

PENNSYLVANIA STUDIES IN HUMAN RIGHTS

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The Breakthrough

Human Rights in the 1970s

Edited by

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Guilherme Assis de Almeida
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UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA PRESS
PHILADELPHIA

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Published by
University of Pennsylvania Press
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19104-4112
www.upenn.edu/pennpress

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
The breakthrough : human rights in the 1970s / edited by Jan Eckel and Samuel Moyn. — 1st ed.

p. cm. — (Pennsylvania studies in human rights)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-8122-4550-9 (hardcover : alk. paper)

1. Human rights—History—20th century. I. Eckel, Jan. II. Moyn, Samuel. III.

Series: Pennsylvania studies in human rights.

JCS71.H76919 2014

323.09'047—dc23

2013011619

global scale, democracy was strengthened while at the same time party systems in the Western world reconfigured, with the emergence of the new left and the rise of a populist right. Extra-parliamentary activism arguably left an even deeper imprint on the political scenes than in previous decades, as was most visibly manifested in the blossoming new social movements of various stripes. Not least, a cultural revolution, if there ever was one, occurred in the reshaping of relations between the sexes.

International relations, too, were subject to rapid change. The decade surprised observers with a rapid turnaround, as the era of détente reached its apex only to be followed by the outbreak of the "Second Cold War." But even though the superpowers reverted to their old bipolar antagonism, the clock was not fully turned back. In the 1970s, the field of international actors considerably diversified. China and the Arab countries emerged as potent players in the international arena. Moreover, both the impressive ascendancy of non-state actors in the international realm and the growing importance of transnational issues such as environmental protection or population control dramatically altered preconditions for foreign policy making. Looking back at many of these transformations, historians have discovered in the 1970s the roots of the world as we know it. They consider the decade to constitute the immediate prehistory, as it were, of our present.³

Human rights do not notably figure in these descriptions of the decade. Yet the 1970s saw a vigorous surge in the popularity of the idea and an impressive proliferation of political practices associated with it. The purpose of this essay is therefore twofold. On the one hand, I will suggest an explanatory framework for the new prominence that human rights gained in the international politics of the decade. On the other, I will place this conjuncture in the broader history of the period. Surveying some of the most important developments, I will argue that the 1970s did mark a new moment in human rights history. Nonetheless, this new moment should not be viewed as homogeneous and clear-cut but as an intricate and manifold shift. The decade presents a complex picture that cannot be traced back to a single cause and hardly lends itself to a grand narrative. To explain the diverse initiatives and various new departures shaping human rights politics in the 1970s, we need to understand both how they were related to more general transformations in international relations and political culture, and the inherent appeal they possessed for politicians and activists in different world regions. Human rights in the 1970s appear as a multifaceted promise of moral renewal that in view of the profound changes in the structure of national and international

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The Rebirth of Politics from the Spirit of Morality: Explaining the Human Rights Revolution of the 1970s

Jan Eckel

In the past few years, the 1970s have rapidly moved to the center of scholarly interest. Interpretations have thrived at the same time as—and sometimes, it seems, even before—the contours of important events and developments are beginning to appear in research-based studies. Most historians have shaped the 1970s as a novel and distinctive phase in contemporary history and consequently accentuated the historical breaks that marked the transition from the 1960s to the following decade. Eric Hobsbawm many years ago diagnosed the "end of the golden age," which in his view inaugurated an era of long-term problems.¹ Those trends that have attracted most attention in recent historiographical discussion seem to largely confirm his early assessment. Most strikingly perhaps, the 1970s were a decade of pervasive economic insecurity. They saw the breakdown of the Bretton Woods system, two oil price shocks, a hitherto unknown "stagflation," and steep rises in unemployment. The optimistic belief in ongoing political progress secured by scientific planning quickly evaporated as consciousness of the "limits to growth" and acute perceptions of crisis spread.²

The tale is not entirely one of decline, though. In Europe, welfare states saw a vast expansion and mass consumerism continued unabated. On a

politics came to be seen as increasingly attractive, both ideologically and strategically. Their essential attractiveness lay in the fact that human rights seemed to provide a way of responding to the failure of older political projects, of transcending the logic of the Cold War, of basing political action on a moral foundation, and of reaching a vantage point that supposedly was above politics.

Human Rights in the 1970s

On the surface, the history of human rights in the 1970s neatly fits in the picture of profound upheaval that recent interpretations have drawn. The decade saw an astonishing confluence of developments, many of which clearly represented new political departures. This was true for the mushrooming of human rights groups in Western countries. In the 1970s, innumerable groups emerged, the vast majority of them rather ephemeral, loosely institutionalized, and organized on a grassroots basis. They differed considerably in their outlooks and fields of action, some rallying around countries or regions where human rights violations occurred, others dealing with issues such as torture or indigenous rights. Still others engaged on behalf of prominent human rights martyrs, such as Andrei Sakharov or Nelson Mandela. Their activism overlapped with the concerns of other movements. Human rights advocates at times adopted and reinforced the demands of feminist or Third World activists, for instance, and these in turn couched their demands in human rights language. Nevertheless, in the political jargon of the time "human rights" increasingly came to signify a type, or at least a current, of activism *sui generis*. Contemporary observers were amazed by the sudden upsurge and sardonically spoke of a "human rights industry" building up before their eyes.⁴

As far as the highly professional and politically potent human rights NGOs were concerned, the most important ones had been established in previous decades: the International League for the Rights of Man in 1941, the International Commission of Jurists in 1952, and Amnesty International in 1961. Yet these NGOs underwent profound institutional transformations that both testified to the growing attractiveness of their political project and significantly enhanced their impact on international politics. Amnesty International's development is a powerful case in point.⁵ During the 1970s, the London-based organization saw a dramatic growth in membership and,

leaving its sectarian beginnings behind, turned into a real mass movement. Perhaps even more tellingly, the organization expanded its geographical scope. Before the early 1970s, Amnesty was practically limited to four countries. Internal statistics reveal that almost 90 percent of local groups resided in Great Britain, Sweden, Denmark, and the Federal Republic of Germany.⁶ It was only subsequently that the Amnesty movement took off and spread in many other Western countries.

In addition, the advent of Amnesty sparked a chain reaction that would deeply reshape the field of professional human rights NGOs. Beginning in the late 1960s, the New York-based International League for the Rights of Man initiated a reform process to modernize its institutional structures and to overcome some of the flaws that the board of directors thought hampered its activism.⁷ To this end, the league copied many of the techniques that the London organization had forged. In particular, it was Amnesty's public relations work and its strategies of information gathering that the league chose to adopt. The only new major international human rights NGO that was formed in the 1970s, the later Human Rights Watch, vastly expanded after the turn of the decade. Even so, the Watch groups were also deeply indebted to Amnesty International in their use of the media, their ways of exerting pressure on governments, and their very reference to the idea of human rights.

The appeal of human rights was not limited to those who chose to defend the "rights of others," however. Among the most noticeable departures in the decade's human rights history, and even in its history of international politics at large, was the attempt of opposition groups to appropriate the idea in order to protect themselves from state repression and persecution. South America was one of the regions where this attempt resonated most strongly. Since the late 1960s, a wave of military coups had brought the subcontinent under the rule of a new type of military dictatorship. These regimes used an unprecedented level of violence to eradicate real or imagined Marxist tendencies and to kill or otherwise eliminate their political enemies.⁸ The fact that in the international arena these regimes came to be closely associated with their "human rights violations," possibly more so than other states of the period, and certainly much more so than previous Latin American governments, is in itself revealing. An important reason lay in the struggle of opposition movements within the dictatorships. Comparably strong and well-organized groups emerged in Brazil, Chile, and Argentina, which strongly drew on human rights language and directed their appeals to international bodies. The Argentine Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo figure among the widely

admitted icons of the period's history of protest.⁹ In Chile, the church-based *Vicaría de la Solidaridad* played a key role, particularly in the early years.¹⁰

