

11-2018

## Evidence for Hope: Making Human Rights Work in the 21st Century

Brett J. Kyle

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/id-journal>



Part of the [Ethics and Political Philosophy Commons](#), [International and Area Studies Commons](#), [International and Intercultural Communication Commons](#), [International Relations Commons](#), and the [Political Theory Commons](#)

### Recommended Citation

Kyle, Brett J. (2018) "Evidence for Hope: Making Human Rights Work in the 21st Century," *International Dialogue*: Vol. 8, Article 14.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32873/uno.dc.ID.8.1.1160>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/id-journal/vol8/iss1/14>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the The Goldstein Center for Human Rights at DigitalCommons@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in International Dialogue by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@UNO. For more information, please contact [unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu](mailto:unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu).



# Review

## ***Evidence for Hope: Making Human Rights Work in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century***

Kathryn Sikkink. Princeton, NJ and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2017. 336pp.

Brett J. Kyle\*

In *Evidence for Hope: Making Human Rights Work in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Kathryn Sikkink delivers a timely defense of the promise and progress of human rights movements, ideas, and institutions. Amid a seemingly ever-growing body of scholarship on the shortcomings of human rights, Sikkink contends that the human rights movement has helped to improve the human condition over the long term. As the title promises, there is much we should regard as progress in human rights and reason to be hopeful for the future. Sikkink was motivated to write this book for human rights activists “who say they have lost hope” (6) as well as for a general audience, especially those in the United States who are concerned about the country’s policy turns that put human rights in danger at home and abroad. Effectively speaking to three audiences—activists, scholars, and the general public—the author takes on academic critiques of human rights and frames her responses in a fashion

---

\*Brett J. Kyle is an assistant professor of political science at the University of Nebraska-Omaha where he is a member of the Office of Latino/Latin American Studies (OLLAS) and the Goldstein Center for Human Rights. His research and teaching focus on democracy, authoritarianism, human rights, and civil-military relations. His work has been published in edited volumes and in the journals *Armed Forces & Society* and *Law & Society Review*. He is the author of *Recycling Dictators in Latin America: Legacies of Military Rule* (Lynne Rienner, 2016).

that reinforces her message of hope: We can make a difference because we have made a difference.

Viewing *Evidence for Hope* through the lens of someone who teaches human rights, the work is a valuable resource and an important reminder to marry critique with contribution in presenting human rights issues and ideas to our students. Teaching about human rights in an objective manner requires acknowledging its flaws, paradoxes, and shortcomings, but we should also embrace the desire to make things better that brings many students to pursue human rights studies. Critique is a necessary part of scholarship and of learning, but it can be best achieved when a solid basis of understanding has been built. Our rush to critique can be problematic. Our drive to present our students with a complex understanding of human rights should not come at the expense of the belief that it is possible to improve things. *Evidence for Hope* is accessible for students and a general audience both in content and structure. Part 1 presents a handful of common critiques of human rights and the author's framework for evaluating human rights. Part 2 succinctly reconstructs histories of struggles for human rights in the twentieth century. Part 3 demonstrates empirically the effectiveness of human rights efforts and part 4 concludes with the encouragement and exhortation of continued work to make human rights a reality. Sikkink invites readers to see the book as "an al carte menu from which to choose" (16) the sections of most interest to them. And while the ideas are complex, the arguments are clearly stated and points made with clear evidence to substantiate the claims.

#### **LEGITIMACY AND EFFECTIVENESS OF HUMAN RIGHTS**

Sikkink takes on two broad categories of critiques, those questioning the legitimacy and the effectiveness of human rights. In looking at both legitimacy and effectiveness, the author emphasizes the question, "compared to what" and challenges scholars who make critiques to elaborate alternatives as well so they may be adequately evaluated alongside human rights. Transparency and justification of comparison are fundamental to scholarship, and Sikkink asserts that these basic standards are not followed when scholars use a "comparison to the ideal." What is an author's imagined ideal outcome of human rights? Why is that ideal the appropriate comparison? As Sikkink argues, perfection is a teleological claim, and methodologically, measuring against perfection offers no meaningful way of identifying progress or regression in human rights achievements. Empirical comparison over time and space allows measurement of backsliding and the

ability to identify factors that explain such developments in order to prevent backsliding elsewhere under similar conditions.

Defining legitimacy as “a generalized perception that a movement or institution is desirable, appropriate, and authentic” (8), Sikkink argues that human rights legitimacy is well established. A perennial charge against human rights—from some scholars and from authoritarian regimes seeking to discredit human rights—is that the movement and related institutions are creations of the powerful states of the Global North imposed upon the Global South. Sikkink’s well-sourced argument details the diverse origins of human rights ideas as well as the numerous contributions of the Global South to the creation of the post-war human rights framework. Far from being a new rhetorical cloak for the interests of the Global North, Sikkink reminds her readers that human rights struggles were “often led by oppressed people, inspired by human rights ideas, and targeting powerful institutions and practices” (10). Sikkink draws her readers’ attention to the support, articulation, and defense of human rights in a variety of places, especially Latin America, as well as Africa and India. Latin American diplomats and jurists were at the forefront of developing international legal principles in the early twentieth century, which sought to put all states on equal footing and to push back against the asymmetrical power relations that were developing in the Americas at that time. And in the interwar period, Latin America was a key promoter of international human rights at a time when the United States had disengaged from international diplomacy.

