

JYX



This is a self-archived version of an original article. This version may differ from the original in pagination and typographic details.

Author(s): Kivistö, Hanna-Mari

Title: The Ambivalently Good Human Rights

Year: 2016

Version: Published version

Copyright: © Redescriptions Association

Rights: CC BY 4.0

Rights url: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Please cite the original version:

Kivistö, H.-M. (2016). The Ambivalently Good Human Rights. *Redescriptions : Political Thought, Conceptual History and Feminist Theory*, 19(2), 214-219. <https://doi.org/10.7227/R.19.2.6>

Reviews

The Ambivalently Good Human Rights

Jan Eckel, *Die Ambivalenz des Guten. Menschenrechte in der internationalen Politik seit den 1940ern*. Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht. 2014. 936 pages. ISBN 978-3-525-30069-5.

Hanna-Mari Kivistö, University of Jyväskylä

Jan Eckel's book *Die Ambivalenz des Guten* is an inspiring and impressive account of the role of human rights in post 1940's international politics. In this particular context, much has been done in the name of human rights: it has been the language of struggle, activism, empowerment, protest, the language of religious groups, women's groups, and the persecuted, to name a few. Human rights have been part of the international agenda with reference to foreign policy interests, different actors and fora. It has shaped international debates and conflicts, diminished state power (at least potentially) and caused changes in international relations. Eckel's book examines the ambivalent history of human rights with reference to the different faces of human rights that his account connects with morality and calculated interests, protection and power to both idealistic change and cynical obscurity.

The work builds on the notion that human rights has become an integral part of international politics in the latter part of the 20th century. It examines how an international politics of human rights came into being and how it developed and was transformed between the 1940s and 1990s. As human rights is a compelling and persuasive language in present day politics, Eckel's work is meaningful not only because of its historical account but also for its understanding of contemporary politics.

The book adds to the wide range of literature on the histories of human rights. When situated in the scholarly debate, Eckel's historiography emphasizes human rights as polycentric, ambivalent and discontinuous. This means, above all, that human rights politics include different actors in different places and times with different motives. In this account, human rights histories are studied and their meaning interpreted with reference to their immediate contexts and political actors rather than historical reasons and self-evident continuities. The meaning of human rights is evaluated in different political constellations which are located in their broader politico-historical contexts.

Redescriptions, Vol. 19, No. 2 (Autumn 2016), © *Redescriptions Association*
<http://dx.doi.org/10.7227/R.19.2.6>

It is easy to agree with Eckel's situational analysis over scholarly accounts that see the human rights narrative as a single, linear and rather teleological story originating, perhaps, in the French Revolution. Although in the book human rights is a post World War II concept, Eckel acknowledges the historical links and continuities with international postwar human rights ideas, the rights Declarations of the Enlightenment, and the politics abolitionism and the humanitarian intervention of the 19th century. However, what happens in post 1945 international politics with reference to human rights is historically something new.

Eckel's postwar history of human rights covers the period from 1940s until the early 1990s. When examining continuities, and particularly discontinuities and breaks related to human rights politics, Eckel locates two key moments during which human rights had a particularly important role in international politics: the first five years after 1945 and during the 1970s.

When stressing the importance of the politics of the 1970s, Eckel comes close to the argument presented by Samuel Moyn, who claimed that human rights arose as "the last utopia", an idealistic way of thinking in the 1970s after all other utopias had failed. What made human rights so appealing in the 70s was its relation to a general disillusionment with politics. It was not until the 70s that human rights broke through to become part of the political agenda as a mainstream political language.

However, in Eckel's empirical account of human rights he argues, above all, that the focus on the 1970s as a key pivotal moment would not do justice to the historiography of human rights. Although Eckel's understanding of politics is linguistically, discursively and rhetorically oriented, it is noteworthy that the book is not about the conceptual history of human rights, or a history of the idea of human rights, but, above all, a history of the political practice of human rights in international politics.

Eckel's interpretation is connected to an extensive analysis of empirical primary sources. These include, among others, archive material from different governmental sources including the United States, Britain, The Netherlands and Chile, and the archives of organizations such as the International League for the Rights of Man, the United Nations, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch.