Developments in Eastern Europe, the second region where human rights strongly came to the fore as a protest language, were similar insofar as dissidents used many of the same political strategies as South American opposition figures. They documented abuses, held their governments accountable to international norms and built up transnational networks with Western NGOs. Communist dictatorships arguably had a longer history of being confronted with human rights denunciations. The postwar decades had seen an international campaign against forced labor, partly supported by the United Nations, and the agitation of groups such as the Assembly of Captive European Nations, which had strongly relied on international human rights norms.¹¹ However, during these years of fierce internal repression, protests had mainly been waged from the outside. In the 1970s, by contrast, human rights groups emerged within Eastern European states, many of which rose to international prominence or even fame. The years 1976 and 1977, for instance, saw the formation of the Moscow Helsinki Group in the Soviet Union, the Workers' Defense Committee (KOR) and the Movement for the Defense of Human and Civil Rights (ROPCIO) in Poland, and the famous Charter 77 in Czechoslovakia.¹²

These new oppositional politics were in many ways linked to the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), a further and striking new development in international relations.¹³ The conference, whose origins dated back to a Warsaw Pact proposal of 1969, constituted the first multilateral negotiations between the two Cold War camps since the immediate aftermath of World War II. Human rights formed an essential and strongly contested part of the negotiations. Both superpowers were initially skeptical as to their inclusion in the treaties, and the Soviet Union remained so throughout, being mostly interested in international guarantees of territorial integrity and of the postwar borders. Ultimately, it was the states of the European Community that in spite of strong resistance managed to keep human rights on the agenda. By signing the Helsinki Final Act in 1975, all participating states acknowledged that human rights were one of the "principles guiding relations between participating states." Further, they stipulated a set of so-called humanitarian provisions designed to facilitate "human contacts" across the West-East divide. Finally, states in Helsinki agreed to organize follow-up conferences, which were to take place in Belgrade (1977–1978), Madrid (1980–1983), and Vienna (1986–1989). Since Western governments

regularly used these conferences as platforms to denounce violations behind the Iron Curtain, what came to be known as the CSCE process assured that the human rights situation in Eastern bloc countries remained under scrutiny until the very end of the Cold War.¹⁴

The extremely active role that Western states played in this process was partly related to the fact that in the 1970s human rights gained a new relevance in their foreign policy. Several governments set out to define or refine their attitude toward the new catchword of the times. While some took the lead in incorporating human rights into the stated aims of their foreign policy, others felt compelled to react to the new wave of interest, occasionally taking human rights into consideration. They all contributed to a shift in international politics whose importance can hardly be overestimated. Human rights ceased to be a topic confined to states' policies toward international organizations, as it had been in the postwar decades. Now they entered the mainstream of bilateral relations to a much greater extent than before, moving human rights issues to the center of international relations.

The most influential of these new approaches was doubtless the policy adopted by the U.S. government under President Jimmy Carter, which probably did more than any other single actor to popularize the term in the international realm.¹⁵ After embracing them late in his electoral campaign, Carter repeatedly declared human rights to be a central tenet of U.S. foreign policy and, for better or worse, identified his government's record with their protection worldwide. There is an ongoing discussion among scholars about the inconsistencies and shortcomings of Carter's approach—a discussion that essentially prolongs the contemporary debate, which had also centered around the supposedly selective application and counterproductive outcomes of the administration's policy. But irrespective of which side one takes in this debate, the Carter government unquestionably made human rights a systematic part and even an important pillar of its foreign relations. The archival record reveals that State Department planners reflected intensely on how to inject human rights in bilateral and multilateral relations and that they quite realistically discussed the means, prospects, and limits of this project.¹⁶ Whatever the record after four years of government, the Carter administration had clearly attempted to fundamentally reorient U.S. policy in the world.

Furthermore, the United States was not the only state and, contrary to a widely held belief, not even the first one to develop a human rights foreign policy. Already in 1973, the leftist government of Joop den Uyl in the Netherlands had declared human rights to be an "integral part" of its international

relations. Most notably, the foreign minister Max van der Stoep and the minister of developmental cooperation Jan Pronk incorporated human rights into their agendas during the four years of Den Uyl's premiership. Although both politicians at times pursued conflicting lines, human rights considerations came to strongly determine Dutch relations with several foreign states.¹⁷ For Sweden, international human rights protection had an equally high priority in these years. Particularly the Social Democrat government of Olof Palme in the late 1960s and early 1970s lent much support to international campaigns. The Swiss government in the late 1960s and again toward the end of the following decade moved to emphasize the country's commitment to human rights norms. Interestingly however, it was Switzerland's still powerful self-image as a neutral country that in both cases prevented the government from leveling strong criticism against other states and thus from living up to its proclamations.¹⁸ Even so, the new initiatives in the realm of foreign policy as well as in civil activism and multilateral relations clearly provided the idea of human rights with a new salience in international politics.

Complicating the Picture

Multiple Chronologies

Yet even though the new trends in international relations were marked, it would be wrong to assume that the 1970s constituted a coherent or homogeneous decade. To begin with, not all of the important impulses actually originated in the 1970s. Some emerged earlier, some later; several resulted from a longer evolution, while others sprang up abruptly and virtually unforeseen. A closer look at some of the human rights movements reveals multiple chronologies. Soviet human rights advocates in retrospect dated the first stirrings of their activism back to the mid-1960s.¹⁹ In their accounts, the 1965 trial against the writers Andrei Sinyavsky and Yuli Daniel, which had sparked a series of public protests for freedom of opinion, constituted a moment of *prise de conscience*. Three years later, dissidents started to publish the *Chronicle of Current Events*, which meticulously documented government abuses and, translated by activists abroad, played a crucial role in publicizing the deplorable state of liberties in the Soviet Union. Although early demands for

greater freedoms had mainly referred to the Soviet Constitution and thus to national legal norms, from the late 1960s on dissidents made use of their government's international commitments.²⁰ After 1968, dissidents increasingly invoked international human rights norms, and human rights groups emerged as early as in 1969. A Russian section of Amnesty International was established in 1971.

While the Soviet human rights movement took shape before the adoption of the Helsinki Final Act, the picture was different in Poland. Like in the Soviet Union, the Polish opposition of the 1970s had a longer history, dating back at least to the 1960s. And just like in the neighboring country, 1968 marked a turning point for opposition figures in Poland, provoking intense discussions about how to reevaluate their ideological beliefs and devise new political strategies. However, it was only the successful conclusion of the Helsinki negotiations that catalyzed their turn toward human rights.²¹ In fact, the two years after 1975 saw the creation of Poland's most important human rights groups, KOR and ROPCio.

Crucial as it was in the Polish case, the appeal of the CSCE process remained clearly limited elsewhere. The Helsinki Accords did not initiate sudden change in all the Eastern European states where human rights had not taken root before the mid-1970s. Already at the time, Western activists wondered why East Germany lagged so conspicuously behind.²² The GDR in the wake of Helsinki saw a brief flurry of demands for freedom of movement, but these did not coalesce into a sustained and public protest movement.²³ It was not until 1985 that the first East German human rights NGO, the Initiative for Peace and Human Rights (IFM), was finally formed, giving rise to a widespread discussion among dissidents about the concept.

In South America, by contrast, human rights activism clearly responded to the advent of institutionalized military dictatorships and the shock waves that their brutal methods of repression sent through the continent. The time pattern therefore appears both more coherent and more discontinuous than the one in Eastern Europe. Scholars agree that human rights had played virtually no role as a protest language in the decades after the Second World War.²⁴ This began to change in the late 1960s, although the 1973 military coup in Chile would mark the decisive caesura. In Brazil, where the military established the first of the new South American dictatorships in 1964, opposition groups appear to have gradually adopted the idea of human rights in the last years of the decade.²⁵ This shift largely coincided with the most violent phase in the regime's history, between 1968 and 1973.²⁶ In Chile, developments

unfolded much faster. Almost immediately after the overthrow of Salvador Allende, human rights became an important political device for the defense against state terror.²⁷ Toward the end of the 1970s, the human rights movement in Chile seems to have expanded further, a fact that testifies more to the relative slackening of the junta's repression than to a new appeal of the human rights idea. Events in Chile moreover resonated strongly beyond its borders, as can be inferred from developments in neighboring Argentina.²⁸ There, activists established human rights organizations even before the military takeover of 1976. Confronted with the near breakdown of public order, and amid increasing violence from both leftist guerrilla movements and right-wing terrorist groups, they created the *Servicio para la Paz y Justicia* (SERPAJ) in 1974 and the *Asamblea Permanente por los Derechos Humanos* in 1975. Both would remain active for the duration of the dictatorship. Even though the transition was more gradual than in Chile, human rights activism notably increased after the military established its devastating rule.

