



Universal Rights, Systemic Violations, and Cultural Relativism in Morocco

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BOOK REVIEW

Universal Rights, Systemic Violations, and Cultural Relativism in Morocco, Osire Glacier, New York, Palgrave, 2013, 204 pp.

Osire Glacier's *Universal Rights, Systemic Violations, and Cultural Relativism in Morocco* is an important contribution to the history of human rights, and particularly, to the literature on rights struggles outside the now well-studied terrain of the internationalism of the 1940s, and the transnational rights 'boom' of the 1970s. Its strength is in its narrow-band of analysis, and modest ambition, revealing the particular manner in which human rights language and law interacted with the conditions of post-colonial Morocco. Glacier's investigation is extremely fine grained, and tends to encounter human rights within a much more local and national frame. Domestic processes and activism are set within the international legal and political context, but the work makes no totalizing claims as to the arc of human rights in the general case, working instead from the local upwards, and mapping ground-level interaction with wider global currents.

This caution is refreshing—Glacier's deductions about the Moroccan case are not strained by an effort to draw overly sweeping implications. Instead, the book furnishes a historical treatment of high fidelity in a particular domain, deferring to the wider historiography to tessellate this story into the now truly voluminous scholarship on rights. Its particular focus is to interrogate the general propositions of cultural relativist literature as manifest in Morocco, with a primary emphasis on protections against torture—which took their ultimate legal form in the 1984 Convention Against Torture (CAT). Building on the pioneering work of Susan Waltz (2001) and Mary Ann Glendon (2001) for earlier eras of the international human rights enterprise, Glacier complicates any relativist presumption that human rights law was the exclusive terrain of the West.

In so doing, the work offers a nuanced defence of a more inclusive human rights order. Its finest sentence encapsulates the reality of cultural relativist critique when deployed in the hands of the powerful: 'Rather than pitting small states against powerful states, human rights activism and law pits actors interested in the advancement of fundamental rights against those whose power the institutionalization of these rights threatens' (p. 99). Discussion across Chapters 3 and 5 (pp. 42–60, 77–97) is especially innovative, constituting one of the few detailed demonstrations of state elites drawing upon quasi-relativist arguments to compromise the language of human rights.

Adopting an interdisciplinary mode, mixing historical, critical legal, political scientific, and anthropological aspects, Glacier's method works well. The text is partitioned quite symmetrically, interlacing themes and chronology. Perhaps the greatest virtue of this study is the facility with which it brings actual humans into the frame of human rights, and leavens the unavoidable legalism and political dimensions with the experiential aspect of abuses. With often haunting epigraphs (pp. 23, 41) from victims and activists, the verbiage of the state and of international organizations is always set alongside the reality of human rights violations. As a smaller-scale enterprise, there is necessary trade between high-resolution coverage of Moroccan voices, and broader discussion of implications, context, and significance. Glacier's treatment is weighted to the former. As such, this is a text oriented toward specialists—predominantly those engaged in the study of human rights—and holds greatest appeal for a still further academic sub-speciality, those with North African expertise. At a handful of points, the gendered analysis, while ably undertaken and impressive in and of itself, seems very slightly discontinuous with the overarching arguments of the book, a difficulty which seems likely to be the result of the work's brevity.

The foremost challenge for a work of this scale and specificity is its relationship to what is now an imposing body of scholarship. Human rights history has seen the proliferation of major revisionist survey works, smaller-scale thematic histories, and detailed political histories of foreign policy-making and the birth of a human rights diplomacy. Much of the current literature, following the provocative intervention of Samuel Moyn (*The Last Utopia*, 2010), is focussed on the lineage of rights ideas, and parsing continuities and ruptures between 'old' and 'new' human rights language. Glacier does not address these trends in any explicit manner, but her work does have useful implications that can be drawn out for the flourishing historiography of human rights.

Perhaps most importantly, the work develops a powerful critique of cultural relativist claims, notably the line of argument pursued by Makau Mutua (2002). Glacier pursues the same kind of project Reza Afshari (2001) undertook in his stunning *Human Rights in Iran: The Abuse of Cultural Relativism*, but for the Moroccan case, and with a more exclusivist focus on torture. Her narrative provides an eloquent riposte to the assertions that human rights were a re-badged descendant of the imperial 'civilizing mission'. It demolishes the abstractions of relativist criticism in the most poignant manner, by recovering the testimony of the individual Moroccan citizens, notably women human rights defenders, who suffered under autocratic rule. When arrayed against these stories, the deficiency of easy assumptions and thoughtless phrase about 'Western hegemony' and national, religious, and cultural particularity is manifest.

Given the paucity of recent works on Morocco, and its obvious salience in the aftermath of the Arab Spring (briefly addressed in Chapter 6), Glacier has furnished a meaningful intervention. While it does not speak directly to the current epicentre of human rights historiography, the 'breakthrough' of the 1970s, or the still more elemental question of whether human rights as a discourse is now obsolescent, it does demonstrate that the campaigns of Amnesty International, and the global mobilization against torture, had a reality that went beyond the activated consciences of the Western middle class. In its economy of prose, and explicitness of argument against relativist simplification, Glacier's work is well suited to teaching, and to human rights practitioners. Its application to the larger question of the genealogy of rights is necessarily limited, but it does demonstrate that behind and below language, there were ideas that mattered, whatever the specifics of their intellectual provenance.

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