The field of human rights,“ avers Indian Intelligence Bureau officer Biplab Dasgupta in Arundhati Roy’s The Ministry of Utmost Happiness, „has become a perfectly respectable and even lucrative profession.“ With characteristic indelibility, Roy etches in our minds an undeniable if uncomfortable truth: human rights advocacy and the operations of power need not be at odds. When the human rights enterprise spotlights abuses without asking after the structural conditions that make them possible, apparent opposites can find themselves aligned. But as Roy’s readers also know, power’s enactions are real and often brutal, but never uncomplicated. Geographically a good distance from the South Asian setting of Utmost Happiness, Patrick William Kelly’s Latin American history also engages critically with human rights while emphasizing complexity.

Sovereign Emergencies argues that Latin America is indispensable to human rights history, and that the 1970s are pivotal to that history’s arc. Kelly’s is a transnational account, focusing on Brazil, Chile, Argentina, and the United States albeit with less to say about the larger global context. Opening with a chapter on state violence and responses to it in Brazil after its military coup in 1964, Kelly shows how human rights was not a given response to the regime’s use of torture. In order for state abuses to be understood within a human rights framework that emphasized the violation of individual bodies, other paradigms within which such violence might be understood and opposed – namely socialism – declined. Enter Amnesty International, which set up its first department on Latin America in 1973 and whose activists generally considered contextual questions of wealth and power asymmetry as beyond their remit.

The Brazilian military government’s cruelties were of consequence for more than its citizens alone. The practice of torture in Brazil gained greater international attention in ways that galvanized wider conversations about the status of state sovereignty. Not just the regime but also numerous observers within the Organization of American States and the United Nations agreed that what happened in Brazil was a domestic matter. But Brazilian exiles, Catholic and Protestant activists, and members of Amnesty pressed the case that victims of torture deserved a form of global concern that transcended the limits of national jurisdiction. All of these developments proved crucial for the reception of Augusto Pinochet’s government after September 11, 1973.

Attention to human rights in Chile under military rule comprises, over three chapters, the central story of the book. Pinochet himself provided a personification of malevolence that failed to fully cohere within any particular individual in the Brazilian or Argentinian examples, while thousands of Chilean exiles ensured the regime’s enduring scrutiny. More than a scene of concerted attention, as Kelly explains, Chile was also a site of human rights’ evolution. Leftist, anti-imperialist resistance to Pinochet also characterized the 1970s, but by the end of the decade, a human rights politics that shunned contestations of inequality in favor of critiques of state violence had become hegemonic. What the spectrum of opposition to Pinochet had in common was a willingness to delegitimize national sovereignty’s veneration as censure-proof shield.

From here, the narrative moves to the United States, where, engaging with the influential work of Barbara Keys, Kelly points out that human rights offered its proponents in the US the possibility of national redemption after the Vietnam War. In this context, a politics of garnering sympathy and influencing those in power won out over anti-imperialist solidarity campaigns. Meanwhile, in Argentina, as the final two chapters explore, the scale and inhumanity of the violence unleashed against the disappeared and

their families outpaced that of the already awful Brazilian and Chilean cases. As documents released since the book’s publication confirm, even US intelligence officers found aspects of Argentinian counterinsurgency to be disquieting. Argentina’s junta was adept at managing its international public relations, in part by learning from its authoritarian neighbours. But as Kelly shows, processes of globalization during the 1970s meant that it was impossible for the junta, even with its powerful friends, to control the flow of information and opinion that condemned the terrible abuses perpetuated until the regime’s end in 1983.

The easiest part of evaluating a book is often identifying topics that are missing or underdeveloped. And readers might indeed wish that the author had said more about gender, race and indigeneity, or the world beyond its three main examples. But for this reviewer there are two more things to note beyond saying what this book could have said more about. The first is to make the obvious point that because Sovereign Emergencies is part of a literature, it is best read, like all good scholarly monographs, in good company. For example, with Benjamin Cowan’s Securing Sex we have a brilliant analysis of the roles of gender and sexuality in the Brazilian dictatorship, while with Katherine Marino’s Feminism for the Americas, we now have an impressive study that puts gender and Latin America at the center of the story of twentieth-century human rights. Indigeneity and race are taken up to great effect in, for instance, Isabel Altamirano-Jiménez’s Indigenous Encounters with Neoliberalism and Jerry Dávila’s Hotel Trópico. Tanya Harmer’s Allende’s Chile, Renata Keller’s Mexico’s Cold War, and Patrick Iber’s Neither Peace nor Freedom are models of how Latin American history might be written in broad, global context. And so on. To read the book alongside such exemplary works is to enhance the contributions it makes, rather than draw easy and unsatisfying attention to what Kelly did not devote more attention to.

Secondly, while it provides an effective synthesis of the human rights story as it pertains to Brazil, Chile, and Argentina during the long 1960s, which this non-specialist reviewer found to be particularly useful, the book is distinctive in several of its contributions. It shows how human rights did not emerge from an already formed Latin American tradition, but evolved in transnational interplay with regions beyond South America. It shows how the concept of an „emergency” was instrumental in redrawing definitions of „sovereignty.” And it shows that oppressive structures can remain standing while accommodating human rights. In attempting to approach his subject with an attitude he calls „critical empathy,” Kelly does not diminish how human rights advocates were able to intervene under difficult circumstances and make a real difference when it mattered most, even if „the very concept of solidarity transformed from a maximalist dream of revolution to a minimalist protest to be free from state violence” (p. 96). Kelly thus offers further insight on that line of questioning about human rights, respectability, and lucre which Arundhati Roy’s intelligence officer gives ironic voice to, and to which Samuel Moyn’s Not Enough has also given great prominence. „Human rights, even perfectly realized human rights,” Moyn points out, „are compatible with inequality, even radical inequality.”7 Kelly gives this argument greater depth while confirming Christy Thornton’s persuasive point about Latin America’s essen-

6 Tanya Harmer, Allende’s Chile and the Inter-American Cold War, Chapel Hill 2011; Renata Keller, Mexico’s Cold War. Cuba, the United States, and the Legacy of the Mexican Revolution, New York 2015; Patrick Iber, Neither Peace nor Freedom. The Cultural Cold War in Latin America, Cambridge, MA 2015.
tial if too-often underappreciated place in the histories of global phenomena such as human rights. No shortage of reasons, then, why the book deserves a wide readership.


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