Finally, chronological comparison between the two regions not only reveals different geneses of human rights movements but also divergent trajectories. While their beginnings appear to have been less evolutionary in South America than in Eastern Europe, the movements proved more successful in staying on the scene. Communist rulers cracked down on practically all dissident human rights groups in the late 1970s and early 1980s. By contrast, many important organizations in the South American dictatorships managed to survive—at great cost, it should be added, since activists operated under permanent threat and many lost their lives. Human rights claims continued to be a rallying cry in the transitions to democracy that started in Argentina in 1983 and concluded with the elections in Chile in 1990. In the 1980s, human rights activism even spread beyond military dictatorships to formally democratic states such as Peru or Colombia, where advocates attempted to stem both state repression and the violence of guerrilla groups.

Other human rights causes followed even larger rhythms than the ones in South America and Eastern Europe. The most long-standing movement, if indeed it can be considered as a single continuous movement, was the one that fought against apartheid in South Africa. Some groups started to wage their campaigns as early as in the 1950s—such as the American Committee on Africa, in the United States, or the Movement for Colonial Freedom, in Great Britain. And to be sure, until the end of the white minority regime in 1994 transnational protest would never completely disappear. Anti-apartheid activism appears as a case par excellence to study the logic of protest cycles,

since it points to the often contingent, strongly media related, and always multifarious causes behind the ebb and flow of international concern.²⁹ In many Western countries, organized protest against South Africa emerged in response to the African National Congress's demands in 1959 for an international boycott and would be fuelled by the Sharpeville massacre of the following year. The 1970s, particularly the second half, did have some significance in this story, as they marked a relative high point in anti-apartheid initiatives in several countries. After the Soweto massacre of 1976, various Western governments hardened their stance toward South Africa, the United Nations imposed a mandatory embargo, and NGOs redoubled their efforts at pushing their home governments to become active. However, the peak of mobilization against the racist regime was not reached before the mid-1980s. It was sparked by the vicious circle of increasing political unrest in South Africa and ever more violent state oppression. The regime declared a state of emergency and in 1985 committed the worst single killings since Sharpeville, leaving twenty-one dead. Against the backdrop of record media coverage, debate about possible sanctions against the racist state intensified in Great Britain, Sweden, and the United States. At the same time, nonstate groups mounted massive pressure through large-scale demonstrations, vigils, and boycott appeals. In 1988, several immensely popular rock bands participated in a birthday concert for Nelson Mandela, which an estimated audience of 600 million followed on television worldwide.

Different Forms of Appropriation

Temporal dynamics were not the only feature highlighting the diverse and anything-but-clear-cut patterns of the decade. Moreover, different forms of appropriation shaped the human rights history of the 1970s, even where actors were politically or culturally close or operated under similar circumstances. Although many Western governments displayed a new openness to international human rights claims, they remained far from developing a uniform morality in their foreign policies. Even Social Democrat governments, which came to be almost hegemonic in the 1970s, did not share anything like a common approach. The case of the West German government provides an illustrative example. Chancellor Helmut Schmidt's contempt for Jimmy Carter's supposedly idealistic approach to foreign relations was no secret even at the time. Schmidt was concerned, and not without reason, that human rights criticism leveled at repressive regimes might strain international politics.

More generally, the West German government in its foreign policy never went beyond a purely reactive approach.³⁰ On almost all occasions that Bonn included human rights considerations in its bilateral relations, it yielded to pressures from either domestic interests and human rights groups or from international partners, particularly the states of the European Community. At times human rights concerns became so important as to produce conflicts of interest. The government weighed moral convictions against their interest in the NATO alliance, in the case of the military junta that ruled Greece after 1967, or against trade relations, in the case of South Africa. Yet human rights never turned into a political end in itself or even received high priority.

If the relevance that actors attributed to human rights differed, so did the reasons why they adopted them and the meaning they invested in them. Global and transnational historians have in past years not tired of stressing that cross-national trends are usually shaped according to the circumstances prevailing in the national or even local realms. Their observations also apply to the way nonstate groups in Western states appropriated human rights and defined their engagement. Many derived at least part of their motivations from the historical traditions and political landscapes of their own countries. Activists often referred to their state's history of crime to justify and strengthen their fight against current injustices in faraway countries. German proponents of human rights, for instance, evoked National Socialist abuses, while Dutch activists pointed to Dutch colonial rule, which in fact was only terminated in 1975.³¹ It deserves to be further explored, however, if and to what extent "Holocaust consciousness" and feelings of colonial guilt became themselves internationalized in the 1970s.

All Western human rights movements shared a highly critical attitude toward the foreign record of their own governments, pressuring them to support international norms and to take action against human rights violations abroad. Yet both the character and the urgency of these criticisms varied. While activists in countries such as West Germany or Switzerland mainly focused on their governments' trade relations, human rights groups in the United States far into the 1970s grappled with their government's covert and overt interventions in foreign countries. Many activists cited these experiences as a prime reason for getting involved in human rights work in the first place. To be sure, there was no lack of occasions. Beginning with the military intervention in the Dominican Republic in 1965, U.S. policy in the world drove many at home to engage in internationalist causes.³² This was most notably true for the crucial support that the Nixon administration lent to the

Brazilian, Greek, and Chilean dictatorships—the latter was even widely believed to have been installed by a CIA-implemented coup.

Changing Constellations of Actors

The cold-blooded overthrow of Chilean president Salvador Allende and the ensuing repression met with a measure of international outrage and mobilization that was arguably more intense and more geographically widespread than in all previous cases of state terror. In fact, the international campaign against the Pinochet dictatorship, together with the one against the apartheid regime in South Africa, can be counted among the strongest and most prolonged ever waged against a single country.³³ It is from the history of these causes célèbres that political scientists have developed their concept of "transnational advocacy networks." They refer to coalitions consisting of governments, intergovernmental organizations such as the United Nations and the Organization of American States, and domestic and international NGOs all joining forces to end violence and aid victims.³⁴ In the abstract, this picture is certainly accurate. Similar networks were at work in all human rights campaigns against state repression since the 1960s and even earlier. However, this should not lead scholars to overlook the different composition of these networks in different cases. The fact that international human rights efforts were supported by changing constellations of actors constitutes another important facet of the decade's diversity. A brief look at the role of the church may suffice to highlight the varying degrees of support that a single actor lent to human rights struggles. In Chile, the Catholic Church formed the heart of the opposition to the Pinochet regime. It made use of its relative, if always precarious, immunity from state interference to provide shelter to the persecuted and build up crucial networks for legal advice and material aid. In Brazil, Catholic priests were likewise highly instrumental in organizing resistance and documenting human rights violations, particularly by disclosing evidence about endemic torture.³⁵ In Argentina, by contrast, the Catholic Church as an institution remained silent in the face of the military's fight against political opponents and at times even backed it.³⁶ Many activists embarked on the defense of human rights only after failing to receive church support. In Eastern Europe, Catholic priests played an important role in the context of the Polish opposition of the 1970s, as did the Protestant churches in the emerging human rights movement in East Germany in the 1980s. The same could not be claimed, however, for the Orthodox Church in the Soviet Union.

The fact that actor coalitions shifted is even more obvious when it comes to government actions. The decision whether or not to accuse another state of human rights violations unfailingly grew out of complex calculations about geostrategic priorities, economic needs, and humanitarian self-image. It may be argued that the state coalitions targeting South American dictatorships were exceptionally broad, precisely because these regimes came to represent a sort of lowest common denominator.³⁷ Even so, before 1977 the United States did not join these campaigns. Western European governments by and large supported international action against state crimes in South America. By contrast, they remained considerably more muted in their criticism of the military junta that ruled Greece between 1967 and 1974, careful not to endanger the NATO membership of this particularly important strategic ally. No human rights initiative managed to really surmount the political and ideological cleavages prevailing in the international arena. Human rights criticism of socialist state repression obviously did not receive encouragement from Eastern Europe. African states in the United Nations effectively blocked action on the mass murders in Uganda, Equatorial Guinea, or the Central African Republic, and the Organization of African Unity did not intervene. The appalling state crimes in Asia hardly even gave rise to any extended international effort at all, with China, Cambodia, and Indonesia figuring among the most glaring omissions.³⁸

Limits of Human Rights Discourse

The role that African and Asian states played in this context suggests a final and particularly important modification in the picture of the 1970s, as they point to the limits of human rights discourse. The human rights history of the decade was marked by geographical divides that not only shaped the way in which actors adopted and defined the idea but also the degree to which it penetrated their ideological self-understanding and political practices. Africa and Asia are deplorably under-researched regions in this global story, but it seems safe to say that human rights did not acquire the same prominence there as in Western countries, either for governments or for nongovernmental organizations. A profound gap opened between the outlook of human rights NGOs in the global South and those in the global North. The former almost exclusively aimed at self-help and self-protection, whereas the latter embarked on a vigorous moral interventionism reaching into the world's remotest corners.

