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How Can We Create a Better World?: The Problems of Human Rights Promotion and Refugees

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The issue of human rights violations and the problem of refugees remain as relevant as ever in the year 2014. The ongoing civil war in Syria has produced more than two million refugees seeking asylum abroad and displaced more than six million people inside Syria, making it one of the worst humanitarian crises in recent history. These events have overshadowed the millions of African refugees who have fled violence in countries such as Sudan, Somalia, Mali, and the Central African Republic in recent years. The problem of human rights violations has also not gone away. International news agencies have drawn attention to North Korea’s domestic horrors and the excesses of the US war on terror, including the disgraceful behavior of Iraqi occupational forces in the Abu Ghraib prison. Much as they have in the past, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) such as Amnesty International work to raise international awareness about lesser-known atrocities, such as the Bangladesh government’s attacks on the country’s Hindu minority and the appalling amount of violence against Coptic Christians in Egypt.

The continuing relevance of human rights issues and the problem of refugees help account for the appearance of Jan Eckel and Samuel Moyn’s edited volume The Breakthrough (2014) and Peter Gatrell’s The Making of the Modern Refugee (2013). The former work offers an international history of modern refugees from roughly World War I to the present that strives to elucidate the complexities of the refugee experience and explain why historians should make the subject of refugees an important element of contemporary history. The Breakthrough contains a collection of essays that aims to determine if the issue of human rights violations only “broke through” to the mainstream during the 1970s and to reveal the limitations of relying on social science models, rather than careful historical analysis, to evaluate human rights promotion.

This review will explain how The Making of the Modern Refugee and The Breakthrough have made valuable contributions to the existing literature in the fields of human
rights critiquing specific arguments and offering a few suggestions for areas of future research, it will raise the issue of how best to deal with the refugee problem and the inherent tensions in the larger project of human rights promotion. This review will also use these works as a platform to raise questions about roles the modern nation-state and universal human rights can play in creating a better planet given the deep differences in culture, wealth, and religion that continue to divide humanity.

Peter Gatrell stands out as excellent choice to write a book about the history of modern refugees. As a professor of economic history at the University of Manchester, he has written several works on Russian economic history and refugees, including A Whole Empire Walking: Refugees in Russia during World War I (Indiana University Press, 2005). In The Making of the Modern Refugee, Gatrell makes a strong argument that refugees have become an enduring and normal part of the international landscape, rather than an unfortunate aberration. Drawing on a wide array of secondary and primary sources, including oral testimony and movies, he also attempts to give refugees a voice and a human face, as part of a larger effort to illustrate how they have attempted to empower themselves in ways that complicate the narrative of automatic victimhood. Resisting simplification, Gatrell devotes considerable attention to how refugees have articulated individual and collective interpretations of history to “make sense of their displacement” and “turn the tables on those who prosecuted them in the first place” (12).

Along with exploring the refugee experience, Gatrell also examines how nation-states, NGOs, and international institutions have come to view the existence of refugees “as a ‘problem’ amenable to a ‘solution’” (5). Such a move puts him a strong position to analyze the assumptions that international actors have made about refugees and how the definition of what constitutes a refugee has evolved over time. It also allows him to remind readers that even the most well-intentioned NGOs possess their own agendas and have often viewed refugees as numbers, rather than human beings. Instead of negotiating with refugees on equal terms, many NGOs have come to expect “expressions of unalloyed gratitude” from them and looked for “success stories” that they could publicize to “keep supporters . . . [and donors] happy” (285).

Reflecting his desire to write an international history of modern refugees, Gatrell divides his work into three sections. In part 1, he analyzes the evolution of the refugee problem during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He pays particular attention to how governments and NGOs dealt with the millions of refugees created by World War I, including (but not limited to) Serbians who hoped to escape the destruction of their nation; Belgians who fled the German invasion; and Jews who either fled or were removed, depending on whether the Austrians or Russians controlled a specific territory on the Eastern front. He also explains how the Ottoman Empire’s murder or deportation of Armenians on the grounds of disloyalty facilitated the ability of Muslims who had previously fled various nations during the Balkan wars (1909–13) to enter and live in the empire. After dealing with World War I, Gatrell analyzes the interwar period. In this section, he recounts how the League of Nations and NGOs dealt with the millions of refugees produced by the Russian and Spanish Civil Wars. He also explores the reconstruction and resettlement of Armenians, Jewish refugees in Europe, and the population transfers carried out by the Greek and Turkish governments in 1923.

