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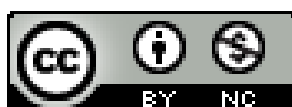
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Book Review – ‘Human Rights for Pragmatists: Social Power in Modern Times’ by Jack Snyder

Neil Hicks

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In this valuable new book,¹ Columbia University political science professor Jack Snyder presents a synthesis of over twenty years of human rights scholarship. Refreshingly, Snyder goes beyond some of the more negative critiques that have situated human rights in its ‘end times,’² making a strong case for the need for human rights to advance if societies are to achieve better outcomes for their people. At the same time, he puts forward forceful criticisms of the conventional practices of the mainstream human rights movement that make for challenging reading for practitioners in governments, international organisations or the NGO sectors involved in human rights promotion on the domestic and international levels.

Snyder rightly identifies that many of these conventional practices are not delivering results and obliges his readers to consider empirical evidence that human rights and democracy are in reverse: authoritarian regimes are becoming stronger; fragile new democracies are devolving into illiberal democracies or dictatorships; and, even established democracies are threatened by the rise of anti-democratic movements hostile to many human rights principles.

Snyder highlights several key areas where recent efforts to transition from authoritarianism to democracy have fallen down. These include: the timing of post-authoritarian or post-conflict elections and their sequencing with the embedding of institutional safeguards for basic rights and democratic principles; and, dealing with the crimes and violations of previous regimes in ways that do not exacerbate societal divisions and conflicts.

Snyder’s observations are based on his own research carried out in China, Hong Kong, Egypt, Indonesia, Myanmar, Turkey and Ukraine. He situates his analysis within a broad historical canvas encompassing movements towards democratic and rights reforms from the European revolutions of 1848 and the mid-nineteenth century, through the third wave of democratisation in southern Europe, southeast Asia and Latin America of the second half of the twentieth century through the colour revolutions and Arab Spring protests of the early twenty-first century.

Snyder contends that the contemporary human rights movement has run into an impasse because it relies on methods that were effective at the time of the ‘unipolar moment’ after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989, when democratic liberalism, rooted in the rule-based international order of international law appeared, if not inevitable everywhere, then at least unchallenged as a preferred mode of governance. As the events of the last thirty years have reminded us, the unipolar moment was short-lived, and an anomaly. We now live in a time of ‘equipoise’ between democratic and anti-democratic forces on the international level, where authoritarian states openly challenge liberal values, and on the domestic level in many countries divided between liberal and illiberal political movements in the developed countries of the global north and in major countries of the global south like India or Brazil. In much of the global south, including the Arab region, burgeoning authoritarianism has crushed local human rights and democratic movements.

Snyder’s prescription to overcome the current blockage of human rights implementation is ‘pragmatism’ based on the maxim, ‘power leads, rights follow.’ By this he means that rights prevail when they align with the interests of powerful local constituencies. Therefore, human rights advocates should develop strategies that ‘create social preconditions for empowering the core constituencies that benefit from and strengthen inclusive, representative institutions.’ He admonishes activists to view patience and expediency not as contrary to human rights principles, but as ‘tools towards making ideals a reality.’

Snyder has forthright recommendations for necessary changes in the practices of the mainstream human rights movement. He cautions that there are ‘no magic shortcuts that get directly to rights through law and morality by taking a detour around politics.’ He explains that the human rights movement alone is too narrowly focused to be a ‘central engine’ of progressive change. Human rights can provide an aspirational vision for such change, but to achieve it requires a ‘mutually supportive tripod’ of a human rights movement working in concert with a popular mass movement and pragmatic, progressive political parties, capable of gaining and exercising power.

It is worth noting that in many countries led by authoritarian regimes, leaders have worked this out and have taken forceful pre-emptive measures to block the development of mass movements or viable opposition political parties. Nonetheless, Snyder has faith in the fact that more rights compliant, democratic states generally, over time, deliver better outcomes for their citizens and that therefore advocates can ‘persuade by showing that rights work.’ Moreover, authoritarian states have difficulty escaping their own internal contradictions; inequality, governance deficiencies and corruption intensify when states have ‘one foot in the political economy of global capitalism’ while maintaining a domestic system based on patronage and favouritism, not the rule of law.

