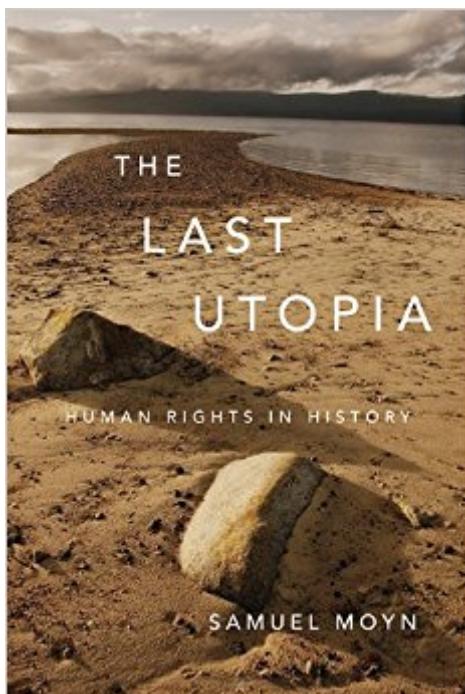


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# The Last Utopia: Human Rights In History



## Synopsis

Human rights offer a vision of international justice that today's idealistic millions hold dear. Yet the very concept on which the movement is based became familiar only a few decades ago when it profoundly reshaped our hopes for an improved humanity. In this pioneering book, Samuel Moyn elevates that extraordinary transformation to center stage and asks what it reveals about the ideal's troubled present and uncertain future. For some, human rights stretch back to the dawn of Western civilization, the age of the American and French Revolutions, or the post-World War II moment when the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was framed. Revisiting these episodes in a dramatic tour of humanity's moral history, *The Last Utopia* shows that it was in the decade after 1968 that human rights began to make sense to broad communities of people as the proper cause of justice. Across eastern and western Europe, as well as throughout the United States and Latin America, human rights crystallized in a few short years as social activism and political rhetoric moved it from the hallways of the United Nations to the global forefront. It was on the ruins of earlier political utopias, Moyn argues, that human rights achieved contemporary prominence. The morality of individual rights substituted for the soiled political dreams of revolutionary communism and nationalism as international law became an alternative to popular struggle and bloody violence. But as the ideal of human rights enters into rival political agendas, it requires more vigilance and scrutiny than when it became the watchword of our hopes.

## Book Information

Paperback: 352 pages

Publisher: Belknap Press; Reprint edition (March 5, 2012)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0674064348

ISBN-13: 978-0674064348

Product Dimensions: 5.5 x 0.9 x 8.2 inches

Shipping Weight: 15.2 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.0 out of 5 stars 10 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #43,185 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #32 in Books > Law > Constitutional Law > Human Rights #70 in Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Politics & Government > Specific Topics > Human Rights #260 in Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Philosophy > Ethics & Morality

## Customer Reviews

A most welcome book, *The Last Utopia* is a clear-eyed account of the origins of "human rights": the best we have. (Tony Judt, author of *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945*)In this profound, important, and utterly original book, Moyn demonstrates how human rights constituted a new moral horizon and language of politics as it emerged in the last generation, a novel and fragile achievement on the wreckage of earlier dreams. A must read. (Nikhil Pal Singh, author of *Black is a Country*)With unparalleled clarity and originality, Moyn's hard-hitting, radically revisionist, and persuasive history of human rights provides a bracing historical reconstruction with which scholars, activists, lawyers and anyone interested in the fate of the human rights movement today will have to grapple. (Mark Mazower, author of *No Enchanted Palace: The End of Imperialism and the Ideological Origins of the United Nations*)*The Last Utopia* is the most important work on the history of human rights yet to have been written. Moyn's search for origins reads like a great detective story as he carefully sifts the evidence of where and when human rights displaced alternative political ideals. (Paul Kahn, Yale University)Human rights have always been with us--or so their most zealous supporters would have us believe. With surgical precision and forensic tenacity, Moyn reveals how recent and how contingent was the birth of human rights and how fraught has been its passage from 1970s antipolitics to present-day political program. (David Armitage, author of *The Declaration of Independence: A Global History*)Anyone who truly cares about human rights should confront this bracing account. (Jan-Werner MÃller, Princeton University)The triumph of *The Last Utopia* is that it restores historical nuance, skepticism and context to a concept that, in the past 30 years, has played a large role in world affairs. (Brendan Simms *Wall Street Journal* 2010-09-08)The way the phrase human rights is bandied about it sounds like an age-old concept. In fact, it was coined in English in the 1940s. Samuel Moyn examines the myths of its historical roots; most explicitly, the conflation of human rights with the revolutionary French and American concepts of *droits de l'homme*. The latter implies "a politics of citizenship at home