When tracing this complex and manifold history, Eckel divides the 900 page account into two primary parts. The first one deals with the period between the 1940s and the 1960s, the second covers the years between the 1970s until the end of the 1980s. The work looks at human rights in international politics in different continents, although the main focus is on the so called Western world. Key contexts chosen are related to the postwar design of Europe, to colonialism and postcolonialism, dictatorship in Chile and the human rights politics of Eastern Europe. The choice of cases is well-justified but

the history, as always, might have looked somewhat different if other key moments of human rights in international politics had been considered. Different kinds of histories of human rights could also have been told by focusing on the struggles related to particular rights or groups. With reference to the first, an interesting case of international human rights politics mentioned in the book is the question of the right to development that was politicized and placed on the international agenda by various African and Asian states in the early 1970s.

The first part of the book dealing with 1940s and 60s includes the Allied Power's plans for a postwar Europe. It examines the beginning of the United Nations, which was rather late in implementing an agenda on human rights. The role of the Catholic Church in notions of human rights is dealt with in the immediate postwar context, but perhaps surprisingly here, Eckel's account on churches is mostly limited to this context. Human rights politics are discussed with reference to the beginnings of the European integration and the Council of Europe, another central postwar institution and locus of human rights which was eventually forced to remain in the shadow of international security concerns, alongside the Organization of American States. Of the NGOs discussed, particular attention is given to the International League for the Rights of Man.

Eckel's account shows how different conceptions of human rights were used for different political purposes by different actors in the immediate postwar context: Jewish organizations used human rights to campaign against racist and religious persecution, the American internationalists to speak out against dictatorships, and the Federalists and the Catholic voices for the protection of human dignity. Later, in the 1950s, nationalist leaders in the colonies used human rights in the struggle against the racial and oppressive politics of the colonial powers.

When analyzing human rights politics, Eckel's key argument is that from the beginning human rights was a matter of political interest, pursuit of political aims, power politics and ideological divides. Foreign interests and security frameworks were also central to the beginnings of the United Nations during the period of momentum that human rights had in the 1940s. In this account, the idea that every individual has rights that limit the powers of states – the core idea of postwar thought on universalistic human rights – ends up being subordinated to the security concerns of states. Later, the paradigmatic difference between human rights interests and the security interests of states – which also remains crucial to understanding current debates on human rights – became evident in the UN. Another example of postwar ideological politics connected to human rights was the anticommunist conceptions of human rights at the Council of Europe, influenced by conservative-Catholic thinking and included in the rights and freedoms of the European Convention of Human Rights (1953). Further, in the creation of both the United Nations and the

Council of Europe – the latter a so-called “community of values” – the maintenance of state sovereignty, rather than the rights of the individual, was the primary focus.

Although Eckel locates a shift in the ethical argument connected to human rights only in the 1970s, the moral tone of human rights was not missing from the debates in the immediate postwar period. It was present, for example, at the Council of Europe when human rights were emphasized as a response to past experiences. In the fora of the United Nations, in the context of creating the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, appeals to worldwide justice were common, as well as it being the language of the less powerful states. Further, two major powers, the United States and the Soviet Union, used the moralistic language of human rights at the UN for political purposes, as a tool during the Cold War to condemn the politics and the political system of the other.

The second part of the book focuses on the 1970s and 80s and is constructed from a detailed analysis of selected case studies. Eckel examines human rights as part of the foreign policy in the United States, Britain and the Netherlands. Here, a clear shift is detected in how human rights protection becomes more important for foreign policy goals and politics in the 1970s. In 1977, Jimmy Carter declared human rights as a central concern of US foreign policy. This was connected to specific domestic political issues, as well as to foreign policy interests, to restore the moral ethos of the superpower after the Vietnam War. Another particularly interesting case, which is perhaps less well known, is the Dutch Social Democrat government of Joop den Uyl (1973–77). Eckel describes the Dutch policy as the “avant-garde of humanitarian rethinking of international community”. In this framework, human rights were used with reference to justice and solidarity with the developing world taking a stand on, for example, the politics of Apartheid and the Pinochet dictatorship in Chile. Another foreign policy example that Eckel gives in the Cold War context is the process related to the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, and the Helsinki Act (1975) which followed it, in which the European governments included human rights as a political commitment in order to use it for political purposes against the Soviet bloc during this period.

