensions during *détente*—that made the world (or at least Western Europe and the Western Hemisphere) more interconnected and contributed to a feeling of interdependence. But for Kelly, the crucial change was the re-orientation of the Left in North America and Western Europe, away from revolution and towards a more depoliticized notion of "sovereign emergencies" (p.273), an argument that resembles Moyn's idea of human rights as "last utopia." In contrast to Moyn, however, Kelly does not shy away from tackling the

[1] Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010).

[2] Mark Bradley, *The World Reimagined: Americans and Humans Rights in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

complex relation between human rights activists, pronouncedly non-political in their approach, though not the implication of their work; solidarity activists, often motivated by an anti-imperial agenda, with a more political vision; and actors from Latin America, themselves falling in different, often overlapping categories of victims, exiles, and members of emergent human rights organizations. These groups definitely had a common interest in denouncing human rights violations by the South American dictatorships. This led to alliances, common networks and sharing of information. Of special importance were interactions with actors from Latin America who provided information and first hand-accounts, which helped create "testimonial truth" (p.121) as a valid and powerful basis for human rights violations, a term Kelly borrows from Steve Stern.[3] At the same time different opinions on aims and methods separated the different groups within the activist field. Solidarity groups criticized the purely moral position of human rights organizations such as Amnesty International or the Washington Office on Latin America and aimed at exposing the—often thought as imperial—roots of repression. The latter in turn saw their explicit apolitical stance endangered by too overt political demands. How these tensions played out can only be shown by a detailed analysis of the empirical material, something Kelly does convincingly.

The second major facet of human rights history Kelly addresses is the plurality in content and usages of a language of human rights. Those were closely related with the different types of activism. Though this insight is not completely new—on a general level this point has been made by Jan Eckel[4] and the aforementioned Mark Bradley—Kelly does an excellent job in showing concretely how it played out in human rights activism for the victims of repression in South America. The scale ranged from a full-hearted embrace of the human rights idea by human rights activists, i.e. from Amnesty International, over a more strategic appropriation by solidarity activists; to outright rejection by groups from the far left that criticized its lack of revolutionary potential. For each group, the idea of "human rights" was distinct. Instead of one interpretation, there were multiple, each depending on local and political context. Even if the idea of a homogeneous Latin American concept of human rights, which Kelly is set to disprove (p.14), is a bit of a strawman, the point of division is still extremely important. A second aspect of the human rights language is chronological. Kelly not only claims that its usage increased over time, but actually shows how the actors came to appropriate it. Unfortunately, he does not question the point found widely in the existing literature, that the confusion in the usage of the expressions "human rights" and "rights of man" is exemplary of the confusion over the concept of "human rights" itself in an early stage. This might be true in English, however, it is far from clear if this

[3] Steve Stern, *Battling for Hearts and Minds: Memory Struggles in Pinochet's Chile, 1973–1988* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).
[4] Jan Eckel, *Die Ambivalenz des Guten. Menschenrechte in der internationalen Politik seit den 1940ern* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014).

can be transferred directly into Spanish. It would have been worthwhile to ponder a moment on the question if "derechos del hombre" had the same deep connection to the revolutionary era's ideas on natural rights claimed from a state as did the "rights of man."

This point, however, as well as earlier occasional criticism, should not be taken as an argument against Kelly's work as a whole. It should be rather seen as a hint that there is still a lot of work to be done: accounts that trace the relationships between the human rights organizations in the Global South and North on an institutional instead of a personal level; the reaction of the South American dictatorships to the emergent human rights activism; and also questions of intellectual history such as the commonalities and differences of the term "human rights"—and "rights of man"—in different languages or the history of the term in Latin America before 1970. Kelly has managed to write a convincing and detailed account not only about transnational human rights activism in the Americas and Western Europe, but has also made an important contribution to the still recent historiography on human rights more generally. The author has achieved this by pointing out the importance for detail, nuance, and clarity when dealing with the different aspects of human rights and its "breakthrough" in the 1970s.