Burke, Roland: *Decolonization and the Evolution of International Human Rights*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 2010. ISBN: 978-0-8122-4219-5; 234 S.

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Recently, the history of human rights at the United Nations has been analysed with more attention to detail and also with a more critical perspective. This led historians (and others) to contest the idealistic „Eleanor Roosevelt narrative“[1] that regarded the emergence of human rights as defined in the Universal Declaration of 1948 as the outcome of a global wish for equal rights for everybody. This official view had interpreted human rights as a result of a truly international (and intercultural) negotiation in view of the cruelties of World War II and the atrocities of the Holocaust and other crimes committed by the Axis powers and the Nazis in particular. This perspective commonly neglected colonial rule and associated contradictions with the western promotion of universal human rights. While the basically western origin of the rights collection has been analysed, the role of the „Third World“ in the establishment of human rights at the United Nations and its connection to the anti-colonial struggle at the UN have been largely overlooked. Here, Roland Burke's study provides inspiring new insights.

Sarah Zaidi and Richard Normand demonstrated that human rights in a way entered the UN agenda by accident, as the US and the United Kingdom had used the concept also as a propaganda tool in World War II[2]. And then the genie was out of the bottle, although it obviously contradicted with racial discrimination in the United States and colonial rule in the British empire. At this point, Roland Burke's now published dissertation takes off. The author used United Nations transcripts, some archive material and personal papers of key figures (p. 2).

Roland Burke, lecturer at La Trobe University in Melbourne, enriches the debate on the origin of human rights as a powerful value and instrument at the international stage with three main arguments: First, human rights were, despite the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, not deemed truly universal in the beginning. Secondly, that the first relativists were actually western countries, and particularly the colonial powers that deemed colonial people or newly independent societies as not yet ready for human rights. Thirdly, in contrast to mainstream research, it was mostly newly independent states that pushed for human rights universality in the first decades and thus were very influential for the universality claim, before cultural relativism became the main argument of many non-western governments to criticise human rights since the 1970s.

After an introduction that seeks to put his quite original research agenda in perspective to the state of the art, Burke focuses on the role of human rights at the Bandung Conference in 1955, which is largely considered as the birthplace of the Third World movement but also for the universality of human rights as part of the anti-colonial struggle – an aspect that has long been overlooked (pp. 13f.) (chapter 1). In the following part, he tackles the paramount right to self-determination and its role for the Arab, Asian and African countries as the „nexus“ between decolonisation and human rights (p. 37) (chapter 2). The third chapter deals with the notorious topics of non-western human rights activism at the UN: Apartheid, anti-colonialism and the quite surprising „accidental birth of a universal right to petition“, which was ironically facilitated by mostly dictatorial regimes in Africa and Asia. Chapter 4 scrutinises the infamous human rights conference held in the Shah's Tehran in 1968 – here Burke illustrates the awkward gathering with absurd incidences like the praise of Haitian dictator Papa Doc Duvalier as human rights champion by an admirer. The rise of cultural relativism (now from the „South“) and the decline of human rights since the 1970s is the subject of chapter 5, before Burke ends his quite inspiring contribution with some conclusions.

[1] Mark Mazower, The Strange Triumph of Human Rights, 1933-1950, in: The Historical Journal 47 (2004) 2, p. 380.

[2] Roger Normand / Sarah Zaidi, Human Rights at the UN. The Political History of Universal Justice. United Nations Intellectual History Project Series, Bloomington 2008, chapter 3.

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In the beginning, it seems a bit confusing that Burke abstains from explaining what kind of human rights he is referring to, as the concept has become such a broad notion, including all sorts of individual, political, social, cultural, economic, group, collective and solidarity rights (that are supposed to be intertwined in the very idealist wording). Nevertheless, after reading the book, it seems to be implicit that the Universal Declaration is the starting point, and a more historical or even philosophical debate on the origin of human rights would have been quite another book. However, the exclusion of Latin America in the Asian-African coalition to promote universal human rights in the first post-World War II years, and the turn to cultural relativism in the 1970s is deplorable, as Latin American elites have always struggled where they belonged since decolonisation took off – even Samuel Huntington had difficulties to place the subcontinent correctly in his „clash of civilisations".

In this regard, the Chinese „hostility" to the Universal Declaration – apparently due to non-involvement of the Chinese in its preparation – leads the author to speak of a lip-service to the Declaration only (pp. 21-24). Here, it may be interesting to look at the motives of other non-western delegations to full-heartedly support universal human rights. Burke states that numerous "...speakers simply conflated the pursuit of self-determination and human rights, making the struggle for one coterminous with the struggle for the other" (p. 26). Thus, how can we verify that these claims merely served to morally support anti-colonialism and beyond this goal – particularly regarding domestic practices – were not much more than lip-service? The enthusiasm with which Latin American governments promoted human rights and related international documents after 1945 were not always matched by corresponding human rights records at home, for instance. So, may we argue that international human rights could have been nothing more than a diplomatic decoration for some, while serving different purposes for others? Nonetheless, it is remarkable that Burke highlights the political efforts of non-western countries to promote the universality of human rights in the first post-war years, regardless of their true motivation.

