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With provocative chapter titles and sub-headings such as “Twenty-first Century Blues,” “Slouching Towards Nemesis,” and “The Guernica Paradox: Bombing for Humanity,” Geoffrey Robertson’s Crimes Against Humanity: The Struggle for Global Justice embarks on a felicitous navigation of the perilous waters of political will surrounding the justiciability of crimes against humanity.

Robertson—a British barrister, president of the United Nations Special Court in Sierra Leone, and leading human rights lawyer—tackles an enormously complex problem with admirable dexterity. His prose cogent, his arguments precise, Robertson deftly weaves a coherent narrative occasionally punctuated by humor—a dry wit that reveals in all sincerity that General Pinochet had not tea with Baroness Thatcher, but a stiff whisky before his arrest on fashionable Harley Street. This sort of pedestrian commentary makes an otherwise weighty subject manageable and—dare I write this—thoroughly engaging and enjoyable.

The book synthesizes an enormous range of material and history in twelve chapters. Chapters one and two present an abbreviated though no less substantial overview of human rights, the first from “the beginning” (the Hammurabi Code), through the humanitarian impulses of Bentham and Marx, up to the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The second delves into the inglorious Cold War years, highlights successful European attempts at enforcement, and ends on the somber and inauspicious notes of atrocities committed literally under the noses of UN peacekeepers: the Dutch commander, Colonel Kerremans, caught on videotape accepting gifts from Serbian General Ratko Mladic in exchange for thousands of (soon-to-be-slaughtered) Muslims who sought refuge on the UN compound, and Belgian and Ghanaian “peacekeepers” who “handed over the Tutsis they were meant to be guarding” (79).

Chapters three and four appear a palliative to the slightly-veiled pessimism—nay, realism with a small “r”—of the previous two by reminding us that individuals do have rights, the most recognized being safety of the person, fairness and due process in trials, and the right of private property. More controversial are those proclaiming economic and social rights, freedom from execution, and indigenous and minority rights which rarely extend beyond a mere “right to exist.”

Chapters five and six examine laws of war, protections of individual persons, and the ostensible heralding of a new era symbolized by the Nuremberg trials, “the key which unlocks the closed door of state sovereignty,” the book jacket celebrates. The remainder of chapter six fleshes out that insight vis-à-vis universal jurisdiction over crimes of genocide, torture, apartheid, piracy, and slavery.

But not all atrocities are met by international tribunals or bolstered by universal jurisdiction. “Slouching Towards Nemesis,” (chapter seven) examines amnesty, truth commissions and transitional justice arrangements in Bolivia, Uruguay, Chile, El Salvador, Haiti, and Argentina. Chapter eight returns us to the somewhat familiar terrain of ad hoc international tribunals in the guise of the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, while chapter nine focuses on the International Criminal Court. There, Robertson strikes a cautiously optimistic note amidst the court’s shortcomings by maintaining the court’s seven year review conference in 2009 may actually make “the ICC’s universal jurisdiction over crimes against humanity truly universal” (392).

Chapter ten deals with the Pinochet case, which appeared as the harbinger of the shift from human rights as idea to human rights as enforceable, even though Pinochet walked away from prosecution. Chapter eleven explores the thorny issue of humanitarian intervention in Kosovo, East Timor, and Sierra Leone. While each chapter demonstrates “the rudimentary nature of the human rights enforcement system at the turn into the twenty-first century” (471), in the end both provide “a convincing argument in favor of developing a system of international criminal justice which has power to humiliate and incarcerate the commanders of crimes against humanity” (472).

The revised edition of 2002 (the original appeared in 1999), includes a final chapter entitled “Terrorism: 11 September and Beyond.” If one could say with confidence that on 10 September 2001 the “third age of human rights” in which basic humanitarian norms achieve some measure of enforcement was underway, then on the evening of 11 September Americans, Robertson avers, saw that their ultimate safety “lies in international law and cooperation” (474). He convincingly argues in favor of respect for basic humanitarian norms despite Bush-Rumsfeld “injured pride and emotional chauvinism” swept aside the protections of the Geneva Conventions and fair trial guarantees.

Overall, *Crimes Against Humanity* is an enormously engaging book, and is highly recommended for lay persons and students alike.

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