Human rights innovations of the Global South preceded, and often went further than, those eventually adopted by the great powers in the form of the United Nations Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The Uruguayan delegation was a leading voice calling for the UN Charter to include a declaration of rights and mechanisms to enforce the agreement among states: “Uruguay proposed that it be possible to suspend from the organization countries which persistently violated human rights” (72). Additionally, “Cuba, Panama, and Chile were the first three countries to submit full drafts of bills of rights” to the UN Commission on Human Rights and each one “contained references to rights to education, food, health care, and other social security provisions” (77). Similarly, Sikkink argues that Latin American contributions acknowledged duties paired with rights, some of which can be seen as precursors to more recent constructs of states’ obligations now articulated as Responsibility to Protect (R2P). As Sikkink writes, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (IACtHR), in the *Velásquez Rodríguez* case

(1988) issuing a judgment regarding a Honduran disappearance, “the Court concluded that governments have an obligation to respect the human rights of individuals and to guarantee the enjoyment of these rights” (118).

Sikkink also devotes attention to India’s role in promoting and defending human rights, serving as key evidence of human rights leadership and action from the Global South in the twentieth century. With many Indians living in South Africa and Southern Rhodesia under those countries’ apartheid governments, India was at the forefront of international condemnation of those systems and efforts to challenge the impunity for abuses that state sovereignty can provide. India called for UN investigation of South African violations of Indians’ human rights, which led “the UN to clarify, for the very first time, that violations of human rights were not protected by the doctrine of sovereignty” (73). Moreover, Sikkink presents India’s invasion of East Pakistan (present-day Bangladesh) in 1971 to stop a genocide against the Bengali population as a case of successful humanitarian intervention. Reminding readers of the role that countries of the Global South, civil society organizations, and individuals have all played in the development and implementation of human rights ideas is an effective rebuttal of the criticism that human rights are a tool of the Global North imposed upon the Global South.

Sikkink develops her argument regarding the effectiveness of human rights in part 3 of the book. She acknowledges the despairing question that scholars, activists, and casual observers all seem to ask: If human rights have been effective, why does the human rights situation seem to be getting worse rather than better? Both scholarship and activism tend to have a negativity bias—that is, we focus on what is wrong and how to address it. And when human rights issues are highlighted in the media, they too are focused on the violations rather than progress in mitigating violations, further amplifying the perception that it is all bad news in the world of human rights.

Additionally, the nature of human rights work itself means that when it comes to measuring progress, it can be a victim of its own success. Human rights activism seeks “to make invisible harms visible” (179). The more human rights activists succeed in their work—bringing abuses to light—the worse things seem to be. And as scholars and activists have improved their abilities to measure, record, and publicize abuses, additional human rights violations can be seen and understood. Moreover, human rights norms have spread and definitions of what constitutes a violation of human rights have expanded, changing

the standard of accountability itself. More ills in the world are now identified and now spoken of in the language of human rights.

### DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

Much of the empirical evidence Sikkink cites as human rights progress—improvements in infant mortality rates, diminished death tolls from famines, fewer fatalities in one-sided violence, expansion of women’s education, among others—can be read as broad improvements in the human condition tied into economic development and expansion of democracy in the twentieth century. With intensifying economic inequality and erosion of democratic norms and practices in many countries across the globe, we should be reminded not only of the progress that has been made in human rights struggles but also of the potential for reversals.

Throughout *Evidence for Hope*, Sikkink acknowledges the importance of democracy in the promotion and defense of human rights. And while the author argues that states are not the only actors that can, or should be, relied upon to uphold human rights, she sees a “lack of political will” (99) from states as a key factor that can halt human rights efforts. Wavering commitment to basic political liberalism among established democracies, as well as outright authoritarian reversal in many young democracies, is a troubling development for human rights movements and institutions. Defense of democracy itself must be at the forefront of our concerns for the future of human rights.

Overall, this book is a welcome departure from the pessimism that often pervades scholarly debates on human rights. It offers a needed assessment of human rights progress and the potential to remind scholars, activists, and the general public that we can make a difference because we have made a difference. And viewed through the lens of teaching and thinking about the human rights struggles ahead, this work is a powerful call to “keep [our] focus on the genuine culprits of human rights violations in the world” (51) rather than solely criticizing human rights efforts themselves. To this reader, *Evidence for Hope* is a valuable resource for teaching human rights in a way that both enables our students to critique while empowering them to act.