Similarly, no government in the global South drew as heavily on human rights rhetoric to justify its foreign policies as some Western states did. Nevertheless, attitudes of these governments are not easily categorized and on the whole reveal a certain ambiguity. On the one hand, the 1970s saw an attempt by African and Asian states to redefine the idea of human rights at the intergovernmental level. In the previous decade, nationalist movements and postcolonial states at the United Nations had mainly used the term to denounce colonial rule, and the Non-Aligned Movement continued to do so at its conferences throughout the 1970s.³⁹ Now an additional strategy emerged, however, since both the Afro-Asian bloc at the UN and the Non-Aligned Movement began to frame their concern for economic development in human rights language. Their initiative reacted to what they saw as the failure of the development model practiced by Western countries.⁴⁰ In their attempt to establish a "right to development," African and Asian countries employed human rights claims to expose the injustice of the postcolonial world order and to lessen Third World dependence on wealthy industrialized nations—largely unsuccessfully, as became evident by the mid-1980s.

On the other hand, an opposing discourse emerged on the African and Asian continents, rejecting human rights as a Western conception inappropriate to political and social realities in the global South. The vast majority of postcolonial governments, in their attempts to stabilize their newly gained power and to accelerate economic progress, had established harshly authoritarian systems relying on resolute suppression of opposition groups. Under these auspices, governments were hardly prepared to promote political freedoms and civil liberties internationally. But their new hostility toward human rights also responded to what they perceived as undue Western interference in their domestic affairs. Indeed, the surge of human rights politics in the West brought a flurry of criticism by both governments and NGOs that not only denounced political injustices but increasingly also cultural practices such as the treatment of women and children in supposedly "traditional" societies. At their 1979 conference, the Non-Aligned Movement strongly protested against Western states' attempt to use human rights accusations to patronize and ultimately prolong their domination over Third World countries.⁴¹ Against this background, the view gained currency that human rights were a Western ideology designed to impose liberal and individualist norms on non-Western cultures. In the United Nations, so-called Third World countries as early as in the late 1960s began to contest the concept of civil and political rights as well as the universality of the human rights idea. During the

1970s, their contributions were largely limited to discrediting the human rights idea as an expression of Western imperialism and neocolonial designs.⁴² Furthermore, toward the end of the decade a broad debate unfolded among African intellectuals about the meaning and relevance of human rights.⁴³ Some authors voiced a radical rejection of the idea. The dominant approach, however, was to counter the supposedly Western values with genuinely African legal concepts or even to construct an African tradition of human rights. These ideas encompassed "cultural relativism," the notion that legal and moral concepts were the product of distinct cultures; communitarian models emphasizing duties within the community over individual rights; and collective rights such as the right to development.

It was not only at the level of global divisions and conflicts, however, that human rights discourse remained restricted. Even the uses that Western movements made of the term during the high tide of the 1970s reveal limits. Human rights campaigns were seldom only human rights campaigns. In their efforts to shame foreign governments, activists harnessed a panoply of discourses separated by highly fluid and permeable boundaries. The campaigns against the Pinochet dictatorship and the South African apartheid regime, for instance, were strongly supported by people who thought of themselves as human rights advocates. The varieties of rhetoric that international opponents employed against both states were on the whole much more diverse, however. The hundreds of Chile solidarity groups emerging in the Western world after the military coup, coalescing into massive movements in countries such as Great Britain, Sweden or West Germany, clearly engaged in a leftist political critique of the emerging military regime. Antifascism was consequently a crucial point of reference in their campaigns. Anti-apartheid activists likewise couched their denunciations of the regime in anticolonial language or claimed the right to self-determination without necessarily referring to human rights. Many in addition relied on an ideology of antiracism.⁴⁴ Further, both movements strongly attacked transnational corporations and global capitalism for their supposed complicity in the crimes and both heavily drew on anti-imperialist discourse.

Finally, human rights advocates did not confront all forms of state injustice with equal vigor, nor did they always meet with the same measure of public support. The vastly heightened awareness of human suffering had a reverse side, as numerous issues that could have been considered human rights violations *de facto* fell out of its focus. Amnesty International, for instance, invested many resources in its "Campaign for the Abolition of the

Death Penalty," which was in fact one of the organization's major undertakings during the decade. Yet nowhere does this campaign seem to have resonated as strongly as its campaign against torture.⁴⁵ Certainly in the United States, where other human rights issues boomed in these years, Amnesty failed to mobilize the public—and even its own members—against the death penalty. Activities got off to a bumpy start and later attracted a fair amount of internal criticism precisely because the investments did not seem to pay off. State executions lacked the acuteness that torture, massacres, and other sudden eruptions of large-scale violence undoubtedly had. The death penalty was much more of a structural problem, deeply embedded in legal culture and administrative practice. Perhaps most important, American Amnesty members had numerous reasons to shy away from the topic. Some thought it would be hypocritical to become active as their own state resisted abolishing the death penalty, while others feared they would harm the organization's reputation in the American public. Still others believed that executing criminals was a just punishment.⁴⁶

Explaining the 1970s Human Rights Moment: Extraneous Causes and Contexts

While the overarching trend in the decade's human rights history was a forceful global upsurge, a closer survey thus reveals a much more fractured picture. The "human rights revolution" of the 1970s can clearly not be viewed as a uniform shift. Rather, it evolved in a polycentric and fitful process, or perhaps more accurately in a set of processes mutually reinforcing each other but nevertheless distinct in themselves.

The complex nature and global reach of this breakthrough inevitably raises the question of what type of explanation may account for it. What seems obvious is that the new departures cannot all be traced back to a single historical cause. To reduce them to one or the other motive, be it at the level of ideologies, political strategies, or social movements, could not but brush over the very diversity that makes human rights politics during the 1970s so interesting. An explanatory framework has to be both more and less comprehensive than any monocausal interpretation could be: more comprehensive in that it needs to include a broad set of factors and various levels of analysis, less so in that each factor explains only part of the overall process and does not necessarily encompass the whole.

A good starting point might be to consider extraneous causes. Not all of the reasons for the rise of human rights resided in the meanings of the idea itself and its ideological or political substance. Human rights initiatives, like other social practices, were deeply embedded in the surrounding political culture growing out of broader political and social trends and depending on opportunities. More specifically, it was a multidimensional political shift in world political and national constellations as well as in political styles that provided an important background to the decade's human rights conjuncture.

Decolonization

To begin with, two major trends in international relations deserve closer examination. Decolonization had by the late 1960s brought the virtual end of colonial rule, with some notable exceptions such as the Portuguese territories. For Western powers, loss of empire entailed a whole range of often arduous readjustments in their foreign policies. In the realm of human rights, however, it seemed to make things easier. As long as they had held on to their empires, Great Britain, France, or the Netherlands had often come under hard-hitting public attacks upon their human rights record.⁴⁷ This was most tangible in the United Nations, where postcolonial and socialist states almost ritually lambasted them for their oppressive and discriminatory behavior. The fear of opening the doors to anticolonial criticism worked as a heavy brake on the desire of these governments to formulate international human rights norms. Eager to shield their colonial policies from accusations, they were constantly on the defensive and acted warily. Consequently, a wide gulf opened between their rhetorical championship of human rights and the non-compromising stance that they assumed in practice. Colonial governments found themselves caught in a contradictory back and forth that severely damaged their international credibility, a fact of which foreign ministries were painfully aware.