Eckel’s account shows how in the 1960s and particularly 70s human rights became the language of activists with reference to opposition against dictatorships in Latin America and the Eastern Europe, both domestically and abroad. Among the different case examples, most attention is given to the international human rights politics connected to the Pinochet military government in Chile and its human rights abuses. This brought human rights oriented foreign policy and human rights to the fore of international politics in a manner that united different actors and interests in a way which had not previously been possible, including different governments across the political spectrum, the UN, NGO’s and churches. Further, in the 1970s, human rights in Western

countries became a means to criticize the morally questionable foreign policy of governments and the symbol of suffering people.

Histories of human rights are also histories of human rights activism. Amnesty International, which was founded in 1961, became an important actor in international human rights politics via its targeted campaigns in the 1970s. NGOs were also well connected to the political morality that became associated with human rights in the 1970s by both state and non-state actors. In addition, human rights became connected to ethical ideas, injustice and the suffering of others, as well as to the question of moral responsibility with reference to postcolonialism, in particular. The mediation of politics further meant that it became easier to get information about human rights abuses in different parts of the world.

It is interesting that Eckel uses the phrase “politics of the unpolitical” in reference to NGOs. This is connected to the notion of human rights as something “apolitical” or “above politics” in the language of the NGOs during the 1970s. In reality, in the field of human rights, the NGOs can be seen as political actors with certain political goals. The idea of “the politics of the unpolitical” is also linked to humanitarianism which can, like ideas connected to human rights more generally, be used for different political or foreign policy purposes which actual international political events have shown. Eckel’s book and the specific case studies it uses testify to the notion that interpreting something as a human rights question does not mean that the matter becomes somehow depoliticized, apolitical, uncontroversial or even indisputable. On the contrary, human rights and the language of human rights can be used to politicize questions and concerns. Human rights open up possibilities for politicking and opportunities to act politically.

There are different ways to interpret the ambivalence inherent in the good of human rights. First, it can refer to the ambivalent responses by states to human rights in international politics. Connected to this is the notion of realpolitik and cynicism, on the one hand, and morality and idealism of human rights, on the other. Eckel’s book aptly shows how human rights are related to particular political constellations and contexts and the role given to them by contemporary political agents remains essentially a political question. Further, this ambivalence can be interpreted in relation to the idea of universalism, on the one hand, and to the question of the implementation of human rights by the states, on the other.

Thirdly, from the perspective of conceptual history, the ambivalence of human rights is connected to understanding human rights as a political concept *par excellence*. Human rights can be used, interpreted, defined, and claimed by different (political) actors for different purposes, perspectives and political interests. Moreover, Eckel’s account shows that human rights are far from something self-evident or fixed: there remains a constant struggle over the meaning

and interpretation of human rights and the role of human rights in international politics and political practice. Although Eckel's narrative concludes in the early 1990s – thus leaving aside the last 25 years – this question resonates exceedingly well with current human rights debates and controversies.

When examining human rights practices and controversies in different decades, Eckel shows that histories of human rights are not a single, linear, continuous story of evolution that have brought political injustices to an end. Even if the book is written by a historian, it can also be read, above all, as a political account of the postwar histories of human rights. This non-teleological view includes the idea that human rights are politically contingent with ambivalent consequences that cannot always be anticipated. There is not a particular goal for human rights but central to Eckel's analysis is the question of the role and purpose of human rights as part of international politics in the post 1940s world. It is precisely the ambivalence of the good that makes human rights so attractive and useful for international politics.

References

- ECKEL, Jan, 2014. *Die Ambivalenz des Guten. Menschenrechte in der internationalen Politik seit den 1940ern*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
- MOYN, Samuel, 2010. *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.