

Ben Dorfman

13 Acts of Academic Journalism and Historical Commentary on Human Rights

Opinions, Interventions
and the Torsions of Politics



PETER LANG
EDITION

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POLITICAL AND SOCIAL CHANGE

Edited by Martin Bak Jørgensen and Óscar García Agustín

VOLUME 6

*Zu Qualitätssicherung und Peer Review
der vorliegenden Publikation*

Die Qualität der in dieser Reihe erscheinenden Arbeiten wird vor der Publikation durch einen Herausgeber der Reihe sowie durch einen externen, von der Herausgeberschaft ernannten Gutachter im Blind-Verfahren geprüft. Dabei ist der Autor der Arbeit dem Gutachter während der Prüfung namentlich nicht bekannt.

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Prior to publication, the quality of the work published in this series is reviewed by one of the editors of the series and blind reviewed by an external referee appointed by the editorship. The referee is not aware of the author's name when performing the review.

13 Acts of Academic Journalism and Historical Commentary
on Human Rights

To my students and children. Thank you.

Acknowledgements

This book is a result of the two and a half years of reflections on global affairs, historical issues and human rights. It wouldn't exist without my students, reflections on my children and the many extraordinary people I've met through my now not-short career who have suggested that I should handle the issues I'd like to address my own way, and compose what amounts to an activist book. Our work as academics, intellectuals and, indeed, civic-minded members of the public at-large *must* concern the realization of people's basic dignity and essential human equality. Come the twenty-first century, the road to such things has become too long. It's time to begin to find an end to certain of our social and political journeys and to let the freedom and dignity of all human beings shine through.

Among those progressively-minded individuals encouraging the work behind this book are most certainly Óscar García Agustín and Martin Bak Jørgensen, the editors of this worthwhile series. Their own work on issues concerned with problems of social injustice and political right has been inspiring and, with the current series, they've created a home for those who not only want to address such problems at-large, but do so creatively and in a different voice. Their work and collegiality have been decisive for this book.

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Ben Dorfman
Portland, Oregon
November 2016

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Introduction: The Torsions of Politics

Human Rights and Where We Are (And a Discussion of “Historical Commentary” and “Academic Journalism”) (November 21, 2016)

It's been two years – perhaps two and a half by the time this finally shows up in print – like few others. The war that was announced to have ended all the way back in 2003 most decidedly has not (the Iraq War – now partly morphed into civil war in Syria), the world's supposedly most reliable source of rights-based politics (Europe) has become awash in oft-shocking levels of xenophobia as it's dealt with a flood of migrants from precisely the locales where war *doesn't* seem to stop, the United States, supposedly the world's *other* great example of democratic practice, has elected a what might be a pseudo-demagogue to be its next President (the controversial Donald Trump), and we've seen so many fluctuations in the supposedly good-for-everyone liberal global financial system that what are supposed to be First World countries like Greece have needed to be bailed out – that to say nothing of the bailout of the American auto industry some years before. In certain ways, all is fine. Democracy still functions in places like Europe and the U.S., people – at least many of them – maintain access to their bank accounts, and for every civil rights crackdown in countries like Turkey or Egypt, there seem to be demonstrations reminding us that such things aren't ok. Those are the good signs. The bad signs are wars that *don't* seem to stop (what *will* bring the fighting in Syria to an end?), intercultural conflicts of which many in the world's dominant political geographies seem to be barely aware (religious conflict on the Indian subcontinent, e.g.) and the fact that ranges of countries either continue to support dictators or have taken newly authoritarian turns (are you a part of that trend, America?). Humanitarians can take comfort in their victories – the legalization of gay marriage in the United States, say, or UN attention to dire rights situations in locales from North Korea to South Sudan. Humanitarians stand agog, however, as bombs explode in European capitals, Western politicians invoke vocabularies of force and poverty continues to plague large parts of the world. For all the activism out there, the mountain of difficulties we face on the global stage can challenge the fortitude of one's convictions, making it hard, at least sometimes, to find the spirit to get out and fight.

The current project is an imperfect – perhaps deeply imperfect – attempt to address at least *some* of these issues as well as a few more, largely of a historical

nature. I can't explain *all* the dimensions of the work here except to say that I've felt compelled to respond to a variety of problems confronting our world and reflect on others related to milieus of social and political justice from not particularly distant pasts. I've been interested to enter into general conversation – conversation from the positions in which I stand – as well as to latch such conversation into discussions about and concrete regimes of human rights; that with rights standing as perhaps the preeminent socio-political discourse of our times. The issues to which I've responded to are simply those which entered my view over a particular period of time: roughly the end of 2014 to the first half of 2016. The notion of “general conversation” emerges from my sense of the role of the academic: that some need to be generalists and broader-scale, more subjective communicators over and above dedicated specialists whose call sign is the deepest levels of science. The focus on rights again derives from notions that they're the present day's ultimate socio-political concept – the idea or ideal by which many of us register how things “ought” to be and which represent mile-markers regarding successful approaches to international affairs and domestic politics. This book's pieces are “scholarly;” they rely extensively, perhaps decisively, on academic convention and debate. Still, I prefer notions of “academic journalism” and “historical commentary” – that as I've attempted to speak in a *somewhat* different voice and with a different purpose and style. If I could classify this book as *The New Yorker* with footnotes, I would. Unfortunately, such characterizations don't fully work as the writing isn't up to that kind of snuff and the articles can get a little caught in the academic muck and mire. Still, I have attempted to work subjectively and based on opinion wherein, though invoking a particular set of academic knowledges and skills, I've sought to paint with a broader brush and work via a slightly more “public intellectual” approach.

I'd like to say something about the latter concept first. Modern academics is a mixed bag. It's filled with dedicated teachers, supporters of general education projects, individuals invested in civic enlightenment ideals as well as more than a few activists. The increase in disciplinary specialization since the end of the Second World War is a well-known trend. With the expansion in both the size and number of global universities, detailed work that's beyond the reach of most members of the general public has become much of what modern academic life is about.¹ Still, academics descend the stairs of the ivory tower frequently enough. I.e., regardless of demands that they often write primarily for those in their field,

1 See, e.g., Jerry A. Jacobs, *In Defense of Disciplines: Interdisciplinarity and Specialization in the Research University* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013); Russel Jacoby, *The Last Intellectuals: American Culture in the Age of Academe* (New York: Basic Books, 1987).