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Joel R. Pruce on The Human Rights Reader: Major Political Essays, Speeches and Documents from Ancient Times to the Present (Second Edition), by Micheline R. Ishay. New York, NY: Routledge, 2007. 592pp.

Joel R. Pruce
University of Denver

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Abstract

A review of:

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Keywords

Human rights, History, International human rights, Universal human rights

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The Human Rights Reader: Major Political Essays, Speeches and Documents from Ancient Times to the Present (Second Edition), by Micheline R. Ishay. New York, NY: Routledge, 2007. 592pp.

In this newly renovated and aptly supplemented second edition of The Human Rights Reader, Micheline R. Ishay continues her ambitious project of tracing the human rights tradition from the earliest “divine” contributions, to those of contemporary academicians. Eclipsing in size the first installment of this anthology (the first edition was 518 pages), this edition adds much in the way of depth throughout history by providing more Q’uranic verses, Platonic dialogues, Liberal debates and Socialist polemics—all of which address questions of justice, treatment of individuals, notions of human progress and ideals like universalism and cosmopolitanism. Ishay’s implicit argument—found in the Reader’s unique historical and theoretical approach—is that the field and study of human rights does not begin in 1948 with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the subsequent treaties and covenants. Rather, our contemporary human rights discourse is the culmination of responses to oppression and injustice that have occurred across time and space.

Conceptually, each section is subdivided into themes that appear in the collected writings, which also reflect current debates in the field: “Social and Economic Justice,” “Challenging the Liberal Vision of Rights,” “On the National Question,” and “Redefining Rights in the New Millennium.” Aside from these more abstract phrases, specific, concrete issues are also well-covered: religious freedom, labor rights, women’s rights, refugees, human trafficking, self-determination, just war, and so forth. Most sections of the book conclude with a “Human Rights for Whom?” discussion, which reminds the reader that human rights are about real people, not just ethereal concepts, and that “universal” has always been an evolving notion, as an ever-wider population became captured by the heading of “rights-deserving.” However, there is no overly optimistic revision of this history, as Ishay makes clear that there have been tensions among groups since ancient times that often resulted in gross exclusion.

As a history, the book is organized more or less chronologically. Beginning with a section entitled, “The Origins,” this early period is analytically divided into the secular tradition, Asian thought and monotheism. Featuring thinkers and writers from Plato and Cicero to Confucius and Asoka, this section highlights the diversity of these early attempts at protecting individual well-being, contextualized in the conflicts of the period. In a sense, this first section of the book is a very suitable introduction to any history of human rights: while not always perfect in their application, universal human rights come from humble yet well-intentioned beginnings. Over the course of history, and the book, it is clear that universality has never been realized, but incremental progress toward that goal has been evident along the way.

The next featured era is commonly and appropriately associated with the contemporary human rights movement and well captured by the title, “The Legacy of Liberalism and the Enlightenment.” Rounding up many of the “usual suspects,” Ishay presents work by John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Thomas Paine, but she also includes figures who are less-often mentioned in the human rights discourse, such as Maximilien Robespierre, Thomas Hobbes and Adam Smith. Bringing into the discussion these seemingly divergent characters, Ishay is able to illustrate how different thinkers from varied traditions have had similar ideas about the way individuals should be treated and the opportunities that individuals should have in their attempt to realize the “good life.”

Perhaps the most controversial section is the one named “The Socialist Contribution and the Industrial Age.” As in the previous part, many names rarely mentioned in the same breath with human rights are featured: Karl Marx, Rosa Luxemburg, Vladimir Lenin and Leon Trotsky. Whether it is the stigma still felt from 1950s McCarthyism in the U.S. or the horrific experience of the Gulag, the Socialist era is not widely regarded as a step forward in the protection of rights. However, the beautifully articulate works of these thinkers and revolutionaries must be distinguished from their resultant political manifestations—e.g., the vicious regimes of Joseph Stalin, Mao Zedong and Pol Pot, who, in many relevant ways, strayed from the more orthodox writings featured in this collection. In an attempt to resurrect the contributions of Marx and his followers, this section sheds important light on their tradition and its focus on genuine human emancipation.

Sections four and five address the most recent developments in the historical struggle for human rights: anti- and post-colonial movements, resistance to the encroachment of globalization and the effects of the 9/11 attacks on the global landscape. Emphasizing voices from the developing world, these sections recognize the contribution of local and regional leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Kwame Nkrumah, Ken Saro-Wiwa and Amartya Sen. On questions of sovereignty, environmental rights, and the free market, the crucial figures are not only Western academics or policy-makers, but real people involved in the actual struggle, who are properly included among other human rights protectors. The tension between civil liberties and national security, with a special focus on the “war on terror,” is teased out nicely by contrasting opinions on the torture debate—Ishay has included writings by Alan Dershowitz and Richard Posner, and even the original text of the “torture memos” written by White House counsel in 2002 and revised in 2004.

The final section of The Human Rights Reader is a collection of treaties and covenants that constitute the modern human rights regime. In keeping with her historical approach, this section begins with the Magna Charta (1215) and French Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen (1789), tracing the development of human rights forward in time to include the United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide (1948) and the Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (1979). This section serves as an appropriate conclusion as it demonstrates how the history of the human rights struggle has culminated in the drafting of internationally binding legal documents and the diffusion of norms and ideas that reinforce the idea of a universal set of rights for all humans.

The Human Rights Reader is a necessary companion to any human rights course that seeks to identify the historical and theoretical roots of the modern human rights struggle. It is a crucial contribution that lends support to the universalist claim that the struggle for human rights is not time/space specific, but rather one that, like human existence, transcends time and space and is part of a larger movement to protect and ensure the emancipation of all. For a student or instructor interested in widening the scope of the human rights debate, outside the pages of mainstream international relations journals, this anthology provides the wherewithal to do so.

Joel R. Pruce, Ph.D. Student

Josef Korbel School of International Studies, University of Denver

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