

Book Review

Evidence for Hope: Making Human Rights Work in the 21st Century

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Sikkink, Kathryn. 2017. *Evidence for Hope: Making Human Rights Work in the 21st Century*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 336pp.

Kathryn Sikkink has just published her latest book: *Evidence for Hope: making human rights work in the 21st century*. Sikkink is one of the most respected and known human rights scholars in the International Relations and Political Science fields today. Since her first works in 1990s, Sikkink has focused on the Global South, especially human rights norms, transitional justice and transnational advocacy networks in Latin America (Sikkink and Keck 1998; Sikkink 2011).

Because of her normative and ideational assumptions, Sikkink can be positioned as a constructivist thinker in the International Relations field, openly opposed to realists. In her long intellectual battle against the scepticism of realists about human rights, ideational elements and non-state actors, she has increasingly used rationalist methods and research designs throughout her career. Her latest book is that: a combination of constructivist assumptions and rationalist and historical methods to elaborate a reply to prominent scholars who deeply criticize human rights international movements, institutions and literature, such as Samuel Moyn (2010, 2015), David Kennedy (2002, 2012), Stephen Hopgood (2013) and Eric Posner (2014), among others.

These authors say that human rights movements are at risk because of their lack of effectiveness, as does Moyn (2010), or even that they are illegitimate as an expression of Western imperialism, as does Hopgood (2013). Kennedy (2002: 24), for example, says human rights 'overestimates the singularity of its vision and refuses to place the costs of its rulership centre-stage where they can be assessed and either refuted or taken into account.' Moyn (2010: 218) argues that human rights are a minimalist anti-politics platform and nothing more than our last utopia, weak when compared to other sets of ideals, like those linked with nationalism or communism, for instance. Posner (2014: 7) dismisses human rights by stating that they have not been able to improve the situation of the world: 'human rights law has failed to accomplish its objectives. More precisely, there is little evi-

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dence that human rights treaties, on the whole, have improved the well-being of people, or even resulted in respect for the rights in those treaties.'

Sikkink deeply disagrees with these authors and their arguments, and *Evidence for Hope* makes a straightforward case that, yes, human rights movements and institutions are legitimate and can and do work indeed. According to her research, human rights international movements have been contributing to produce effective changes in the world in the long term and one of the main reason for that is their legitimacy.

Hopgood (2013: xii) explicitly questions the legitimacy of human rights by stating that '[it] is only as a by-product of American power and money that human rights have been globalized.' And Moyn (2010) argues that international visibility of the human rights has been inextricably linked with the USA insofar as human rights would have only gained international traction when Carter Administration adopted them as a parameter of foreign policy in 1970s. Sikkink says that arguments on lack of legitimacy like those are supported by the colonized idea that the Global South has not been participating in the rising and construction of the international human rights system: 'Human rights scholars, pundits, and practitioners continue to assume and to argue that the idea of human rights comes from the global North and is imposed upon the South' (Sikkink 2017: 58). This kind of position inserts Sikkink's book in a contemporary and welcome trend of scholarship: a polycentric and critical approach on the origins of human rights.

Focusing not only but mainly on Latin America, the author shows how international human rights ideas and norms have diverse sources other than Western. Based on historical records, Sikkink demonstrates, for example, how Latin American countries, specifically their representatives (who came from their national elites, a point poorly considered by Sikkink), pioneered in international human rights law when they elaborated and approved the American Declaration of the Rights and Duties of Man six months before the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). She also argues that the inclusion of economic and social rights in the UDHR was primarily a result of Latin American countries' mobilization, and not a strong demand of the Soviet Union, as the mainstream narratives of human rights have used to claim.

She is also very emphatic in pointing how the women's rights language in the UDHR is much more associated with the advocacy of Latin American women delegates than from representatives from the Global North: 'In promoting this language, [Brazilian Bertha] Lutz and [Dominican Minerva] Bernardino were opposed by women delegates from the United States and Canada and by women advisors to the UK delegation' (Sikkink 2017: 81). Moreover, based on historical research, she reminds, especially US readers, that not only the Soviet but also the American government during the Cold War supported coups that led to systematic human rights violations in Latin America.

The discussion about the origins of international human rights is not only a historical issue, but the different conceptions of these origins are in the centre of the debates between Sikkink and the critics. Hopgood (2013), for example, argues we are in the endtimes of human rights, the title of his book, because for him the origin of international human rights is located in the powerful countries from the Global North and as these countries

are losing power in the new configuration of the world the relevance of human rights necessarily will diminish. On the other side, Sikkink traces a different horizon for human rights because for her their origins are more complicated and mixed than the mainstream scholarship shows:

[P]owerful countries have never been a constant, or even a primary, source of support for the international protections of human rights. [...] because the history of the human rights movement is much more diverse than Hopgood presents, its future is likely to be more promising (Sikkink 2017: 30).