The analysis of these topics helps Gatrell illustrate many of his larger arguments. For example, he describes how the League of Nations lacked the power and funding to deal with the problem of refugees, including Jews who hoped to move abroad to escape the Nazis, in any sort of comprehensive manner. He also recounts how the French authorities during World War I “homogenized” Belgian refugees and linked “government programs of assistance” to the close “supervision” of these refugees’ “character.” After dividing these refugees into different categories, including those who could perform labor for French industries, the French government passed laws such as the Alien Restriction Act, which “confined” Belgian refugees to “specific areas of the country” and required them “to notify the police of any journey” of five miles or more (34).

In part 2, Gatrell drives home the scale and scope of the global refugee problem during the mid-twentieth century. When examining the problem of displaced persons in Europe after World War II ended, he notes how the Refugee Convention of 1951 set important precedents when it committed the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to work for “permanent solutions” to the refugee problem in Europe and defined “refugees” in terms of the persecution they faced at home, rather than their dislike of living in a particular area (108–109). After dealing with Europe, Gatrell looks at the plight of Palestinian refugees in the wake of the creation of Israel and its continued occupation of Palestinian lands. In chapter 5, he analyzes how refugees from Pakistan and India experienced and handled the partition of British India; he also uses chapter 6 to bring much needed attention to the massive displacement of Chinese, Koreans, and Tibetans that took place in Asia from 1937 to 1950.

These chapters help reveal a number of complexities about the refugee experience. In post–World War II Europe, many refugees (i.e., displaced persons) came to see their camps as prisons and clung to nationalist identities to orient themselves in an uncertain world (117). In contrast, many Tibetans who moved to Nepal or India after the Chinese took over their nation in 1950 embraced more cosmopolitan identities and adopted foreign customs in their new homes. Gatrell’s analysis also reveals the assumptions that private actors and international agents made about the displaced persons in Europe on whose behalf they worked. For example, in the context of the Cold War, US politicians had a tendency to champion Eastern European refugees and displaced persons as “the standard bearers of democracy even if their previous actions were thought to be dubious or even collaborationist” (109).
The chapter that covers the impact of Israel’s creation further reveals the complexities and diversity of the refugee experience. Employing a wide array of sources, including literature and opera, Gatrell raises important questions about how Israelis and Palestinians have framed their relationship and worked to influence how people “remember” past events (142). For the foreseeable future, he writes, Palestinians will continue to remind the world that Israelis are not simply victims of Arab anti-Semitic violence. Instead, Jews have committed major crimes by displacing hundreds of thousands of Palestinians from their homes and building settlements on occupied lands. Gatrell also makes the important point that these refugees have not always had good relations with other Arabs. For example, in the Gaza strip, the aid that “recognized” Palestinians refugees received from UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Middle East) has given them a level of “prosperity” that the local population came to envy (134). At the same time, he also reminds readers that not all Palestinian refugees, especially members of younger generation, have embraced “militant Islam” or dedicated their lives to eradicating Israel so they could return to their native soil (al-awda). Much like other peoples, Palestinian refugees often place primary importance on living well in the present and engaging in forms of recreation such as playing “pinball” or watching sporting events on television (144).

In part 3, Gatrell turns his attention to the major refugee crises that have racked the world since the 1970s. In Chapters 7 and 8, he looks at the experience of refugees in Southeast Asia and Africa, including the Burmese government’s decision to force almost one million Rohingya Bengali-speaking Muslims to leave the country for camps in Bangladesh. Gatrell uses the final chapter, chapter 9, to write about the experiences of refugees produced by the Soviet war in Afghanistan and the collapse of the Soviet Union, as well as the breakup of Yugoslavia during the 1990s and the continued division of Cyprus. He also draws attention to less well-known examples, such as the Tamils in Sri Lanka and the Lotshampa people of Bhutan.

Although Gatrell uses these chapters to reinforce many of arguments outlined above, he also employs them to address how the problem of refugees has evolved since the end of the Cold War. He advances a persuasive argument that commentators have tended to overstate the scale and unique nature of the refugee problems that have arisen since the end of the Cold War. For example, he explains how the recent crises in Africa, including the steps that Hutu officials took to wipe out the Tutsi in Rwanda, had deep roots in the history of “pre-colonial” and “colonial rule (250).”