From this perspective, the end of empire was a highly important tectonic change, ridding Great Britain, France, and the Netherlands of the main reason for their inconsistent policies and drastically improving their chances to present a positive self-image to the world. The precise effects of this turnaround are nevertheless far from clear. Historians have demonstrated that Great Britain and France, after withdrawing from their colonies in the 1960s, reformulated the premises for their policies at the United Nations.⁴⁸ They displayed a new openness toward international norms and started discussing

new initiatives. However, no connections have so far been detected between the changed positions these states took in the UN discussions of the 1960s and the new approaches that they adopted in their foreign policies at large during the 1970s. It seems doubtful that France in its international relations developed anything like a strong and coherent human rights policy at all. The British Labour government that was elected in 1974 discussed giving human rights greater prominence in their foreign policy but without any apparent relation to the end of empire.⁴⁹ It was in the case of the Dutch government of Joop den Uyl that a direct influence most visibly came to the fore. The prime minister and several leading ministers appear to have acted under a sort of "guilt complex" that made them hastily engage in the decolonization of Surinam and also partly inspired their attempt to strengthen humanitarian considerations in foreign relations. Yet the country's colonial legacy was but one of several interlocking motives that spurred their embrace of human rights, and it ranked behind others.⁵⁰

Détente

Whereas decolonization was largely completed by the beginning of the 1970s, the breakthrough of human rights overlapped with the peak years of détente between 1969 and the mid-1970s. The relationship between the two was by no means obvious. For the Western human rights movement, the waning threat of military confrontation was certainly an important backdrop. When the heads of the superpowers started to talk to each other and even entered into disarmament negotiations, the worst Cold War fears lost their immediate grip on political observers. The relaxation of international tensions set activists free to concern themselves with issues reaching beyond the clash between Western democracy and Eastern European socialism and helped to foreground problems that had long been overshadowed. In Amnesty International's work, these changing perceptions were reflected in the discussion about whether to abandon the principle of the "threes." A hallmark of the organization in its early years, this principle obliged local activist groups to adopt one prisoner each from the West, the Communist camp, and the Third World, thereby transcending the Cold War framework. Beginning in the mid-1970s, however, many activists saw this principle as no longer adequate to the changed world order and suggested dropping it.⁵¹

At the governmental level, a complex interplay developed between détente and human rights, as was manifested in the various and at times

contradictory intentions that states pursued in the CSCE process. Human rights hardly played a significant role in the Nixon administration's conception of détente. The U.S. government clearly prioritized bilateral negotiations with the Soviet Union, and therefore the CSCE ranked low on its agenda. Only belatedly did Henry Kissinger start supporting the European initiative, as he became aware of its potential for destabilizing Soviet rule.⁵² Western European governments, despite joining forces, had widely differing motives to include human rights in the conference program. The delegations of Canada and Denmark, and occasionally also those of Austria and the Netherlands, considered provisions for freedom of movement and free exchange of ideas as a way of making détente work on the ground.⁵³ The aim of at least some of their proposals was to alleviate the lot of Eastern European populations, not to win the Cold War by other means. This however was precisely the goal that some other delegations had in mind. The Netherlands by and large hewed to a subversive line in the CSCE process, realizing that humanitarian provisions provided a potentially useful means of undermining the Eastern bloc.⁵⁴ Growing out of staunch anti-Communism, Dutch advocacy of human rights and, even more importantly, self-determination was devised to erode socialist rule and promote the Eastern European satellites' independence vis-à-vis the superpower.

West Germany and France adopted an attitude in between these extremes. Initially, they shared parts of the subversive strategy. However, they were extremely skeptical about the chances of success—German chancellor Willy Brandt mused that it would be impossible “to force the Communists through negotiations to abolish themselves.”⁵⁵ Moreover, both governments feared that putting the Helsinki provisions into practice would inevitably lead to conflict and thus endanger the achievements of several years of détente. Both therefore proceeded with extreme caution. The French deliberately stayed in the background throughout the negotiations, while the West German government after the Helsinki conference decided not to use the Final Act too offensively.

Only a few years later, the experience of the Carter administration proved that their fears were not groundless, demonstrating that human rights could indeed run counter to détente. When Carter set out to criticize the Soviet Union for its human rights violations and even bolstered the internal struggle against the regime by meeting with dissidents, the result was an immediate freeze in the temperature of bilateral relations.⁵⁶ Realizing that public criticism seriously threatened progress in the Strategic Arms Limitations Talks,

the Carter government quickly changed course, toning down the human rights approach toward their Communist rival.⁵⁷

Mass Media

Changes in the realm of politics—including ideological beliefs as well as political styles and practices—were preconditions for the breakthrough of human rights as important as the shifting cleavages in international relations. The rapid expansion of the mass media may be counted among the trends that most pervasively transformed the conditions of policy making from the 1960s on, most visibly if not exclusively in democracies. The diffusion of telephone and telex connections marked a quantum leap in both the speed and the reach of communication. Perhaps more to the point, the steep rise in the number of households equipped with television allowed for a much wider and almost instantaneous circulation of pictures.⁵⁸ Undoubtedly, image politics were an integral part of human rights campaigns in the 1970s. The military coup in Chile turned into a vivid reality when TV stations showed airplanes bombing the presidential palace in Santiago and fearful prisoners herded together in the city's sport stadiums. NGOs such as Amnesty International included photos in their reports to provide victims with a human face and to personalize the abstract process of political oppression. The Nigerian Civil War between 1967 and 1970 powerfully illustrates the ways in which images could stimulate international responses.⁵⁹ Leaders of secessionist Biafra deliberately employed pictures of starving babies to garner international support. A spokesperson later somewhat cynically recalled that the Biafran government had experimented with different strategies. It “had tried the political emancipation of oppressed people, it had tried the religious angle, it had tried pogrom and genocide . . . but the pictures of starving children . . . touched everybody, it cut across the range of people's belief.”⁶⁰ In fact, news coverage of the war made extensive use of these pictures. Subsequently, the image of hungry African children would take on a life of its own, turning into an extremely popular icon of the perceived misery of the African continent. Similar pictures flooded newspapers and television reports time and again. Later they were popularized through music videos, most strikingly perhaps during the Ethiopian famine of the mid-1980s.

It is very plausible to assume that these and other images mobilized activists and literally shocked them into action. The photos of emaciated Biafran children reveal what art historian Horst Bredekamp calls the actor capacity of

pictures: more than mere illustrations, they were appeals, activating deeply rooted cultural and religious frames of reference.⁶¹ Children stood for innocent suffering, and their hunger evoked one of the archetypal situations of charity. Gazing at the viewer, often from below, they adopted a posture of begging for help. Images turned into powerful messages, condensing meanings and eliciting emotional responses. Very often, too, they stripped the events they depicted from their political contexts; photos could seemingly be grasped without the need of understanding the political and social intricacies that stood behind human rights violations.

Yet historians should be careful not to overestimate the significance of images. First, people did not automatically react in one way to pictures of violence or suffering. One and the same picture could stimulate a variety of responses that did not necessarily converge with the efforts of human rights groups.⁶² Moreover, photos often merely activated political sensibilities rather than engendering them. Also, it remains to be discussed if and to what extent the interdependence of visual culture and social mobilization was a distinct phenomenon of the 1960s or 1970s. Antinuclear activists in the 1950s, for instance, used pictures of mushroom clouds, one of the most powerful cultural icons of the era, to symbolize the apocalyptic threat of atomic weapons. In the wake of the Second World War, humanitarian organizations employed photos depicting destitute European populations in order to request donations, albeit to a much lesser degree than later NGOs.⁶³

Mass Mobilization and the Presence of Suffering

The comparison between social movements of the 1950s and those of the 1970s suggests another change in political practices that proved to be crucial for the strong resonance of human rights in the latter decade. NGOs springing up in the 1970s strongly benefited from techniques of mass mobilization and forms of public protest that only in the 1960s had become firmly entrenched in political movements' repertory of extra-parliamentary action. In the postwar decades, numerous international NGOs had dealt with human rights questions.⁶⁴ Some of them, such as religious or women's groups, had a broader focus, whereas others mainly or exclusively dedicated their work to human rights issues—this was true of anti-apartheid groups and of larger organizations such as the International League for the Rights of Man and the International Commission of Jurists. None of these groups, however, was able to leave nearly as strong an imprint on international relations as human rights

groups would in the 1970s. Postwar NGOs working in the field of human rights remained small and elitist. Virtually all of them focused on developing legal norms at the United Nations and invested few resources in research or public relations work. In pursuing a largely nonpublic, high-level approach to politics they were typical of the social movements of the period. Few staged public events or organized rallies, such as the antinuclear movements in North America and Europe and, albeit only gradually, the civil rights movement in the United States. With the emergence of highly visible and mostly transnational protest movements—particularly of students, opponents to the Vietnam war, and American civil rights activists—the 1960s marked a decisive break whose long-term repercussions would continue to shape the practices of human rights groups in the following decade.⁶⁵ Many groups took their concerns to the streets, building up public pressure and engaging in symbolic manifestations, often using the same strategies of direct action and consciousness-raising that their 1960s predecessors had so successfully forged. In this respect, human rights activism bore a strong resemblance to other new social movements that perpetuated earlier political practices, adapting them to new circumstances and harnessing them for new political projects.