Samuel Moyn is Professor of Law and History at Harvard University.

Purchased this book for a required class text. Although Samuel Moyn's writing is a little difficult and complex, it was overall a worthwhile text.

Perfect condition

If this is an alternative history of human rights it is because Samuel Moyn makes us examine the

development of human rights in spite of the missed opportunities such as those that accrued in past struggles from colonialism to independence. Why was it that Ho Chi Minh failed to grasp the straw that the declaration of Human Rights 1948 offered him? How was it that in spite of all the missed opportunities human rights managed to add flesh to the civil rights movement? He examines the American turn in which the Reagan and Carter administration managed to make human rights a distinctly political rhetoric and from there to the modern flash in which human rights became a universal and prolific cry. Yet, in spite of all that, we are far from the utopia that human rights hold such promise. That might well be because "Human rights were the victims of their own vagueness". The deep and intellectual study carries with it a pessimistic outlook, but one can see a glimmer of hope - provided that we understand what it means and how it should be.

Samuel Moyn's argument in *The Last Utopia* suggests that the origins of human rights, as a "utopian program" to transcend national boundaries, is a contemporary idea (5). It is utopian because the movement's nature is politically neutral while implemented universally beyond ethical and national law standards. Through an explanation of classical Greek concepts, revolutions, and the Enlightenment, Moyn successfully discards previous scholarship that attempts to 'date' human rights. Rather, he claims the recent human rights movement only manifested in the 1970s during a time of failed utopias such as communism, fascism, and socialism (3-5). Moyn's reasons that the origin of human rights' importance is to assist scholars in realizing human rights as a last utopian ideal and movement (214). For, "if the past is read as preparation for a surprising recent event," then it is that both the past and the present notions concerning human rights that are "distorted" (11). Yet, Moyn's seeking to discard previous interpretations of philosophy and historiography to establish a contemporary origin for human rights impedes 'rights' work already established. In other words, all the world's revolutions and era of Enlightenment have facilitated in setting humanity upon the course toward recognizing human rights. Each step was a gradual shift toward realization. To discard that rhetoric simply for the sake of 'dating' human rights in the 1970s, and through an American perspective no less, seems a bit arbitrary as each historical era appears to have interpreted 'rights' differently. To emphasize his points each chapter is constructed to flow chronologically to provide crucial insight into his argument. The treatise opens with a focus on classical rights talk that influenced the revolutions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Moyn shows that the contemporary origins of human rights is not within these earlier ideas. Rather, he claims earlier motivations of individual rights and civil rights were inspired by the creation of state sovereignty. Therefore, the setting of state boundaries were not the same as setting the boundaries

