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Book Review of *Advocating Dignity: Human Rights Mobilizations in Global Politics*

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Book Review
Advocating Dignity:
Human Rights Mobilizations in Global Politics

by

Jean Quataert

(Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 355 pages.

Reviewed by Delia Popescu

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We hear the voices of some victims, but not of others. Why is public outrage selective? Jean Quataert's *Advocating Dignity: Human Rights Mobilizations in Global Politics* is an ambitious project exploring the multifaceted forces that initiated, championed and influenced the evolution of human rights discourse after 1945. Intended as a historical inquiry into the voices, perspectives, and activities of the many courageous individuals (p. xi) who changed the world's perspective on human rights, Quataert's book aims to weave a story of local, transnational, and international (p. .xi) forces coming together to shape human rights advocacy and outcomes. Chapter 1 sets the historical background by analyzing the pre-1945 legal and institutional factors that made possible the human rights system under UN auspices at the end of two great wars. Quataert usefully points out the tension between the rise of an individual-oriented discourse of rights and the definitive importance of sovereignty in the Cold War world. On this background, the human rights system was the cumulative result of hard fought battles in various parts of the world. Following Chapter 1, the book is divided in three parts, each part containing two chapters. Part I documents the interplay of political opportunities that bolstered the rise of the human rights discourse after WWII. Chapter 2 juxtaposes the anti-apartheid and Eastern European anti-communism movements in an effort to point out their far-reaching, transnational impact. The analysis suggests the possible reach of local voices and the transnational interpretation fills a gap in the existing literature. Chapter 3 documents the fight of Latin American mothers of the forcefully 'disappeared.' The analysis reveals the formative connection between

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social initiatives and institutional adjustments, such as the inclusion of NGOs in UN oversight.

Part II focuses on the 1970s as a time of social initiatives that challenged orthodox views on human rights questions, in the context of rising globalization. In this context, Chapter 4 focuses on women's advocacy networks and on the complex question of gender in the human rights vocabulary. Chapter 5 discusses the intersection of globalization and labor migration as a source of new developments in human rights thinking. Part III is an investigation of the tide of wars, genocides and humanitarian crisis that were an unfortunate trait of the 1990s. Chapter 6 examines events in Yugoslavia and Rwanda in order to bring to light the problematic legacy of 'humanitarian interventions' as both a legal and a strategic tool. Chapter 7 is a case analysis of the UN World Conference Against Racism as a platform for both new and old voices to be heard. The Chapter connects the relevance of issues raised at the WCAR with the questions that were confronted in the post 9/11 world.

Overall, the analysis successfully draws on a wide array of fields: political science, legal history, philosophy, women's studies, and international relations. Quataert brings the perspective of a social historian to the study of human rights advocacy and captures the complex negotiations between grassroots organizations, NGOs, IGOs and state governments that precede successive advancements in the human rights discourse. As the author mentions, the book is focused on the vast gray zone (p. 13) of dialectical interchange between emergent societal convictions and the eventual legal outcomes. The study is successful in pointing out the rich complexity of exchanges, negotiations, initiatives, support and actions that are required in the formation of new human rights concerns and operating principles. The author's familiarity with human rights developments is evident throughout the book, and the main thesis – that the rights discourse is a hard won construction – flows seamlessly.

While the author is aware of the many levels of transnational politics, she is also concerned with the individual voices and the day-to-day actions of courageous individuals. But on this topic, the book is less successful in delivering. While the institutional responses are clearly mapped out, it is less clear how individual action starts and what are the powerful motivators of sustained action. Why do some

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individuals act and not others, and what sustains their courage and their resolve in their 'day-to-day' (p. 7) suffering and struggles? Chapter 5, which maps the women's initiatives in carving a space for gender in the human rights language, comes closest to the stated goal of a rich history of personal accounts and responses. The chapter recounts the experiences of activists, introduces the reaction of social analysts and weaves in the answer of individual policy makers. But beyond chapter 5, the narrative seldom descends to the individual level, and personal stories are an episodic appearance in the book. The resulting project has rather a 'mid-range' organizational focus that successfully intertwines the histories of grassroots groups together with those of larger organizations. The political science audience will especially appreciate the richness of detail regarding transnational relations and international power structures. What they might object to however is the rather rosy picture of the UN. With the exception of the chapter on humanitarian intervention, the UN is depicted as a mostly unproblematic, responsive and accommodating organization. Issues such as corruption, power plays and factional interests are glossed over and eclipsed by the mention of only one overarching UN problem: great power politics. The role of the UN in human rights development is far more complex and problematical than suggested. This issue plays into a second concern: the book chronicles successful developments in the language of human rights, but hints little at the many efforts that did not pay off. If we wonder why we hear the voices of some victims, then we are logically looking for the reason why we do not hear the voices of others. There is no doubt that those interested in social movements will find a rich account of success stories, but that account is partly marred by the lack of examples of less successful social initiatives.

The strength of the book is in connecting the history of grassroots initiatives with that of international organization and state responses. The connective threads are not flawless, but they present a necessarily selective and compelling story of how political and social action can mediate the rise of new ideas and principles. The book could have used a crisper theoretical gaze at human rights principles. The author makes scarce use of the intellectual history of human rights, despite the promise that the book would draw on philosophy. The lack of heavy theoretical discussion does not come as a surprise,

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but it does take away from the motivational story that lies between individual actions. Activists are individuals with convictions and the book takes most of these convictions for granted.

On balance, the book is a noteworthy historical overview of several levels at which action is initiated, interpreted and transformed into operating principles of international law. *Advocating Dignity* offers scholars, policy makers and activists a useful perspective into the workings of norm creation in the international arena. Quataert recognizes that advances in human rights cannot be taken for granted and their success is dependent on a multitude of factors that have to juxtapose at the right time. This constructionist perspective of human rights allows Quataert to combine political, historical and social analysis into a rich account of the life of human rights.

Delia Popescu is Assistant Professor of Political Science at LeMoyne College, Syracuse, NY. Her work addresses totalitarianism, anti-communist dissidence, issues of justice, and political rhetoric and remembrance in the context of Eastern European post-communism. She is currently working on a book manuscript entitled, *The Responsibility of Resistance: Political Action in Vaclav Havel's Thought*.

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