

| *Inventing Human Rights: A History*, Lynn Hunt (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2007), 272 pp., \$25.95 cloth, \$14.95 paper.

In the second half of the eighteenth century, epistolary novels became popular in France and England, people began listening to the opera in silence rather than walking around to converse with friends, and efforts were made to prevent theatergoers in Paris from disrupting performances by coordinating their coughing and farting. For Lynn Hunt, these changes in the daily lives of Europeans are intrinsically related to the development of universal human rights. In this rich and beautifully written work, Hunt argues that human rights rely upon our ability to empathize with strangers. The changing

habits and experiences of late-eighteenth-century Europe fostered new understandings of individuality and empathy, which would support the expansion of rights.

Hunt recognizes that empathy was not invented in the eighteenth century, but claims that something happened in these decades that taught people to empathize “across more broadly defined boundaries” (p. 38). She argues that the popular novels of this era not only conveyed the importance of individual autonomy but also demonstrated interiority in a way that compelled wide audiences to identify with characters. The expansion of empathy

would address a problem posed by individualism and the erosion of sacred conceptions of moral community: “What would provide the source of community in this new order that highlighted the rights of the individual?” (p. 64). Hunt contends that the rise of the novel served to widen the scope of empathetic identification, while simultaneously teaching readers to see “the capacity of people like themselves to create on their own a moral world” (p. 58).

Inventing Human Rights develops an intriguing meditation on the relationships among art, morality, and political change. The novel served as a powerful vehicle for reshaping ideas about morality, in Hunt’s view, because it did not *moralize*, but rather “cast a spell” over its audience, engaging readers in the complexity of inner moral struggles. To illustrate this point, Hunt focuses on three works written by men and about women: Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Julie* and Samuel Richardson’s *Clarissa* and *Pamela*. Hunt suggests that reading these novels enabled men to identify with female characters, yet acknowledges that the expansion of rights in the eighteenth century did not encompass women’s rights. Far from receiving an empathetic reaction for her efforts to attain such rights, the writer Olympe de Gouges was vilified and guillotined. Hunt also observes that the contemporary spread of literacy and global communications should, in theory, generate more empathy and thus greater support for human rights. What are we to conclude then, she asks, from “the resurgence of torture and ethnic cleansing, the growing use of rape as a weapon of war, the growing traffic in children and women, and the remaining practices of slavery?” (p. 209).

Hunt’s primary response to this question centers the hope for human rights on

the model of eighteenth-century declarations. Once declared, Hunt argues, rights claims had a tendency to cascade, as with the expansion of political rights in France to Protestants, Jews, and some free black men between 1789 and 1792. Hunt sees in this expansion an “inner logic of human rights” (p. 150), whereby granting rights to some groups leads inexorably to demands by excluded groups. “The promise of those rights can be denied, suppressed, or just remain unfulfilled,” she writes, “but it does not die” (p. 175). What is striking about these chapters is that Hunt seems to assign agency to the very *idea* of rights. She argues that the logic of rights has a “bulldozer force” that drove eighteenth-century change (p. 160) and characterizes this logic as “implacable” (175). Here, Hunt’s focus implicitly shifts from the empathy of the privileged to the outrage of the excluded, yet her grammar suggests that the gaps between human rights rhetoric and reality will eventually demand their own closure.

Whereas the chapters dealing with the “inner logic” of rights declarations suggest an unambiguous path to progress, Hunt later argues that this logic also inspired more virulent forms of nationalism and racism. In contrast with her initial celebration of novels, she later observes that novels also sensationalized violence against women. These observations raise interesting and difficult questions. When is the representation of suffering and degradation an act of empathy and when is it merely exploitative? What are the limitations of liberal rights as responses to the brutalities that Hunt lists in her conclusion? Although she insists that we recognize the “dualities” of rights (p. 212), she does not address scholarship on the limitations of civil and political rights as a response to racism, gender-based violence, and economic inequality.

Nor does she address a common contention among such scholars—that public rights can function to obfuscate or legitimate private forms of domination.

Should we valorize a definition of empathy that centers on the ability to see others as *like ourselves*? In Hunt's telling, this capacity informs the view that there is a self-evident imperative to expand rights. This is exactly what concerns many critics of the human rights movement, suggesting that the willingness to aid or avoid harming others must be premised upon essential and enduring human sameness and that one model of justice must apply to all contexts and peoples. Hannah Arendt proposed an alternative response to the claim of "self-evidence." Instead of asserting our moral positions as truths beyond dispute, Arendt suggested that we explain why we hold them as opinions and communicate them through means of persuasion to

others with different views. Although the drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was influenced by power politics, the process was also marked by an effort to engage in dialogue across political and cultural traditions as part of the post-war process of reinventing international human rights. Hunt makes a good case for thinking about how such efforts are limited when they appeal only to abstract reason, yet appeals to emotion and outrage will also be limited or violent when they do not acknowledge and respect human differences.

Hunt thus raises questions of profound importance to the contemporary human rights movement. Her book makes a valuable contribution to the history and philosophy of human rights and should also appeal to a wide general audience.

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