for universal human rights. Yet, through Moyn's backward-looking trajectory of history, where he utilizes a contemporary understanding of human rights against earlier constructs, inhibits us from identifying 'human rights talk' within original individual rights of man philosophy. That is to say, that Moyn's contemporary definition of human rights does not fit those of ancient history. However, Moyn's transition to the 1948 Declaration of Human Rights at the start of the Cold War falls in line with the recent international trends in the historiography as he shows that human rights became marginalized in order to preserve global national and corporate interests (68-71). Moyn then explains why the origins of human rights do not rest in the 1940s. He concludes that human rights did not take off during this era due to the creation of new nation-states and the partition of Europe at the onset of the Cold War. It, however, seems more likely that the number of stateless people who roamed Europe in the 1940s, as postulated by Hannah Arendt, also worked against the establishment of a universal human rights movement during this era as well. He attributes the marginalization of human rights to European decolonization and anticolonialism efforts of Middle Eastern nations to claim sovereignty through self-determination as new nation-states. Moyn is adamant about showing decolonization and anticolonialism in the Middle Eastern nation-states was more about a proclamation to self-determination than it was about disseminating human rights (85). But it stands to reason that if an eventual focus on the individual is forthcoming, then an organization of nation-states is also warranted. That is to suggest that if human rights are to go to find success internationally and universally, the world organization of nation-states must first be established and consequently stabilized. Nonetheless, Moyn proves again that the origins of human rights are not found in the anticolonial movements either as self-determination toward statehood was their primary goal. The true utopian project of human rights does not manifest until the 1970s with the inauguration of President Jimmy Carter. Where his inaugural address marked the first time in (human?) history that a leader claimed to embed human rights within foreign policy. To be sure, Carter specifically incorporated human rights rhetoric as an umbrella to encompass, democracy promotion, genocide prevention and a host of other American ideals (158). As Moyn posits, discussions that concerned US foreign policy "were permanently altered, with new relevance for a 'moral' option that now referred explicitly to individual human rights" (158). The "moral" turn in US foreign policy was soon corrupted, first by Carter's insistence on looking the other way concerning leftist political dictators, and then by the Reagan Administration who conversely went after them. In the later years, human rights became a political device used to justify US foreign invasion (173). In locating the true origin of human rights, Moyn allows future historians to assess the progress of human rights and their consequent mutations. For it is the inevitable outcome that for an egalitarian

ideal such as human rights, in order to universally manifest as the law of the land, must be embedded into the absurdity of politics where it must undergo the careful scrutiny of self-interested lawyers and businessmen.

It is rare one has the pleasure to read a book which both has a sharp, iconoclastic thesis, and in which the author is obviously working out, right before you, his own moral ambivalences about the subject he is writing about. *The Last Utopia* is just such a book. Moyn's argument is simple: that the idea of individual "human rights," far from being an ancient tradition harkening back to the French Revolution, or even the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) is a phenomenon of much more recent vintage, specifically of the mid-1970s, and that the reason it arose when it did was that it filled a void left by the collapse of alternative, collective notions of human emancipation (e.g. socialism). (This chart graphically illustrates the point Moyn makes in qualitative detail: [...] Human rights, in other words, was a specifically anti-political reaction to the failures of other, more political Gods. But at the same time, it is precisely its anti-politics that has limited human rights' effectiveness and scope. On the one hand, human rights advocates have been fundamentally ambivalent about how to incorporate social and economic exclusions that undermine the meaningfulness of political rights; on the other hand, the language of human rights has revealed itself as all too readily hijackable by rights-negating militarists like George W. Bush. In the end, Moyn points out that this "last utopia," while noble in conception, is also limited in its effectiveness, and may indeed require a renewal of more collective notions of utopia in order to realize its promises.

For an analysis of how social change (legal change in this case) occurs, this book is incredibly insightful. It changed my perception of the whole process (and I've been teaching it for years).

Samuel Moyn's book is bold in its theory, and accessible in its logical reasoning. Moyn breaks down the view of Human Rights History as a long steady building to the current movement. Instead he recognizes the significant and recent leaps of thinkers in the 70's. In looking at this recent history he brings important questions about the relevance and nature of the Human Rights Movement today. I recommend this to anyone who cares about the Human Rights Movement and is willing to think critically about it. Great read.

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