

COUNCIL

book review

HUMAN RIGHTS AS POLITICS AND IDOLATRY

BY MICHAEL IGNATIEFF

With Commentary by K. Anthony Appiah, David A. Hollinger,

Thomas W. Laqueur and Diane F. Orentlicher.

Edited and Introduced by Amy Gutmann.

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Reviewed by Jeffrey Scheuer

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Reading this pair of dense, provocative essays by Michael Ignatieff (based on his Tanner Lectures in Human Values at Princeton two years ago), one is struck by how much the world – and human rights scholarship – have changed in recent decades. In the early 1980's, few spoke of a "human rights revolution." Now, as Ignatieff writes, "The advocacy revolution has broken the state's monopoly on foreign affairs." Yet, intellectually as well as politically, the human rights movement faces formidable enemies, from authoritarians of all stripes to cold warriors and post-modern relativists.

More than anything, "Human Rights as Politics and Idolatry" is a potent reminder that opposition to killing and torture isn't as simple as it seems.

Ignatieff is a forceful defender of human rights, and his most important theme is unarguable: that human suffering, not philosophical or religious or other traditions, is the ultimate source and justification for these universal moral demands. Keeping that theme in mind helps one to get through this short but difficult book.

As Ignatieff recognizes, tolerance is central to the moral enterprise; but tolerance of violence and abuse is not. Human rights are valid universal claims, he observes, "because they define the universal interests of the powerless, namely, that

power be exercised over them in ways that respect their autonomy as agents." No human being wants to be murdered, tortured, raped, or denied the right of exit.

The author argues cogently for what he calls "strategic minimalism" – a narrow roster of rights against the most heinous crimes. He makes compelling claims for political consistency and for "syncretism," acknowledging that disparate traditions may further the human rights agenda and broaden its constituency. Likewise for selective intervention: "There are no peaceful diplomatic remedies when we are dealing with a Hitler, a Stalin, a Saddam, or a Pol Pot." He notes the catastrophic failures to intervene sooner in Bosnia and Rwanda.

With so much to recommend it, "Human Rights as Politics and Idolatry" should have been a touchstone for thinking about human rights. Yet the author's arguments are often confoundingly brittle and contrarian, at times to the point of contradiction. He has a lawyerly knack for surrounding an issue, emphasizing polarities, and attacking both extremes, while overlooking syntheses and middle ground, before coming to the right conclusion.

In passing, Ignatieff takes swipes at the human rights project, and gives undue credence to its enemies; he critiques the notions of moral universalism, foundationalism, and rights, before deciding in their favor; comes down against cultural relativism ("the invariable alibi of tyranny"), but also dismisses "moral imperialism," and invokes the insidious term "margin of appreciation" for cultures to interpret universal human rights norms as they see fit.

In relation to human rights, Ignatieff is both for and against democracy, capitalism, secular humanism, religion, communitarian rights, self-determination, nationalism, human dignity, and human rights advocates.

(Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch are, in his sorry estimation, "only the most famous" of the many advocacy groups.) It's unclear exactly whom he would nominate to do the heavy lifting.

I don't disagree in principle with Ignatieff's "strategic minimalism," but there is room for dispute about which rights belong in the pantheon. Should the positive right of a child to subsistence be a "human right" along with the negative freedoms from murder and abuse? It's contestable. Ignatieff is too comfortable with Sir Isaiah Berlin's "negative liberty" formulation to recognize its logical and moral limitations.

The skepticism about rights is also troubling; in its shadows lurk authoritarian claims that some or all rights are moral impostures. The fallacy here is that rights don't exist in a vacuum. Denying a right to one person or class necessarily ascribes a countervailing right to another. Either we have a right not to be subject to medical experiments, or Dr. Mengele has a right to perform them. Rights language is about freedom's boundaries. We can argue about where to locate those boundaries, but we don't "invent" them like so much landfill.

Ignatieff's is an interesting and humane vision, flawed by its tortuous, machete-hewn path through abstract ideas. The sheer range of interlocking issues addressed in this book, and its core insights, bespeak its importance to the human rights community. But much needs to be unpacked, amended, or balanced. The commentaries – especially David A. Hollinger's – underscore some interesting points, but they are largely supportive, and shed little new light on the subject. Above all, these essays suggest that while "putting cruelty first" is essential, intellectual debate about human rights is not irrelevant or obsolete, nor does it muffle the cries or obscure the ghosts of real human beings.

