

# H-Net Reviews

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**Steven Jensen.** *The Making of International Human Rights: The 1960s, Decolonization, and the Reconstruction of Global Values.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016. 334 S. \$99.99 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-107-11216-2.



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The history of human rights, as told for decades, begins in the 1940s. There is perhaps an occasional nod to previous human rights-*ish* ideas, such as the rights demanded in the Magna Carta or the rhetoric of the French Revolution, but the traditional narrative places the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the immediate antecedents of that document, as the major point of departure. Indeed, even going straight to the source, the United Nations's official "History of the Document" for the declaration contends, "The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which was adopted by the UN General Assembly on 10 December 1948, was the result of the experience of the Second World War. With the end of that war, and the creation of the United Nations, the international community vowed never again to allow atrocities like those of that conflict happen again."<sup>1</sup> Following this line of thought, the story centers heavily on the political figures of the West, and human rights can be situated in a familiar Eurocentric, or perhaps more accurately Western-centric, tale. Following the "diplomatic feat" of the declaration, the narrative regularly jumps to the 1970s and the explosion of human rights organizations that gained public traction (best exemplified by Amnesty International's 1977 Nobel Peace Prize) and major diplomatic accomplishments, such as the Helsinki Accords of

1975, again placing human rights in the hands of largely Western actors.

Importantly, none of this narrative is inherently wrong; it is, however, incomplete. The gaps in the traditional approach and the resultant major implications for both diplomatic and human rights history are brought into stark light in Steven L. B. Jensen's work, *The Making of International Human Rights: The 1960s, Decolonization, and the Reconstruction of Global Values*. Jensen's work not only sheds light on a previously neglected decade, the 1960s, in human rights developments, but also brings to the front key diplomatic interventions made by figures in the Global South that "made not just an important but a transformative contribution that would influence the shaping of European "d"tente through the Helsinki Final Act" (pp. 277-278). Jensen's ground-breaking work will undoubtedly reshape the trajectory and scope of human rights scholarship, and mark an important shift in understandings of the broader diplomatic history of the twentieth century.

The major body of Jensen's argument lies in tracing the interventions of Global South diplomats at the United Nations who pushed forward the idea of human rights and who effectively deployed the notion to move agen-

das that were not driven by Europe, the United States, or the Soviet Union, particularly issues of race and religion. With great effect, Jensen demonstrates the critical agency of the Global South in negotiating ideas of "universality" that would shape international politics for decades beyond the 1960s. As the notion of some kind of human rights project emerged in the 1940s, colonialism provided a complicated bedrock onto which notions of universal human rights were being established. Jensen explains, "In the hierarchical world of empire, human rights had only a limited opportunity to shape global politics. The notion of universality was anathema to this world system. After decolonization, human rights were negotiated in a more horizontal system of states, at least in formal terms" (p. 3). Critically, Jensen places constitutive power in postwar decolonization to the success of human rights as an international promise—without that global power shift, the notion would have been effectively dead in the water as a result of its innate hypocrisy.

Jensen argues early in the work that in the first two years of the 1960s, debates over the official position of the United Nations on colonialism were a driving force for not only human rights discourse but also the international body overall. While European and US diplomats had attempted, with poor effect, to employ notions of human rights to protest the Berlin Wall's 1961 construction, Global South diplomats, such as Guinean President Sekou Toure, used the notion to set a new agenda for the United Nations General Assembly. Jensen explains, "For many member states, it [the debate over colonialism and its end] was comparable to debating a new UN Charter outlining the future purpose of the organization. These UN debates signified a new trajectory for human rights norms in international relations" (p. 51). While European diplomats were scrambling to defend an antiquated position, Global South diplomats pushed the conversation forward. In highlighting the role of figures from Ghana, Nigeria, Liberia, and the Philippines, and their effective use of human rights and a foundation for ending colonialism, Jensen depicts a moment where Global South diplomats were in control of the narrative.

That same level of agency and effective diplomacy in the hands of Global South diplomats is apparent in further debates in the General Assembly over the course of the 1960s. Debates over two critical issues—race and religion—shaped major shifts in policy and the power dynamic in the diplomatic struggle over human rights. In fact, Jensen argues that race and religion "were political Achilles' heels for the two superpowers" (p. 138). Jensen traces each of these with meticulous care and demon-

strates the depth of negotiation, political complexity, and vulnerabilities involved in the global negotiations. With regard to racial equality, he argues, "The global struggle for racial equality challenged the legitimacy of the United States leadership on the world stage because of the system of racial segregation in the South. This dynamic had an impact on domestic political reform in the United States in the 1960s" (p. 138). The International Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (1965), the Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966), and the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966) brought issues of race and discrimination to new diplomatic levels. The passage of these conventions and the diplomatic process preceding them "elevated the concept of human rights from one that had been on the fringes of international affairs to one that could not be ignored. It was a process that the superpowers—dominant in the military and economic spheres—could not control" (p. 137). Yet while racial discrimination had proven to be a fruitful ground for breakthroughs in human rights during the 1960s, the issue of religion was equally important, and it was the other superpower, the Soviet Union, that was most vulnerable on that issue.

Jensen traces the debates over the failed Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Religious Intolerance as a lens through which to view the deterioration of world diplomacy over the latter half of the 1960s. The debate, much like the ones surrounding racial discrimination, was framed and formulated largely by Global South actors, including Liberia, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Venezuela. A key player was also Saudi Arabia, whose leaders pointed criticism toward the Soviet Union's intolerant position on the region. Yet, unlike the United States, which enacted domestic policy changes regarding race that were spurred on by criticisms both at home and in the global community, the Soviet response to concurrent domestic and international critiques on religious freedom was to harden their position on the issue, and between 1959 and 1964, there was a concerted crackdown on religious activity within the Soviet Union. Between 1964 and 1967, the breakdown of the diplomatic process is clear in the debates over religious freedom. A critical, and unexpected variable, also came in the form of the Six Day War, in June 1967. Jensen explains, "In the aftermath of the Six Day War, Jerusalem symbolized war, religious conflict, Zionism, displacement and battles over sovereignty. These symbolic meanings were exploited by the communist states as an attack on the Convention [on Elimination of All Forms of Religious Intolerance] itself" (p. 165). As the debate continued, it became mixed