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# Book Reviews

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The notion that Asians are naturally suited to autocracy has been around for centuries, but the idea has been updated and given new currency in the 1990s with the “Asian values” debate. The advocates of “Asian values” argue in part that human rights are not absolute or universal ideals, but are merely Western cultural creations. Western societies and governments therefore have no business admonishing Asian governments for human rights violations or trying to impose democracy. This argument becomes vitally important in matters of trade, development aid, diplomacy, and United Nations politics. In some parts of East and Southeast Asia the debate even has a bearing on the degree of legitimacy that governments have in the eyes of their own people. This debate forms the backdrop for two new books on human rights, each of which comes to grip with the “Asian values” argument in a different way.

Peter Van Ness’ *Debating Human Rights* purports to be a debate, but is remarkable for how little interaction exists between the contributions, excellent though many of them are. Except for occasional references to other schools of thought, most of these contributions are principally expositions of the author’s preferred position, lacking the engagement necessary for a debate to progress. With this in mind it is perhaps best to treat the book as a tour of the debate, regarding each essay as a site of interest and speculating on the possibilities of interaction.

The book opens with Chandra Muzaffar, who is one of Malaysia’s leading Muslim human rights advocates, putting the argument that human rights are derived from the human dignity given to each person by God. This is a startling opening for anyone who has grown up in the West, where the unwritten rules of secular pluralism say that mentioning God is a sign of conservatism and a lack of sophistication. But there is more. Muzaffar regards human rights as an integral part of a much broader worldview that emphasises the spiritual wellbeing of the person, and so he extends his conception of human rights to include economic, social and cultural rights and a savage critique of globalisation. On the other hand, he warns that the “Western secular tradition” threatens to “result in the moral degradation and spiritual impoverishment of the human being.” (p. 27) “Individual freedom”, he writes, “is not the be-all and end-all of human existence. Neither is the individual the ultimate arbiter of right and wrong.” (p. 29) God? Spirituality? Morality? This is obviously going to be a very different debate to one conducted purely from a Western perspective.

Muzaffar’s contribution, itself sufficiently unorthodox to Western eyes, is followed by Nikhil Aziz’s argument based on the implicit assumption that human rights are created by society and conferred upon a person by society. Such arguments can be used as a defence of relativism or particularism in human rights, but when Aziz speaks of “society” he means the global community of religious (there is that word again), social and ethical movements, from which he seeks to derive a universally accepted concept of human dignity. Aziz’s contribution is quirky and difficult to follow, but he finds much common ground with Muzaffar, especially in their

expansion of human rights to matters of economic and social justice. He also joins Muzaffar in rejecting “political secularism” (which seems to be mainstream Western liberalism, although this is not completely clear) as a hegemonic ideology that undermines the dignity of the human person.

It should be said at this point that Muzaffar and Aziz are not very specific about their notions of human rights and human dignity and they make little attempt to articulate what their ideals would look like in practice. Muzaffar is especially reticent (not just here but in other works that I have read) to declare himself on specific human rights issues, or on how one forges a consensus across religions and with those of no faith. The same criticism cannot be levelled at the next contributor in our survey. The third essay (along with two later essays on women’s rights) emerges from the by-now badly mauled stable of Western secularism (and liberalism). Though intelligent and thoughtful in his approach, for Edward Freidman there is no compromise, no debate. Human rights are universal, he knows what they are, and Asian perspectives need be considered only in so far as they can be construed as providing evidence of a democratic, humanist tendency. Freidman is a faithful adherent of ideological liberalism and has made the mistake of regarding human rights as being synonymous with his vision of liberal democracy. He shows no signs of being aware of the more subtle aspects of the “Asian values” argument, such as that over the contingent relationship between liberalism and democracy.

The two feminist contributors (Radhika Coomaraswamy of Sri Lanka and Manisha Desai of India) are not strictly speaking liberals at all, even though they are heirs of that ideology. Basing their agenda very much on United Nations conventions, they assert the legitimacy of placing women’s rights on the human rights agenda, and deal with a wide range of issues including violence against women in war and culturally-sensitive issues like genital mutilation. Then they move onto grounds more familiar to the Westerner: issues of “self-determination”, autonomy, sexuality, abortion and “reproductive health”. There is even a ritual condemnation of the Vatican-Islamic alliance that has been operating in the United Nations for the last few years. But wait a minute. Surely according to the logic of Muzaffar and Aziz, the Vatican-Islamic alliance should be welcomed as a sign of an emerging consensus on human dignity. In fact neither Muzaffar nor Aziz declare their hands on such issues, but the juxtaposition of this agenda with the Muzaffar’s declaration that “the human being is vice-regent or trustee of God whose primary role is to fulfil God’s trust” (p. 29) jolts us back to a realisation of how far we have travelled since opening the book.

Theoretically, these five essays are all on the same side of the “Asian values” debate, but it should be obvious by now that the situation is not nearly so clear cut. Ironically, of the five essays considered thus far, the only ones that show any inclination towards pluralistic tolerance are the quasi-religious essays. The liberal and feminist contributions demonstrate a stridency that is supposed (according to stereotyping) to be displayed by religion. Yet for all of their words, nothing any of these five contributors wrote made much impression on the force of the logic of the book’s two defenders of “Asian values”, Singapore’s Kishore Mahbubani, and Beijing University’s Zhu Feng. Both of these men wield the accusation of Western hypocrisy with devastating effect, and use arguments that resonate—at least superficially—with elements of Aziz and Muzaffar’s arguments. Perhaps the wittiest contribution of the book was when Zhu Feng appropriated the language of human rights by referring to China as a “dissident” state being forced to “knuckle under” to the United States. (p. 246.)

