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Review Essay
The Recent History of Human Rights

KENNETH CMIEL

FEW POLITICAL AGENDAS have seen such a rapid and dramatic growth as that of “human rights.” Prior to the 1940s, the term was rarely used. There was no sustained international movement in its name. There were no non-governmental organizations (NGOs) with a global reach to defend its principles. There was no international law crafted to protect our human rights.¹ By the 1990s, however, you couldn’t escape it. The better-known Western organizations—the International Commission of Jurists, Amnesty International, and Human Rights Watch—roamed the globe looking for infractions. NATO prosecuted a war in the name of “human rights.” Less well known to Europeans and North Americans were the hundreds of NGOs outside Europe and the United States defining themselves as human rights agencies, almost all of them with birth dates no earlier than 1985. Rigoberta Menchú now presides over the Fundación Rigoberta Menchú Tum, a peace organization located in Mexico that campaigns in the name of human rights, particularly for indigenous peoples. It is one of many such organizations in Latin America.² In 1993, when a number of Asian governments tried to derail the Vienna United Nations Conference on Human Rights, calling for recognition of special “Asian values” and a reconsideration of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 180 Asian NGOs gathered, produced a counter-document, and proved a formidable political force in opposition to their governments.³ In Africa, in the early 1990s, a string of regimes vowed to democratize and respect human rights. Numerous local monitoring groups have sprung up to try to keep track of some very unstable situations.⁴

¹ On this background, see A. W. Brian Simpson, *Human Rights and the End of Empire* (Oxford, 2001), 91–156; J. H. Burgers, “The Road to San Francisco: The Revival of the Human Rights Idea in the Twentieth Century,” *Human Rights Quarterly* 14 (1992): 447–77.

² On the general growth of human rights NGOs in Latin America and the Caribbean, see Edward Cleary, *The Struggle for Human Rights in Latin America* (Westport, Conn., 1997), 61–68.

³ On the debate over this conference, and the recent growth of human rights NGOs in Asia, see William Korey, *NGOs and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: A Curious Grapevine* (New York, 1998), 472–91. For statements by the Asian NGOs themselves, see Asian Cultural Forum on Development, *Our Voice: Bangkok NGO Declaration on Human Rights* (Bangkok, 1993).

⁴ To take just one example, note the Committee for the Defence of Human Rights (CDHR), based in Lagos, Nigeria. Created in 1989 after a union organizer was tossed into prison, the CDHR kept active through the 1990s, publishing annual reports of the human rights situation in Nigeria. The University of Minnesota Human Rights Library reported in 1993 that the group had over 2,000 members in nineteen states in Nigeria, and listed it as one of thirteen Nigerian human rights groups then active. See the University of Minnesota Human Rights Library, “The Status of Human Rights

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