These new social movements were also exponents of another trend, which, however, was not confined to them. In Western countries, the 1970s saw the emergence of a conspicuous and pervasive culture of subjectivity shaping lifestyles as well as political attitudes and in fact often blurring the lines between the two.⁶⁶ The self-styled "alternative" milieu celebrated "post-materialist" values such as self-realization, autonomy, or self-organization. Members of this subculture crafted a virtually all-encompassing "politics of the self" that deeply penetrated their forms of political participation, cultural activities, work routines, and daily habits. This subjectivist turn came to be a powerful trend in intellectual life, too, with Michel Foucault developing his ideas about "technologies of the self" and sociologists such as Ronald Inglehart theorizing the nascent attitudes.⁶⁷ The topic has to be explored further, but it does not seem far-fetched to connect these trends to the increasing receptiveness to and public presence of depictions of suffering, which were decisive features of human rights advocacy. Empathy was key to the Western human rights movement and even at times spurred governmental actions. The capacity of activists and politicians to be shocked, to be moved, and to identify with "distant suffering" made helping others a moral imperative.⁶⁸ Very often it was the sheer fact of people being physically maltreated that

propelled human rights activists to intervene—at least as much, it seems, as abstract notions of political injustice and oppression. This in part accounts for the impressive resonance of Amnesty International's antitorture campaign that targeted horrendously brutal forms of physical violence inflicted upon the completely defenseless.⁶⁹ Human rights NGOs, for their part, attempted to mobilize the public by deliberately appealing to sentiments of pity and moral outrage. In its reports on Chile and other countries, Amnesty International prominently inserted testimonies of victims who recounted their excruciating experiences of pain and humiliation.⁷⁰ Skillfully evoked in these accounts and often turning into a forceful impulse to help, empathy was part of a politics of the self.⁷¹ It deeply involved individual activists, both morally and emotionally, and made their feelings the driving force for political action. Paradoxically, aiding those in need provided activists with an opportunity to engage in self-realization through altruistic behavior. This said, political uses of suffering were widespread in the period and not the exclusive domain of human rights groups. More and more groups started to refer to their own history of suffering to justify claims for political participation and nondiscrimination; victimhood formed an integral element of what came to be called "identity politics." This was notably true for Holocaust survivors but also for homosexuals and nativist groups, to name just a few.⁷²

Transformation of the Political Left

The fact that most of the movements pushing these political and cultural shifts forward were associated with leftist politics raises the question of how the human rights revolution was related to the altered political landscape of the post-1968 period. While the position of human rights in the political spectrum remains somewhat elusive, it seems obvious that they were a project of the political left and much less a conservative project. What we can infer about the social composition of the Western human rights movement suggests that two constituencies were particularly important, apart from those activists who considered themselves to be leftists.⁷³ Many people joining human rights groups had strong religious ties, among them clerics but mostly laypersons active in their church communities or who simply practiced their religion. Furthermore, a fair number of members were nonpolitical in the sense that they had not engaged in political parties or organizations before entering the movement. These three groups can hardly be quantified, however, and obviously there was considerable overlap among them.

At the governmental level, human rights in the 1970s were decidedly not a conservative issue. With the possible exception of Dries van Agt's Christian Democrat-led coalition in the Netherlands, no conservative government strongly identified its foreign policies with human rights. In the United States, the Republican Party discussed its stance toward them intensively after mid-decade, laying the intellectual ground for the Reagan's administration later redefinition of the term.⁷⁴ While debate about the topic within the GOP had emerged independently of the Democrats' incipient embrace of human rights, the main purpose of Reagan's maneuvers was to appropriate the concept from the liberal left and to define it in the all-too-well-known terms of anti-Communist containment. Reagan would equate human rights with democracy and freedom and declare Communist totalitarianism vastly more dangerous to the worldwide survival of democratic rule than right-wing authoritarianism.⁷⁵ The fight against Communism in fact provided the main exception to the otherwise leftist coding of human rights politics. Conservative politicians in Western countries could agree with human rights criticism inasmuch as it was directed against Communist dictatorships. Therefore conservatives in Germany or the Netherlands came round to embracing the CSCE process as a new venue for discrediting the socialist system. Human Rights Watch would later attempt to use this negative consensus to support its human rights work on Eastern Europe, taking the Reagan administration by its anti-Communist word.

These observations suggest that the transformation of the political left since the late 1960s provided a particularly important framework for the reinvigoration of human rights politics.⁷⁶ After the energies of 1968 had dissipated, new leftist activism fractured and split up into differing and often competing factions. For activists who did not find their way back into the established socialist parties, two broad and heterogeneous directions came to predominate. Many engaged in the wildly proliferating range of sectarian groups; in Western Europe ultraleft Trotskyist and Maoist groups provided comparatively strong currents. Another offspring of 1968 was the fluid and ever-growing scene of alternative groups and new social movements rejected by radical leftists and revolutionary activists for their supposed bourgeois and reformist ideology. Many activists rallied around issues such as antinuclear protest, the ecological movement, second- or third-generation feminism, and later the new peace movement. Human rights groups can be counted among these movements. In most countries they were neither as large nor as publicly visible as others, which assembled tens of thousands of people for street

personifying the unnecessary suffering that the Soviet system inflicted on its people. The "passing of an illusion," it seemed, awakened leftists to a new humanitarian awareness.⁷⁹

The Transformation of the Churches

Considering the importance of church-related actors for human rights mobilizations, the transformation of the churches was no less fundamental than the changes on the political left. In the 1960s and early 1970s, both the Catholic and Protestant churches saw a dramatic redefinition of their role in world politics that entailed both their opening up to global issues and what has been called the politicization of their self-understanding and practical work. Historians are only beginning to grapple with the many consequences of this seminal process.⁸⁰ The starting point for much of what transformed the churches' activism was the Second Vatican Council between 1962 and 1965, convened to discuss the stance of Catholicism toward modernity and its role in "the world of today." Across confessional divides, the council sparked critical engagement with the traditions of ecclesiastical hierarchy and political aloofness, inaugurating the churches' transition "from a state-centered to a society-centered institution" and committing them to social change.⁸¹ Developments in Latin America provided another strong impulse. Crystallizing at the second Latin American Episcopal Conference in Medellín in 1968, liberation theology gained strong intellectual influence among both Catholic and Protestant Christians worldwide. What united its various versions was its identification of the church with the struggle against poverty and oppression of the poor. The new prominence of the Latin American, African, and Asian churches moreover was an important reason why a forceful interest emerged among churches of the global North in the problems of the Third World. The ecumenical World Council of Churches at its conferences in the 1960s devoted increasing attention to issues such as economic inequalities and world hunger. Subsequently, the council initiated a comprehensive (and highly controversial) "Program to Combat Racism." But interest in these topics was also manifest at the grassroots level, where innumerable discussion and action groups emerged on both the Catholic and the Protestant sides. In ways that merit closer research, this spiritual upheaval provided a fertile breeding ground for the adoption of human rights claims, and a vigorous drive for international justice more generally. The Vatican had already in the 1960s revived and expanded its embrace of human rights. Pope John XXIII in his

marches and massive demonstrations. But they shared many features of the new social movements' conception of politics: they kept their distance from the parliamentary system, chose a confrontational style, experimented with distinct forms of participation, organized locally, and focused on concrete issues to bring about gradual social change. Interestingly, among new leftist groups a vigorous internationalism evolved that sometimes did and sometimes did not overlap with human rights initiatives. Mostly couched in anti-imperialist language, these campaigns often targeted the same regimes and events as human rights groups, such as the Chilean dictatorship, Portuguese colonial rule, the civil wars in Central America, apartheid, or the exploitation of the Third World.

