

**BOOK REVIEW: *The Last Utopia – Human Rights in History***

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The goal of Samuel Moyn's book, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History*, is to analyze the past to determine what factors began the push for international human rights. The Columbia University professor argues that human rights are an ideal (or utopia) for the world to aspire to, and Moyn takes a compelling standpoint regarding the origins of human rights. Moyn declares that "the last utopia" (or unrealistic ideal) for the world is the idea of human rights. Brought about by a collapse, over time, of all other alternative ideologies – like religion, socialism, or capitalism – human rights is our final utopia to believe in. Moyn says that "instead of turning to history to monumentalize human rights by rooting them deep in the past, it is much better to acknowledge how recent and contingent they really are" (p. 225). He reminds us that human rights have not been around forever, and are recent developments that need protection.

The first few chapters outline Moyn's perspective of the revised history of human rights through revolutions, events, and the leaders that have shaped it. Moyn deduces that "the true history of human rights matters most of all, then, in order to confront their prospects today and in the future" (p. 9). He does just that, starting with civil and common law and explaining how and why they changed to natural rights. He discusses how issues were not framed as human rights violations during World War II, which kept the public from recognizing the problems. Notably, Moyn states that devastation from World War II had little impact on creating a set of human rights standards for countries to live by. He discusses the

idea that the United States, under President Carter, began adding human rights to their foreign policy agenda simply out of the country's self interest rather than out of their concern for international human rights.

Moyn begins chapter two by framing the birth of human rights in a new and unique way, stating that the modern human rights regime stems from relatively recent events from the 1970's. A more typical perspective that historians accept as the history of human rights – but that Moyn disagrees with – is the idea that events like the French Revolution greatly impacted the push for human rights. Moyn challenges the belief that international human rights are a very recent development, and discusses an alternate history of human rights as a utopia. His bold approach creates a completely new perspective, specifically targeting issues and leaders from the past few decades in Europe and America.

In chapter three of *The Last Utopia*, Moyn covers the progression of human rights starting from small organizations that promoted basic morals as rights. He describes how in the United States, the phrase got introduced by accident when Franklin D. Roosevelt happened to add the term in his Four Freedoms speech, resulting in new conceptual ideas about human rights. Human rights underwent a huge transformation with the adoption of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, and Moyn describes the complex political situations taking place at that time. His knowledge is extensive in the field of human rights history and he provides lots of insight into the reasoning behind human rights developments and issues, such as the connection of human rights to “the African American struggle against subordination” (p. 100). Moyn's main argument is that it is “crucial to link the emergence of human rights to the history of utopianism – the heartfelt desire to make the world a better place” (p. 225). At first, I was skeptical of his argument that human rights have largely been impacted during the past 50 years, , but after reading the book I feel much more knowledgeable of the events that caused human rights to burst out as a utopia for a better world. Human rights began in

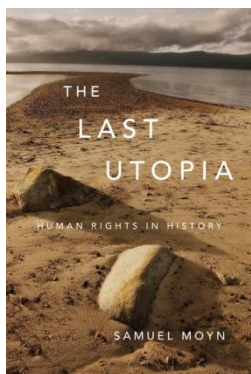
countries and during times that the other utopias did not succeed, and they have continued to fill that need because we, as humans, want to use human rights as a utopia to believe in.

Lastly, Moyn argues that a more defined and effective present version of international human rights is found in law and society, where the public openly supports basic human rights. Looking back on the transformation is impressive, and Moyn's commentary provides a close look at our more recent history from a human rights perspective. He considers the current state of human rights and how they are accumulating and expanding as a utopia, with an emphasis on possible problems in the future. Although Moyn approves of the equal rights that are finally being incorporated into law, he warns that this is an unrealistic ideal that the public latches on to for hope. In Moyn's opinion, the current human rights laws need to stay minimalist and simply protect the most basic human rights so that our governments do not go overboard, which could be more detrimental than helpful. He argues that there is a possible failure if this utopia keeps expanding and broadening, such as with the current issue of the United Nations promoting Internet freedom as a human right. Governments and the public are now in favor of human rights to the point that it could be problematic. I agree with his perspective, as long as countries keep incorporating basic human rights into law to protect the public's fundamental rights.

While he does well recounting the history of human rights over the past few decades, Moyn barely mentions a few events in the past decade that have dramatically shifted Western views of human rights. An example of an altering event is the 9/11 terrorist attacks. After many lives were lost in the United States, some have changed their views to an attitude of revenge rather than human rights. In the search for terrorists and terrorist organizations, much of the American public has forgotten about the human rights standards that were so influential in the past for informing their view of justice. Amnesty International reminds us how the United States has behaved, saying: "In the years since 9/11, the U.S. government has repeatedly violated both international and domestic prohibitions on torture and other

cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment in the name of fighting terrorism”.<sup>1</sup> Moyn does not focus on the present state of human rights as much as he perhaps should, considering the thesis of the book was to discuss the history of human rights. Commentary on this topic would have been advantageous in a post-9/11 world.

Overall, Moyn’s sometimes complicated argument is that human rights stem from the very recent past, and his detailed analysis of human rights history is informative and thought provoking. His arguments regarding the world’s utopia are either enlightening or dramatic, and the questions raised – such as “Is the process of its troubled expansion merely the story of the difficulty of combining cooperation with existing governmental programs?” (p. 225) – present new ideas and challenges for our present day human rights decisions. By focusing on events and leaders of the time and considering this concept of utopia, Moyn provides an interesting perspective with perhaps a valid argument for the history of human rights and the last utopia for the world. Although at times difficult to grasp, Moyn’s perspective on the creation and expansion of human rights introduced me to completely new ideas about human rights. *The Last Utopia* is a compelling book because of Moyn’s unique perspective and I recommend it to anyone interested in human rights.



**Book Information**

*The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History*

Samuel Moyn (2012)

253 pp., The Belknap Press of Harvard University, \$18.95

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<sup>1</sup> Amnesty International. Torture and Other Ill-Treatment. Retrieved from <http://www.amnestyusa.org/our-work/issues/torture>.

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