In reference to NGOs and international bureaucrats, Gatrell makes a strong case that private groups working on behalf of refugees and agencies such as UNHCR have used their increased resources to expand the scope of their activities far beyond the confines of Europe. During the past thirty years, he continues, the gap between “ordinary refugees” and NGO field workers has continued to grow, as the latter have become more “professional” and placed more emphasis on “framing” their work in ways designed to gain money from donors, rather than giving refugees a voice. Drawing on their expertise, NGO field workers and UNHCR have become wedded to the assumption that their developmental programs (i.e., technical and economic assistance) represent the best ways to resettle or repatriate refugees (201–202).

This last development has had at least two unintended consequences. First, as the example of Hutu refugees in the camps of Zaire (now Democratic Republic of the Congo) shows, warlords have sustained their wars by using refugee camps as a source of recruits for their armies and confiscating resources “destined for displaced civilians” (200 and 241). Second, some governments, including the Somali government under Siad Barre, discouraged refugees from giving up the jobs that NGOs set up in the camps “because self-sufficiency would undermine the case for emergency financial and material resources from abroad” (241).

Once again, Gatrell deserves credit for elucidating the complexities of the refugee experience and providing readers with a glimpse into how refugees have worked to shape their lives. He also deserves praise for drawing attention to subjects that need further research, such as the experiences of Cambodian refugees in the wake of the Khmer Rouge and the Vietnamese invasion of their country in 1979 (221). The Making of the Modern Refugee will remain an essential work of historical synthesis for the foreseeable future that authors will have to consult before embarking on new research projects. Despite possessing strengths, this work has limitations. However informative, its small print and dense prose will probably have limited appeal to general readers and undergraduates. As far as content, Gatrell devotes few pages to the general contours of refugees’ relationship with international law and human rights norms. He also does not draw enough attention to the role Arab militias and military forces played in forcing the evacuation of tens of thousands of Palestinians from the homes during the war against Israel in 1948 and the refusal of neighboring countries such as Syria to accept them.

Specialists may also question Gatrell’s case selections. For example, he does not devote much attention to the plight of the Cossacks and Russian refugees whom the Allies forced to return to the Soviet Union against their will after War II ended. He also does not write much about the experiences of Hmong refugees in the United States or the subject of Kurdish refugees. Perhaps more surprisingly, Gatrell devotes little attention to the millions of refugees that the US-led invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan have created during the past decade. He may very well have made this decision for the same reason that he chose not to examine the subject of refugees in Latin America: a desire not to craft a narrative “dominated by the history of US intervention” (13). By framing this specific choice in such a manner, however, Gatrell simplifies a complex issue, especially given the role that Communist land policies and left-wing violence played in bringing about the refugee
problem in Latin America during the Cold War. He also overlooks the hundreds of thousands of Cubans who have fled their nation to escape Communist tyranny and economic failure.

Although Gatrell did not write The Making of the Modern Refugee to solve the problem of refugees, some may question his suggestions for how best to deal with this global reality. Recognizing that the nation-state and concept of sovereignty will not disappear in the near future, he places a lot of faith in the ameliorative effects of having refugees speak and exercise power for themselves, rather than relying on the politicians and experts who have tended to do so on their behalf. Even though such an approach runs the risk of opening up the old wounds that caused the refugee problem in the first place, he still believes that the plight of refugees will improve once they gain the power to forge “cosmopolitan coalitions” with non-refugees that promote “equality” and “transparent justice” (12–13).

Though few will argue with the importance of empowering refugees, provided that they do not resort to violence or encourage hatred, some may question Gatrell’s suggestion that nation-states and the expression of nationalist identities represent an impediment to reducing the number of refugees and improving their lives. This view has many supporters, but it glosses over the reality that the best way of addressing the problem of refugees involves increasing the number of well-functioning nation-states that allow private citizens to exercise effective nationalism. To put this insight another way, the history of the last one hundred years reveals the limitations of solving global problems through the cultivation of cosmopolitan identities or by excessive reliance on international institutions. Whether critics like it or not, forging well-functioning nation-states still represents the best way to erect a legal framework that allows diverse peoples to forge their own identities, live together in peace, and work with other peoples of the world to address important global problems.

The role of the nation-state in the larger process of creating a more humane world also becomes an issue in Moyn (Columbia University) and Eckel’s (University of Freiburg) The Breakthrough. Drawing on their expertise and on numerous publications in the fields of human rights, international law, and intellectual history, these historians have succeeded in assembling a wide variety of thoughtful essays that follow in the footsteps of works that expand our current understanding of contemporary human rights promotion and raise important questions about how to periodize the human rights “breakthrough.”