The mythical year 1968 changed political perceptions in Communist countries, too. In the wake of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia profound disillusionment spread among those who had hoped to alter the Communist system "from within." Not only in Czechoslovakia but also in the Soviet Union and Poland the ruthless smashing of the Prague Spring sounded the death knell for "reform Communism." Everywhere in the Eastern bloc regimes set out to strengthen their hold on power, buttressing central economic planning and restricting spaces of intellectual freedom. These events proved to be a crucial experience for many Eastern European intellectuals and dissidents and led them to reorient their ideological beliefs to include a new embrace of human rights. Repercussions also made themselves felt among Western European Communists. Most Western Communist parties distanced themselves from the Soviet Union, some clearly breaking with their Stalinist past, and redefined their position vis-à-vis democracy. Traditionally averse to what they considered as a bourgeois concept, some even seem to have made their peace with human rights. In their attempt to forge an independent "Eurocommunist" line, leaders of the Italian, Spanish, and French Communist parties at least occasionally demanded protection of basic rights and freedoms in Eastern Europe.⁷⁷ Yet the sobering effect of 1968 reached even further. In France, it prepared the ground on the left for a new attitude toward Socialist violence.⁷⁸ The Soviet crackdown on Dubček's "socialism with a human face" helped to erode the long-standing belief that repression was justified for the sake of building a Communist utopia. Informed by Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago*, a book now suddenly attracting vast attention, intellectuals such as André Glucksmann and Bernard-Henri Lévy from the mid-1970s on started accusing the Soviets of state crimes. Dissidents emerged as celebrated figures on the French intellectual scene as elsewhere,

1963 encyclical *Pacem in terris* expressed the church's commitment to a range of individual rights. He further acknowledged the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the UN's efforts to protect human rights internationally. His successor Paul VI repeatedly articulated very similar positions. In a message to the UN General Assembly on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Universal Declaration in 1973, for instance, he prominently declared the Vatican's "full moral support to the common ideal" contained therein. Eight years previously, the Second Vatican Council's declaration *Dignitatis humanae* had emphasized the protection of religious freedom as a human right.⁸²

Explaining the 1970s Human Rights Moment: The Intrinsic Appeal of Human Rights

However important these structural changes were, the ascendancy of human rights in 1970s political culture cannot adequately be understood as the by-product of broader transformations in international relations, political practices, and ideological beliefs. These transformations created an environment propitious for the adoption of human rights. But without the intrinsic appeal of the idea, the resonance would hardly have been as widespread and as intense as it actually was. As mentioned before, the various actors had differing motives for embracing human rights that depended strongly on the political context in which they acted. Nevertheless, several transnational patterns shaped the human rights history of the period, each of which accounts for significant parts of why the concept came to be such a strong political impulse for activists and governments. The greatest common denominator of these patterns lay in the appearance of human rights as a profoundly moral yet multifunctional way of revitalizing politics, both as an ideal and as a practice.

Disillusionment and Rehabilitation

In several important instances, the turn to human rights followed the breakdown of previous political projects and grew out of the resulting political disillusionment. Samuel Moyn in his *Last Utopia* has made this observation the pivot of an interpretation of 1970s human rights. He frames the story as one of shifting idealisms, with human rights replacing lost hopes for social and political change that had dominated both the revolutionary and the

democratic left in the United States, Latin America, and Western and Eastern Europe. It remains open to discussion whether this applies equally to all prominent new departures. Further, the question may be raised of how idealistic the collapsing concepts were in the first place. Nonetheless, the fact that politicians and activists resorted to human rights to reshape political approaches and redefine ideological projects provided an extremely important reason for the rise of human rights in the 1970s.⁸³

This was reflected in the way the breakdown of the Prague Spring propelled Eastern European dissidents to seek new forms of political expression. Of course, no automatism was at work. Events of 1968 may have accelerated the disenchantment with Communism that had already been under way since the mid-1950s. There may have been less of a rupture in the Soviet Union than in Poland or Czechoslovakia. And the fact that dissidents seized upon human rights was certainly as much a matter of tactical choice as of ideological realignment, or even more so.⁸⁴ These observations notwithstanding, human rights formed an increasingly important part of a process of political reorientation. Many intellectuals and opposition figures in Eastern Europe perceived the post-1968 situation as dramatically new. Some literally had lost their faith: "I found that I had to stop being a Marxist," Polish dissident Jacek Kuroń said.⁸⁵ All realized that the possibility of reform would be forever precluded, and all faced much more severe repression as security apparatuses stepped up persecution. Human rights were part and parcel of the political conceptions and strategies that dissidents devised in reaction to these new circumstances. In essence, many dissidents jettisoned their ideas of changing the system and instead struggled to secure at least a minimum degree of freedom and a more humane treatment. They moved to smaller and more concrete aims, shifting "from theoretical counter-projects to the practical defense of civil and human rights."⁸⁶

The Western human rights movement, too, searched for a new politics to deal with the sobering experience of earlier attempts at social change. The development of the U.S. section of Amnesty International provides an interesting example.⁸⁷ Beginning in the early 1970s, AIUSA saw a massive influx of new members securing the very survival of the hitherto struggling section and initiating an institutional success story that by the early 1980s would transform the section into the largest and richest of the worldwide organization. The vast majority of the new members had previously been engaged in the social and protest movements of the 1960s, particularly in the student, civil rights, and antiwar movements. They joined Amnesty precisely at the

moment when these earlier undertakings had come to an end or even plainly failed. Their engagement on behalf of human rights essentially marked a departure from 1960s activism; they broke with the belief in social utopias, with the revolutionary fight against "the system," and with the inner polarization of the political scene.⁸⁸ Human rights activists consciously scaled down their political pretensions. At the grassroots level, their activism aimed at no more and no less than helping a few individuals. Groups did not set out to free the world from evil but wanted to assuage suffering in cases they had learned about and that promised a measure of success. Human rights activism, in this sense, grew out of a retrenched, postrevolutionary idealism. This attitude was summed up in the later statement of an AIUSA activist: "Sending a card . . . will not change the world very much. But it is surely worth investing a little time and postage to try to help two other individuals to secure justice, or at least to find courage."⁸⁹

Finally, Jimmy Carter's new approach to foreign policy also fits in this pattern of political replacement. In the U.S. case, the political and psychological disasters of the Vietnam era formed the immediate backdrop. The Vietnam War, whose painful reverberations would be felt well up to the end of the Cold War, constituted the most profound break in the history of postwar America. It shattered the prevailing belief of the political elite and large parts of the population that the United States government had a mission to lead the democratic battle against Communist expansionism. Amid ever-growing protests, the "foreign policy consensus" dramatically collapsed that in the postwar decades had secured bipartisan support for the politics of containment.⁹⁰ At the beginning of the 1970s, the policy of President Nixon and Secretary of State Kissinger had come to appear as the very embodiment of a realpolitik devoid of ethical scruples. Nixon's moral bankruptcy assumed still greater dimensions when revelations of the Watergate scandal began after 1973 and the secret CIA operations to destabilize the Allende government in Chile came out into the open in 1975–1976.

Carter's championship of human rights was a deep-seated response to a foreign policy approach whose devastating outcomes were plain to see. In view of the severe loss of American credibility and a battered international reputation, Carter strove to depart from the excesses of ruthless Cold War power politics and tried to return to what he perceived as the best values of the American tradition. He sought to abandon violent interventions and secret operations, to distance himself from authoritarian allies, and to adhere to a democratic, transparent decision-making process. These had been the main

themes of Carter's election campaign. He took up the term "human rights" relatively late in the day but then turned it into a pivotal element of his rhetoric of renewal, as expressed most strongly in his inauguration speech when he claimed that "our commitment to human rights must be absolute."⁹¹ Human rights became a symbol for a fundamental reorientation of U.S. foreign policy encompassing its premises as well as its methods and aims.