In the chapter on self-determination, Burke holds that the Third World sponsorship of the right to self-determination is based on two rival opinions among anti-colonialists: "...one universalist and democratic, the other strictly anticolonial, and altogether indifferent to democracy" (p. 36). In the course of the 1960s, such a right turned rather into a biased anti-colonial instrument and thus made the previous European criticism of it come true. While these statements of the colonial powers were not appropriate in the 1950s, after the adoption of the two 1966 human rights covenants, "...the rhetoric of independence as the gateway to democracy had begun to look less and less plausible" (p. 58).

The most surprising contradiction for Burke was that the UN actually was more successful in advancing the human rights system when it was dominated by dictators rather than democrats, as dictatorships felt immune to UN monitoring due to the perceived bloc-voting guarantee of the African-Asian group: „Hence the extraordinary irony of the 1960s, where an alliance of African and Asian dictatorships facilitated the construction of a human rights system that contained unprecedented potential for the future investigation of their own regimes" (p. 91).

In the fifth chapter, Burke examines the development of cultural relativism in the UN. Even though there is a vast bibliography on human rights cultural relativism, there is surprisingly hardly any study on the development of the respective discourse in the UN bodies (p. 113). It seems common knowledge, that cultural relativism – meaning that particularly individual rights are regarded as western and thus incompatible with non-western societies – emerged especially in the 1980s and 1990s, as the official principle of many Asian and African diplomats and politicians. The major dilemma of it is that while academic supporters of cultural relativism have been eager to protect non-western communities and culture, despots in non-western countries have used it to justify murder and torture (p. 142f.). Nevertheless, as Burke points out, the first struggle on universality was exactly the opposite of what is widely believed and the order today: While the few non-western dele-

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gates defended universality, it was the imperial powers that criticised it: „The first struggle for universality was the exact opposite of what academic proponents of cultural relativism hold as orthodoxy“ (p. 114). Western delegations, particularly those with a colonial involvement, did not question human rights as such when they demanded a different practice, but supported the idea of differences between cultures – here the main argument of cultural relativism as we know it today is found (pp. 114f.).

Women's rights were strengthened by new independent elites in the 1950s and 1960s that were driven by the belief in progress and modernisation and not necessarily individual rights as such (pp. 125/126). Non-western states advanced women's rights in the fifties as part of a general modernising effort to overcome traditional customs that were considered backward, while western colonial powers showed much less eagerness about modifying local traditions in order to match human rights requirements (p. 126f.). In the Third World rhetoric at the UN during the 1970s, human rights turned from an effective response to western colonialism into the very manifestation of it (p. 132): „Universality was now imperialist“ (p. 137). Burke neatly sums up the history of cultural relativism at the UN: „It has been an excuse used by both colonial administrator and postcolonial dictator, invoked as both imperialist and anti-imperialist at different times. Cultural relativism as a philosophical discourse has its origins in opposition to European imperialism, but historically it has served authoritarian masters of all stripes“ (p. 143).

In contrast to accounts holding human rights at the UN as a more or less exclusively western enterprise, Roland Burke argues that decolonisation was a major political dynamic in the development of the United Nations human rights agenda. This example explains anti-colonialism's multidimensional character and its relations to individual rights, by which it challenges the view that human rights were "...little more than a rhetorical weapon for lambasting the Western democracies". Burke's study further contests the conventional belief in the results of decolonisation for the human rights programme, "...which have been polarized between those who laud the Third World contribution and those who perceive it as highly detrimental or even disastrous“ (p. 4).

While Burke's assessment that cultural relativism was initially rather a western practice is convincing, the argument that advocates of the anti-colonial struggle at the UN decisively fought for universal human rights in the first post-World-World II years remains more difficult to support, as it seems problematic to confirm whether the pro-universality rhetoric was only lip-service in order to promote the higher goal of gaining independence[3].

In sum, Burke's study is a quite readable account that enriches the history of human rights at the UN, and should be of interest to historians, human rights theorists, political scientists and scholars dedicated to decolonisation.

Klaas Dykmann über Burke, Roland: *Decolonization and the Evolution of International Human Rights*. Philadelphia 2010, in: H-Soz-u-Kult 23.06.2012.

[3] For an informed and more detailed debate on this aspect, see Jan Eckel, Human Rights and Decolonization. New Perspectives and Open Questions', in: Humanity, Fall 2010, pp. 111-135.

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