Moyn and Eckel have placed these essays in geographical and chronological order, although the work concludes with Eckel’s excellent overview of why human rights only became an issue of true international concern during the 1970s.

Although the authors in The Breakthrough address many different topics and advance a number of unique arguments, they make a particularly conscious effort to grapple with two issues. First, they strive to historicize the constructivist accounts of human rights promotion popular among political scientists that focus on how international norms shape the behavior of governments. More to the point, these essays start from the assumption that explaining the impact of a transnational phenomenon such as human rights promotion requires a careful analysis of the specific historical circumstances in which actors operate, rather than the use of ahistorical models that explain behavior through social science theory.

Second, the authors evaluate some of the main arguments that Moyn and Eckel have advanced in their works, including the view that human rights only became a major issue of international concern during the 1970s, when utopian projects such as “reform communism” began to implode for many (34). Looking for new ways to improve the world, many private citizens and politicians began to see human rights promotion as a weapon “beyond politics” that could transform the internal behavior of repressive states and bring a new morality to a world that had witnessed debacles including the Vietnam War (34). Both Eckel and Moyn believe, however, that, instead of turning into a well-grounded, realistic approach to creating a better world, the promotion of human rights has not moved beyond a “fundamentally utopian project” that places more emphasis on projecting idealism than on dealing with the concrete steps necessary to improve human rights performance in the real world (34).

Perhaps it is no surprise, then, that five of the essays in The Breakthrough examine the complexities of how the issue of human rights played out in European countries during the Cold War. Benjamin Nathans makes a strong argument that many Soviet dissidents began invoking human rights well before the 1970s and remained committed to building a state built on the principles of ethical socialism, rather than embracing laissez-faire capitalism. He also makes a compelling case that these dissidents used human rights critiques in realistic ways to discredit the behavior of their government. In the case of East Germany, Ned Richardson-Little explains how the ability of the SED (Socialist Unity Party) to brand itself as the defender of “socialist human rights” helped it co-opt the issue of human rights violations during the 1970s and first half of the 1980s (52). Celia Donnert explores the complexities of the East German government’s relationship with women’s rights, including by holding the East Berlin World Congress of Women in the International Year of Women (1975). As she recounts, the East German government hoped to steer international forums away from prioritizing issues such as sexual freedom and lesbianism over the ways in which socialist governments protected the rights of women better than imperialistic or capitalist countries (78–82).

The other essays that cover Europe also pay close attention to periodization and attempt to historicize constructivist accounts of human rights promotion. Gunter Dehnert explains why Daniel Thomas’s influential work The Helsinki Effect fails to capture the complexities of how Polish citizens from backgrounds as diverse as the Catholic Church and the intellectual left found common cause in human rights and used the language of the Final Act
(Helsinki Accords) to challenge the policies of the Polish government. Simon Stevens’s findings call into question the argument that the 1970s represented a “breakthrough” decade for human rights in light of “the limited support that anti-apartheid activism attracted” in Great Britain during the “long 1970s compared to the mid-1980s” (223).

Daniel Sargent and Carl J. Bon Tempo explore the issue of human rights in the United States. Bon Tempo addresses the understudied topic of the Republican Party’s relationship with human rights during the 1970s. He makes a strong case that Republicans abandoned a broad definition of human rights during the 1976 presidential campaign in favor of narrow conception that paid more attention to the shortcomings of Communist governments than to those of authoritarian US allies in Latin America and Asia. Sargent offers a fascinating essay that attempts to account for why many Americans embraced the cause of human rights during the 1970s. Though the human rights agenda of the 1970s drew on many previous precedents, he argues, it also represented a specific “political project” that reflected the circumstances of the 1970s, including, but not limited to, growing “empathy” for human beings who lived outside the United States (132).

