

## BOOK REVIEWS

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***The East Asian Challenge for Human Rights.* Edited by Joanne R. Bauer and Daniel A. Bell.** Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999. 394pp.

How the ideological expedition named “Asian values” ended up in the geopolitical wilderness can be seen in this book, which signposts the route of that rout. Human rights provided some of the most rugged terrain on which the outriders of Asian exceptionalism fell upon the indolent armies of Western universalism, who woke up briskly to repulse, scatter and drive the intruders into the wilds. But the challenge which the insurgents had mounted on the back of what they believed to be an arriving Asian century should not be underestimated. Geographers of “Asian values” claimed that human rights were not only not unifyingly universal, but also that some were injuriously foreign to the organic topography of Asia (condensed, for the purposes of the discourse, into Sino-centric East Asia). To the map-makers of Asian resurgence, American and European attempts to globalize human rights illustrated at best the Western misunderstanding of man’s relationship to society; at worst, they were a predictable manifestation of Western bad faith in a post-colonial world that was less “post” than colonial. In short, proponents of Asian values adopted the view that the political economy of rights, centred unmistakably in the West, served to keep Asia in its peripheral place, by intellectual default or imperious design. The Asian miracle provided the material means to plan an ambush on that order. Though the equally miraculous disappearance of the Asian era bankrupted the attempt, the stridency of the Western

response showed that the rebellious Asians had made a point, if only to lose it.

This book, co-edited by Joanne Bauer of New York's Carnegie Council on Ethics and International Affairs, and Daniel Bell of the University of Hong Kong, draws on a four-year dialogue between East Asian and North American intellectuals and activists. It surveys the false trail of Orientalism where Asia's point was lost. East Asian responses to Western claims of universalism, it shows, ironically originated in the same Orientalist mindset that once prejudiced Western perceptions of Asia as an undifferentiated, unchanging, ahistorical entity.

Rejecting such simplifications, two contributors argue for a truly universal human rights regime that goes beyond the liberal assumptions of Western societies, to embrace aspects of East Asian traditions and practices which endorse the immanence of rights. In this context, other contributors highlight the local and cultural dimensions of a struggle that may well produce human rights with Islamic or Buddhist characteristics.

Then there is the key issue of economics. In a pugnacious essay, Nobel laureate Amartya Sen deflates the argument that economic growth requires authoritarianism and declares that, instead, it is democracy which nurtures growth. His piece gains salience from the Asian economic crisis, which shook (though it did not destroy) the model of growth-based legitimacy on which authoritarian systems in East Asia have been based. Another contributor sharpens the economic argument into a critique of the austerity programmes that the International Monetary Fund imposed on Asian countries. The pain inflicted by its policies on workers and their families infringed nothing less than their human rights.

Though the distinction is a familiar one, the book correctly restates an important divergence between mainstream thinking on human rights in the developed and developing worlds: the former's tendency to emphasize civil and political rights, and the latter's habit of stressing social and economic rights. It suggests that the global spread of free-market values originating in the West, particularly the *laissez-faire* direction they have taken in the United States, will not lead to a globalization of rights. Instead, the integration of markets will undermine economic and social rights, precarious enough as they often are, whether in the West or in Asia. However, globalization will expand political rights as repressive Asian governments respond to the demand for more open societies that are needed to create (economically productive) space for individual creativity and initiative. On balance, then, neither Asia nor the West wins the human rights debate: both

win to the extent that rights, in their plurality, carry the argument among humans.

The diversity of approaches represented in this volume gives it its strength. Firmly resisting any attempt to privilege Western experience as the foundation of human rights — though an essay gives leeway to that point of view — the cumulative effect of the book is to reject Asian claims to social supremacy based on economic growth (which, anyway, spanned no more than the twinkling of an historical eye). Rights must derive from universal experience to be universally applicable, these essays proclaim in an exercise in common sense that is, unfortunately, not common at all in the conflict of discourses on the issue. The book upholds the universal centrality of rights by inviting the reader, wherever he or she may be, to invest in a project whose prospects are central to the condition of being human.

That said, the volume has two shortcomings. First, the case for Asian values is made only as part of the case against them. Contributors mount a critique of the premises of Asian values, but there is no defence of them against the critique.

Secondly, it is necessary but not sufficient to highlight the divergence between the political (Western) and the economic (Asian) views of rights. It is the avowed difference between the two approaches that is revealing. Why does the West insist on political rights? Is it because that part of the world has, as a result of some mysterious benediction, succeeded in moving beyond the economic to arrive at the post-economic, so to say? Any such claim would be spat on with a resounding curse by the jobless post-haves of the United States. Why is Asia perpetually pre-political, in a manner of speaking? Is it because politics is inimical to good economics? The economically and politically dispossessed of Myanmar would spit on the question with a curse — if they could.

The truth is that, just as rights are universal by virtue of being rights, they must be seamless in order to be genuine. And to see why they should be seamless, their origins must be considered. It is not enough to note the divergence between economic and political rights; what must be done is to show how rights themselves are an historical product created by an economic trajectory that has produced uneven but related political consequences across the world. Rights must be viewed as an aspect of the essential permeability of the economic and the political to each other. The issue goes beyond globalization and touches on the logic of capitalism itself. The self-serving arguments employed by the doomed socialisms of Europe and Asia do not absolve the inheritors of the world from making an authentic connection between the economic and political lineage of rights. The book does

not explore this lineage sufficiently; the absence of the past leaves a question mark on what it suggests about the future of rights as a project. In spite of revealing with sophistication and verve how discursive obscurities emanate from both Asia and the West, it does not quite succeed in offering a theory of rights.

And without theory, whither practice?

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***Malaysian Politics Under Mahathir.* By R.S. Milne and Diane Mauzy.**  
 London and New York: Routledge, 1999. 225pp.

The first book on Malaysian politics that this reviewer read was R.S. Milne's *Government and Politics in Malaysia*, published in 1966, when the author was teaching at the University of Singapore. In the late 1970s, Milne was joined by Diane Mauzy in writing an expanded volume — *Politics and Government in Malaysia* — which took into account the great changes during the previous decade. The new work, under review here, brings the story up to 1998 and focuses on the Mahathir era.

The long experience of both authors as observers of Malaysian politics is reflected in this book. It is noted in passing that Milne's first interviews with Malaysian politicians were conducted in 1964 and the footnotes indicate that both authors have had access to most of Malaysia's important political leaders since then. The book is full of comments and evaluations that indicate the "feel" for Malaysian politics that the authors have acquired over several decades. Milne and Mauzy are, therefore, very well placed to interpret recent developments in proper long-term historical context. Their judgements are generally very sound.

The book surveys the major events and issues that arose during Dr Mahathir's long and unfinished tenure as Prime Minister until 1998. Mahathir's confrontations with the sultans and the judiciary are covered in some detail. His battles within his party are also discussed at length, particularly the events leading to the party split in the late 1980s and, more tentatively, the crisis that resulted from Mahathir's deteriorating relations with his then deputy, Anwar Ibrahim, in 1997-98. Attention is devoted to the New Economic Policy and particularly to Mahathir's