On effectiveness, the starting point of her argument is methodological. Actually, the dissent in the literature on international human rights movements, according to Sikkink, is due to a methodological issue. Basically, the point is: the methodology of human rights organizations is to highlight violations; however, this method is not necessarily the best one for human rights academics and researchers who wish to assess trends and changes. Thus, *Evidence for Hope* aims to set a kind of common starting point and, to do this, it claims for methodological transparency in the human rights academic literature, including the critical one: 'Basically, we need to understand the tangled debate over what kinds of yardsticks to use when measuring effectiveness as well as the tension between ideal and empirical reasoning' (Sikkink 2017: 14). The book's purpose is to clarify the terms of the debate, the types of comparisons being utilized and the kinds of evidence that would be more persuasive in supporting and assessing claims.

Sikkink defends that international human rights norms, movements and institutions have been more effective than they are given credit for. Her evaluation is different from the critics because of something she named 'comparison to the ideal.' Sikkink asserts that human rights literature should state its comparative ideal, that is, the ideal mobilized to face the reality. Without it, it is hard to establish a consensus on what is the dependent variable of human rights academics.

In this sense, Sikkink argues that when we talk about effectiveness of human rights we need to ask: compared to what? To the past or to a wishful future? It is indispensable to explicitly differentiate empirical comparisons from comparisons to an ideal. *Evidence for Hope* clearly adopts the former approach and argues there is a lack of transparency in the critic literature. Posner (2014), for example, stresses that the persistence of human rights violations is a proof that human rights law has not functioned well and due to that malfunction, we should quit it. Sikkink's methodological replies would be: but are human rights violations increasing or diminishing? Is human rights law not working compared to what? Is it not functioning well when we look to the past or to an ideal future of zero violations? In her words: 'Is it the twilight of human rights, as Posner claims, or does his method give him a dark lens through which everything seems grim?' (Sikkink 2017: 33). In other words, it is a condition for a fruitful research journey, according to Sikkink's book, that human rights academics at least agree on whether the world is getting better or worse empirically and non-ideally speaking.

According to her, activists (openly and understandably) and critics (implicitly, which is criticized by Sikkink, as mentioned above) make the complete cessation of violations the comparative ideal, but not empirical and historical comparisons as parameters to visualize the progress (or not) of international human rights movements.

Presenting extensive data, Sikkink argues that the world is getting better historically speaking in many senses, like decreasing deaths caused by wars, fewer genocides, fewer countries applying the death penalty, less famine and starvation. Important exceptions shown by the data would be the situation of refugees, and economic inequality among individuals (the topic of a work very recently published by Moyn (2018), by the way, and one of the main reasons that feeds Moyn's scepticism regarding to human rights potential to transform the material world in a less unequal place). So, the idea that human rights do not advance and are not effective in making the world a better place – one of the main pragmatic arguments of the sceptical authors and one of the main reasons of activists' pessimism – is a myth, according to Sikkink.

Thus, in the author's view, the human rights academic community has to turn its eyes to improvement trends (empirical comparisons) and not necessarily to the complete cessation of human rights violations (normative ideal), as many human rights organizations advocate for. Sikkink affirms that only by looking to the historic trends on specific rights and not just to the current data, as her book purposes, would human rights academics be able to demonstrate the transformative potential of human rights international law, movements and institutions:

When we go carefully, issue by issue, and consider the quality of the data and trends over time we see that there are some human rights issues that have experienced worsening [...] But there are many other instances where the situation is improving (Sikkink 2017: 14).

According to Sikkink (2017: 154), this evolving shared perception of the human rights failure appears because '[o]ne of the goals of the human rights movement is to make invisible harms visible, but in the process of doing this, they may make it seem as if human rights violations are more prevalent.' Analysing historical trends would allow overcoming this paradox: human rights movements produce data about violations more than ever, and this very data is utilized by critics, like Posner or Hopgood, to support their case that human rights have been not working. In this sense, Sikkink noted that human rights academics must be conscious that sometimes the work of activists unintentionally produces perceptions that human rights are in crisis. As nowadays they produce much more information on violations, demand more rigorous and comprehensive human rights standards and pay much more attention to violation than to the enjoyment of rights, human rights organizations unintentionally contribute to create this perception of crisis by their own work. However, the scholars concerned with empirical improvements of human rights cannot simply adopt the organizations' diagnostics as their methodological yardsticks, because they are snapshots of the present reality, not moving pictures of trends.

After the discussion on legitimacy and effectiveness of the international human rights movements, Sikkink also makes policy suggestions on how human rights violations should be successfully addressed: decreasing wars and seeking nonviolent solutions to conflicts; promoting and intensifying the quality of democracies; protecting against dehumanizing ideologies and practices; pressuring governments to ratify and to meet international human rights standards; ending impunity by encouraging domestic and international accountability; and supporting and expanding domestic and transnational human rights mobilizations.

To sum up, Sikkink defends that human rights international law, institutions, and movements are – not without temporary struggle and failures – legitimate and relatively effective in the long term. Therefore, in *Evidence for Hope*, Sikkink, supported by decades of research and fieldwork, counters the scepticism on international human rights norms, movements and institutions. Presenting evidence for hope without complacency, Sikkink demonstrates to readers and to unmotivated activists that the international and transnational human rights movement really matters. The book is a sophisticated reply to the critics indeed. Let's wait for their replies now. And possibly some of them will flourish in the solid and necessary way tracked by Moyn's latest book: pointing out the weakness and the historical marginalized position occupied by the concern with material inequalities in the international human rights law, institutions and movements.

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