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Book Review of Achieving Human Rights

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Book Review
Achieving Human Rights

by

Richard Falk

(New York and London: Routledge, 2009), 244 pages.

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Achieving Human Rights, a compilation of fourteen chapters, attempts to provide a coherent account of the struggle to achieve human rights in the early years of the twenty-first century. Falk goes to great length to personalize, for readers, the practice and protection of human rights by locating freedom and responsibility in the countless daily decisions everyone makes about the treatment of others. Therefore, this existential level of implementation for human rights implies a refusal to treat otherness as a set of alien abstractions. The author convincingly reminds us that the struggle for human rights must begin at home, not just in the home country, that is, within our own family and immediate neighborhood.

Part I offers a brief introduction of a necessary utopianism, the future for human rights, Orientalism and international law to engage in a deliberative and participatory human rights within a global world. However, while the utopianism element is to encourage a radical revision of citizenship, the reader is left to question how the citizen pilgrim in such a global setting represents an overall quest for sustainability and equality. For instance, in Chapter 2, 'The Future of Human Rights,' the author argues that the right of power is well-financed and controls every modern society (p. 38). While the reader expects a future solution to human rights, Falk acknowledges that a significant development over the years is reflected by the geographic move away from Europe to Istanbul, which can claim a location that is at least as much Asian and Middle Eastern as it is European. The prospect of global governance can be beneficial for the people of the world and sustainable over time (p. 52). While this sounds noble in practice, it universalizes the mythic or existential realities of the American experi-

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ence and that expectation presently seems utopian. Rather, we should dream freely of a benevolent future, to encounter the moral and political imagination of people throughout the world to take responsibility for their own future.

Parts II and III of the book move on to address global democracy and international criminal law by referring to cases such as the Holocaust, the Pinochet movements, the genocide at the world court and the case against Serbia. Proceeding with the request for and the form of governmental capabilities to establish and implement policy at the global level without implying the existence or desirability of world government, Falk challenges the reader. On the one hand, the sensitivity of the language of 'world government' and the movement for the radical abridgement of sovereignty must be replaced by liberal efforts to promote international cooperation and, on the other hand, collective action promoting human values without requiring modifications in the structure of the world order must be reconciled. In Chapter 6, Falk argues that the Holocaust played a surprisingly small role in further international human rights as a consequence of a state-centric world not genuinely ready for the imposition of human rights standards upon states on the basis of the external sources of authority (p. 94). A point often understated in much work on human rights but highlighted well in the book is that Pinochet was made subject to extradition and potential criminal liability was virtually all that mattered in the critical arena of public opinion. We must pause for a moment as Falk reminds us and critically examines how the Pinochet experience has opened up the issue of universal jurisdiction to an unprecedented degree. Even, and especially, in the case against Serbia (Chapter 8), we carefully consider widespread disappointment greeting the near unanimous decision the international court of justice to the effect that former Yugoslavia was not guilty of genocide in Bosnia during the 1990s. It is aptly stated by Falk in the 'Genocide at the world court' chapter, that the cautious and conservative reading of responsibility of the world court for genocide should not be understood as extending to the moral and political duties to act preventively and reactively in the face of firm, internationally validated instances of imminent or ongoing genocidal behavior.

Parts IV and V describe human rights after 9/11 and then turn beyond politics and the ideal of the citizen pilgrim. Above all, a

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crucial element in post 9/11 is the threat to civil liberties, human rights and the rule of law associated with developments by the outlook of the Bush presidency and the deliberate confusion drawn between counter-terrorism and a broader foreign policy agenda unlikely to generate domestic support. Readers are reminded of how the relationship between the education and responsibilities of citizenship is what makes it desirable to consider this subject matter of human rights from a variety of angles. In so doing, in the last chapter, Falk reconsiders what it means or should mean to the citizen. However, Falk reminds us that until citizenship is embedded in a community that binds at the level of emotion, it will not lead to the construction of a new identity capable of addressing the challenges of planetary scope.

In summary, *Achieving Human rights* implements what it sets out to do. It challenges readers to reconsider the human progressive agenda and presents a careful analysis with a variety of human rights issues, weaving theoretical inquiry with biting political criticism. Therefore, the readers are reminded and encouraged that what we need to do – at the personal level as well as states actions – is to refocus our pursuit of human rights in a post 9/11 world.

Fatemeh Shayan is a PhD student at Tampere University, Finland and a staff member at Isfahan University. She received her Master's degree in International Relations in 2003. Since 2008, she has been a PhD candidate by University of Tampere, Department of Political Science and International Relations and employed permanently by Isfahan University, Department of International Relations since 2008.

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