The essays in The Breakthrough do not just examine Europe and the United States. Four authors cover Latin America, Africa, and Asia. Lasse Heerten explores how the Igbo people attempted to use human rights as a weapon to secede from Nigeria and create the independent state of Biafra during the late 1960s and early 1970s. In his view, the failure of the international community to recognize Biafra helps reveal how the human right of self-determination gave way to “the late twentieth century regime of transnational human rights as individual rights” (32). He also makes the interesting point that the growing importance placed on individual human rights has helped facilitate intervention in the affairs of African nations by giving outside powers an excuse to ignore African sovereignty in the name of humanitarianism (32). Brad Simpson complicates our understanding of how the issue of human rights played out in Indonesia during the 1970s, he advances the important point that human rights did not just “radiate from the West.” Over and over again, Indonesian activists drew on conceptions of “economic justice and human rights” from the 1940s when challenging their government’s contention that promoting economic growth required the repression of political opposition (187, 201, 202–203).

In the case of Latin America, Lynsay Sikba examines how the efforts of private citizens, the US Congress, and the Carter administration helped make the subject of human rights violations impossible for the Argentine junta to ignore (122–23). Patrick William Kelly describes how transnational networks, which included exiles and members of the US Congress, challenged the existence of human rights violations in Brazil, Chile, and Argentina. “Disillusioned with the collapse” of an “international socialist vocabulary” and the failures of revolutions in Latin America, many saw the value of using human rights to draw attention to the vicious internal behavior of Latin American governments. Beyond elucidating how Latin American governments attempted to deflect transnational human rights critiques, each of these authors also reminds readers that many Latin Americans continued to view human rights as a “bourgeois fantasy” or another form of US imperialism (99, 123).

The articles in The Breakthrough succeed in enhancing our understanding of contemporary human rights promotion and familiarizing readers with debates about when human rights became a true global issue. Each of them will work well in upper-level undergraduate classes and graduate seminars. Although this review cannot offer a thorough critique of every author’s argument, it can point out a few limitations and draw attention to some larger questions. Several of the authors, including Eckel, make the commonplace mistake of overestimating the degree to which Jimmy Carter wanted to move beyond the Cold War and overlook just how much his administration employed human rights in realistic ways to challenge the international prestige of Soviet-style socialism and promote internal reform in the USSR. The authors who cover Latin America could have added a layer of complexity to their arguments by placing the debates about human rights within the context of the violent acts such as kidnapping and bombings that left-wing groups in Latin America carried out during the 1960s and 1970s. Patrick William Kelly has good reason to suggest that many Latin Americans would have benefitted from their governments’ implementing more social-democratic policies during the past few decades but glosses over an important point: the growing appeal of human rights in Latin America in the 1970s and 1980s also reflected a growing recognition that Marxist-Leninist (Soviet-style socialism) regimes had failed to promote economic prosperity and enhance basic human dignity, as their defenders claimed they would.

When taken as a whole, the collection of essays in The Breakthrough also has limitations. The essays that cover Europe reveal just how much research remains to be done on the relationship between human rights promotion and the antinuclear and peace movements during the 1970s and 1980s. Though it is a small critique, the editors might also have included additional essays to examine the complexities of non-Westerners’ relationship with the concept of universal human rights. Just how much did the issue of human rights violations resonate in nations such as Japan, China, and Egypt during the 1970s and 1980s? Is the issue of human rights violations just another form of Western imperialism, as non-Westerners in Indonesia and Latin America have contended over the years?

This last question deserves attention because it raises its own set of questions about the entire human rights project. To understand why, we need to keep an important point of view that Moyn, Eckel, and Sargent appear to share: that the status of human rights in an individual nation-state has everything to do with the actual structure of the government (or nation-state) and values of that society. When viewed in this light, the overall respect for human rights in a country depends on the existence of democratic procedures and institutions that protect clearly defined rights and give...
people forums to hold government officials accountable for their behavior.

If this argument has any validity, it raises some uncomfortable questions about the status of universal human rights claims in the non-Western world. Without belaboring the point, countries as diverse as Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Iran, and India often make headlines in the West for their repression of women, Christians, and homosexuals. Given the societal values and government policies that give rise to such policies, how can these nations ever meet existing international human rights standards unless they take specific steps to Westernize their societies and adopt more liberal and democratic values? If such a question appears ethnocentric or as imperialism in another form, then we need to admit that we still lack a global consensus on human rights standards and what constitutes legitimate government. The late political scientist Samuel Huntington recognized this reality in his famous book *The Clash of Civilizations*. Convinced that many observers had overestimated the existence of a common humanity, he reminded readers that Western values and institutions are special because of their uniqueness, rather than their universal applicability. This argument cannot be repeated enough when so many remain enthralled with the utopian dream that pursuing the cause of human rights will create a more just world and end the problem of refugees.²

**NOTES**