Snyder suggests that since the human rights movement alone cannot lead the necessary change, it must embed its ideals within locally resonant mass movements, emphasising the value of ‘vernacular normative discourse’ in human rights activism. He points to examples from the third wave of democratisation where successful, inclusive mass movements for democratic change included religious elements, in Latin America, Poland and Indonesia. In the Middle East region

there have been partially successful versions of this in Turkey and Tunisia, but less successful experiences in Egypt where tensions between secular and religious forces opposed to the Mubarak government were exploited by the military to reimpose harsh authoritarianism using a resonant narrative of the need to ‘rescue’ the country from religious ‘extremism and terrorism’.

Perhaps Snyder’s most iconoclastic critique of the methods of the mainstream human rights movement comes in his discussion of the tactic of shaming, whereby human rights researchers expose shocking violations committed by governments or other entities and seek to mobilise pressure, to deter further violations and encourage future compliance with human rights standards.

Many human rights organisations operating from the global south are only too aware that the leverage of leading liberal states is rarely effective in preventing violations in their countries. There are two reasons for this, liberal states have lost their credibility as international protectors of human rights because of their selective and often half-hearted commitment to human rights ideals, and because of their own domestic human rights failures in such areas as migration and inequality; and, as Snyder points out, criticism from outsiders often produces a backlash. Accused leaders have become adept at using such criticism to mobilise domestic support for themselves.

Despite this, local and international human rights organisations continue to rely on mobilising international pressure, often through shaming, as a major tool in their advocacy. Snyder’s analysis should prompt a re-examination of this approach by human rights practitioners. While human rights organisations make efforts to hold responsible individuals accountable for violations rather than entire countries, as Snyder observes, it is difficult to shame elites without also appearing shame the general population. In addition, human rights advocates often make the assumption that because the values they support are universal they merit universal support. With increasing success, certain political leaders question the validity of some of these values, rendering themselves and their supporters immune to shaming for actions that they do not consider wrong. The use of cultural wedge issues to discredit progressive policy reforms has become a universal tactic, and an effective one.

Snyder notes that the influential spiral model of human rights socialization³ has a later restatement acknowledging that ‘resistance [to human right socialization] could be expected to persist under common adverse conditions,’⁴ including in autocracies. Regrettably, such common adverse conditions prevail throughout the Arab region.

Snyder emphasises that ‘human rights are so important that they need to be promoted effectively, not jeopardized by the unintended consequences of shaming.’ He points to some possibly more effective human rights promotion tactics, including a clearer focus on anti-corruption as a human rights issue that he sees as a promising tool for mass mobilisation. Snyder is surely right to urge the human rights movement to re-examine its conventional assumptions and working methods. He advocates finding human rights values that speak to the interests of majority and influential groups. Anti-corruption is one such issue, a convergence between human rights and environmental justice as seen at the recent United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP27) conference in Egypt may be another.

Snyder's book jacket claims that it will 'constructively turn the mainstream framework of human rights advocacy on its head.' Time will tell whether it achieves such a far-reaching objective, but it certainly deserves to start an overdue conversation.

About the Author

Neil Hicks is the Senior Director for Advocacy at the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (CIHRS).

¹ Snyder, Jack (2022) *Human Rights for Pragmatists, Social Power in Modern Times* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press).

² Hopgood, Stephen (2013) *The End Times of Human Rights* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press).

³ Risse, Thomas, Ropp, Stephen C., Sikkink Kathryn (1999) *The Power of Human Rights: International Norms and Domestic Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

⁴ Risse, Thomas, Ropp, Stephen C., Sikkink Kathryn (2013) *The Persistent Power of Human Rights: From Commitment to Compliance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).