Beyond the Cold War

What many proponents of human rights shared was a profound rejection of Cold War politics. They dismissed the ideological tenets and political methods that the superpowers and their allies had excessively upheld over decades to confront what they framed as an unrelenting threat to human existence. Exponents of human rights politics turned against the cherishing of power for its own sake, the cynicism of realpolitik, and a bleak Manichaean worldview that divided states into friends and foes. These impulses are manifest in the description already given of the Carter administration's new approach to international relations. With good reason have historians spoken of his attempt to develop a "post-Cold War foreign policy"—a spectacular attempt, it should be added, since it would remain singular until the very end of the Cold War.⁹² Similar ideas shaped the human rights policy of the Den Uyl government in the Netherlands, albeit to a lesser degree. Dutch leaders converged with the U.S. approach in that they conceived human rights as a universal standard against which all governments would be measured, irrespective of their ideological leanings. This would help to relax the firmly entrenched bipolar order. In practice, the political conception of Dutch foreign minister Van der Stoep came much closer to this ideal than the forays of his colleague Jan Pronk. Pronk displayed some selectiveness in harshly criticizing military dictatorships while exerting much more restraint in relations with Cuba.⁹³

Finally, the desire to leave Cold War cleavages behind also defined Western human rights activism. It was one of Peter Benenson's principal impulses in founding Amnesty International that Western governments too often overlooked the curtailing of democratic freedoms in right-wing regimes as long as these were allies in the struggle against Communism.⁹⁴ In later years, transcending bloc politics would remain one of the essential principles of Amnesty International's work. This did not only apply at the level of local groups, which based their advocacy on the above-mentioned system of

threes. The International Secretariat consistently attached high importance to ideological equidistance. In its political interventions, Amnesty was extremely careful to retain the balance between the Western and Eastern camps and the nonaligned countries. In fact, it was Amnesty's credo, often repeated, that the guarantee of human rights was independent from ideological or political systems.

Morality as a Political Resource

In pursuing human rights, politicians and activists drew strongly on a set of arguments centered around ethical norms, altruistic beliefs, humanitarian needs, and religious notions of charity. These ideas saw a revival as human rights advocates complained that they had been subdued for too long by strategic or economic concerns and had fallen off the agenda of what politics were about. To be sure, much of this talk remained purely rhetorical. Very often actors did not live up to their promises and self-declared obligations; among the many objections raised against Carter's human rights policy, "inconsistency" was the most widespread and politically most costly. Moreover, when states and NGOs took initiatives in the name of human rights they always pursued various, and often competing, motives beyond humanitarian concerns. Yet the rise of human rights in the 1970s testifies to an increasing importance of morality as a political resource for both state and nonstate actors. This was most notably true for Western NGOs. To them, political action was about "doing the right thing" in situations of dire need, about pursuing "good" intentions and preventing unworthy concerns from overriding the fundamental obligation to help. In the last analysis, they strove to renew the very conception of what was political, reinventing it as a sort of moral politics.

Moreover, they were driven by a sense of global responsibility that crystallized in an ethics of interdependence. "The world is so small and so much more interdependent today than it used to be," a member of AIUSA stated in the early 1970s, "that it is morally right for citizens of all countries to feel responsible for possible political injustice anywhere on the globe."⁹⁵ A poem by Spanish philosopher and historian Salvador de Madariaga, which he apparently had written for Amnesty International in the early 1960s and which later circulated widely among activists, spoke of very similar notions. Characteristic of the Amnesty movement in its secularized Christian symbolism,

the poem essentially expressed a single idea. The first stanza read: "For those who hopelessly latch on to the prison's bars / so that we can walk in freedom / a thought." Another very similarly read: "For those whose country lies in chains / so that our countries can be free / a thought."⁹⁶ The poem established a close mutual relationship between those who suffered—they were unambiguously represented as political prisoners—and those able to enjoy their freedom and basic rights, implying that the latter were morally obliged to help those who suffered from unjust punishment.

In the rhetoric of Western governments, the imperative of altruism was less acute, for obvious reasons, and would have been anything but easy to implement. For them, moral claims came to be important for projecting a positive self-image both in the international and domestic arenas. This was again tangible in U.S. foreign policy during the Carter presidency. At least in part responding to genuine shock at the excesses of power politics in the Cold War, his administration sought to regain confidence at home and abroad. Foreign observers found the moral standards that Carter introduced as conspicuous for what they said about American aims in the world as for what they said about the superpower's intention of taming its own power. Domestically, the administration hoped to have found in human rights the magic formula that could rally a large majority of Americans behind its policies and restore some degree of foreign policy consensus. That public opinion at home was particularly important for the moralistic reshaping of foreign policy was also highlighted by the behavior of the West German and Dutch governments before 1973, even though the context was fundamentally different. Yet both only started turning to human rights issues when they came under severe domestic pressure to intervene in state crimes abroad. The United States was the only country that needed human rights to work its way out of moral catastrophe. Others primarily used them to signal to the public that they considered the newly emerging humanitarian sensibilities as legitimate and that they were willing to take them into account as far as possible.

However, it should not be overlooked that these approaches also provided states with an opportunity to forge a new mission in international relations. Interference in the name of ethical principles in fact became an essential feature in the human rights politics of Western governments and NGOs alike. Citing a universal morality, activists and politicians worked for often profound changes in the political systems and even social practices of foreign countries.

Nonpolitical Politics

Yet another facet in the self-image of human rights advocates came to be decisive for their political project. Many proponents framed their struggle against injustice and for basic freedoms as nonpolitical or above politics. This view was ubiquitous in the rhetoric of NGOs, shared both by organizations that aimed at aiding others—that is, mostly Western NGOs—and those that used human rights claims to protect themselves from state terror. The tactical sense was obvious. Proclaiming their ideological impartiality, lack of hostility, and concern about “purely” humanitarian matters, these groups hoped to find repressive regimes more receptive to their actual demands or, respectively, tried to protect themselves from reprisals for unauthorized political activism. Of course, the contradictions inherent in this approach were not lost on repressive regimes. They were clearly aware that fulfilling activists’ demands to guarantee basic rights would ultimately require installing democratic procedures and relinquishing absolute control of political life—both of which would undermine the very pillars of authoritarian rule.⁹⁷

The tactical sense was not the only one involved in the idea that human rights were a nonpolitical concern. This idea furthermore helped to unite people from very different backgrounds in a common cause and to bridge, to some extent, the political, ideological, and religious gaps that had previously separated them. Amnesty members believed that their organization cut across party lines and transcended the many rifts besetting the political landscape of the period.⁹⁸ While available membership data clearly belies this view, it was the perception of working for an all-encompassing movement that accounted for much of Amnesty’s appeal. For different reasons, the politicized language of self-protection also proved crucial in South America.⁹⁹ In Chile, Uruguay, and Brazil, opposition movements were extremely fractured, reproducing many of the conflicts that had so painfully polarized political life before the military coups. Leftists of various stripes, both moderates and revolutionaries, worked together with conservatives and relatives of victims who had no obvious connections to political parties. Both Christian activists and atheists joined the struggle against oppressive regimes. To agree that basic protections of life and freedom were the most urgent task at hand was a decisive step for these diverse groups to find some common ground.¹⁰⁰ Devoting themselves to what they considered a nonpolitical agenda, these groups finally managed to forge fairly unified coalitions.

All this was less true for states. Governments were hardly in a position to

credibly portray themselves as nonpolitical actors. Their human rights criticism was always considered—and rejected—as highly politicized interference into domestic affairs. Nevertheless, government officials occasionally did revert to an apolitical rhetoric, promising oppressive regimes that they would refrain from condemning political and economic measures as long as the humanitarian situation showed signs of improvement.

Epilogue

Historians have so far mostly focused on the 1970s from the angle of what was lost—of economic certainties shattered, political aspirations abandoned, and social textures dissolved. The “age of fracture” emerged “after the boom.”¹⁰¹ The decade of the 1970s, in the tentative grappings of both contemporaries and historians, constitutes the “post-” age—postindustrial, postmodern, poststructuralist—and human rights certainly formed an integral part of it. If they complicate the picture, it is by the shifting adjectives that follow the prefix. The decade was postrevolutionary for activists in the West but for no one else. Postcolonial framings emerged in the global South, not only contradicting Western uses but also contradictory among themselves. That human rights would inaugurate a post-Cold War era was what virtually all advocates hoped. The idea possessed a post-utopian flavor for the disillusioned activists of 1968 across the East-West divide and, in different senses, for politicians pulling back from the brink of catastrophe in the United States and in South America. Much of human rights’ historical significance, then, consists in what they replaced and superseded.

Yet this view is only half the truth. “The general history of the 1970s is usually treated as a history of disaster or even ‘nervous breakdown,’” Samuel Moyn writes in the introduction to this volume, “not of the moral breakthrough of human rights.” Indeed what was striking about many—not all—of the decade’s departures was the energies and hopes that proponents invested in creating a new mode of politics. They strove to redefine the boundaries of what was political, to enrich and dignify its very substance. Certainly this attempt had its limits and ambiguities; the rebirth of politics from the spirit of morality was perhaps a vision more than a reality. But as much as replacing what was no longer viable, human rights was about constructing new political causes, meanings, and futures.