Yet for all the cleverness and earnestness of the contributors, this book conveys a sense of having just missed its cue. To the novice it should open up new ways of thinking about human rights, but the novice is unlikely to be able to order and assess the contradictory views and messages contained in the essays surveyed thus far. To those working in the field of “Asian values” it is yet another example of the dislocation of the conflicting elements of the debate, which at times seems to have more in common with children’s shouting matches than an adult conversation. Fortunately these essays are complemented by another five that consider the interrelation of human rights and diplomacy, and look at the politics of human rights in particular countries. Several of these essays are incisive, and I particularly recommend Michael J. Sullivan’s critical history of the Chinese Communist Party’s approach to human rights (both its theoretical and real approach) and Hoshino Eiichi’s study of Japan’s attempts to use development aid and quiet diplomacy to advance human rights.

*Debating Human Rights* puts on display a wide range of perspectives and issues, but it begs a follow-up that tries to find a basis for consensus. Fortunately such a book has also been published as part of the current orgy of scholarship on “Asian values”. I refer to Bauer and Bell’s *The East Asian Challenge for Human Rights*. Bauer and Bell’s book is a multi-disciplinary, multi-year international project sponsored by the Carnegie Council on Ethics and International Affairs. It had the express aim of investigating how East and Southeast Asian societies are coming to terms with human rights, and “how East Asians are giving meaning to and prioritizing rights”. (p. ix) In fact it also has a more pro-active role, in that it experiments with ideas that advocates of human rights might use to advance the acceptance of human rights in East Asia.

There is a refreshing vitality about this book, as its sixteen authors cross disciplinary boundaries without a second thought, moving effortlessly between philosophy, history, religious studies, jurisprudence and politics. The standard of scholarship is high, as is the standard of editing and organisation. Not only was each contributor commissioned to perform a particular task, but also several of them had the benefit of reading some of the other contributions before going to print. This has enabled authors to draw on each other’s work and to engage in informative debate within the book.

Unlike Van Ness’ book, this work is not a debate between advocates of “Asian values” and advocates of human rights. Every contributor believes in universal human rights and is seeking either to refute the “Asian values” argument, to find a formula that will allow a cross-cultural consensus to develop on human rights, or is presenting a case study of human rights in a particular country or context.

These contributors are more aware of but less concerned with their personal philosophical underpinning of human rights than are the contributors to Van Ness’ book. If a philosophical bias is present it is towards the notion that human rights are created and conferred by society, a stance that is stated explicitly by Inoue Tatsuo and Jack Donnelly. Nevertheless all the rival approaches to human rights are given respect and serious attention, including Joseph Chan’s treatment of the traditional Confucian concept that rights must be earned—surely a serious omission in Van Ness’ book. Even the “Asian values” argument is treated respectfully, and it was refreshing to read Onuma Yasuaki’s acknowledgment that many Asian authoritarian regimes do actually represent “the will of the people” up to a point and do have “a certain legitimacy.” (p. 105) This is an important concession that doctrinaire liberals are often reluctant to make.

The dominant ethos of the contributions is to advance the cause of human rights by seeking what is variously described as an “overlapping consensus” (an expression borrowed from liberal theorist John Rawls) or an “unforced consensus” between the rival conceptions of human rights and the myriad of religions and cultures found in East and Southeast Asia. It should be noted that those who believe that rights are created by society should logically be well suited for this type of consensus building. Yet regardless of one’s underlying beliefs about the nature of human rights, this approach is surely the key to advancing the human rights debate. After all, was it not the “overlapping consensus” between Christianity, liberalism and socialism that led to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights? A believer in natural, God-given rights (Christian, Jewish or Muslim) can enter such a dialogue in good faith, as can, I hope, a doctrinaire liberal. Can a Buddhist? A Hindu? A Confucianist? The advocacy of human rights by Confucian scholars and even by the Dalai Lama (though not in this volume) gives reason for hope. The contributors to this book have certainly made a worthwhile contribution towards building such a consensus, and they have also provided an excellent academic overview of a major section of the current human rights debate.

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In a dictated note presumably destined for his memoirs, President John F. Kennedy once described the office of president as “the ultimate source action” in the U.S. political system. Certainly, since Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal this has remained true. But penetrating the shroud of secrecy around the Oval Office has been a perennial challenge to historians. Any small glimpse into the workings within the White House has been keenly sought after as a potentially valuable clue as to how the president wields his power. For many years, especially since it became widely known that Richard Nixon had secretly installed audio recording equipment in the White House, the recordings made by U.S. presidents have held an allure to historians. But it is only recently that large collections of these recordings have been declassified and available to historians. By letting us eavesdrop on discussions in the rarefied atmosphere of some of the inner sanctums of the American government, these tapes are making – and will continue to make – unprecedented contributions to our understanding of how the most powerful nation in the world is governed.

Using what was then emerging technology, Roosevelt first installed a microphone in his office – in his desk lamp of all places. For the most part Harry S. Truman appears to have avoided the temptation to record his dealings. With Dwight D. Eisenhower, however, the Oval Office was once again bugged, a limited number of tapes only recently coming to light. But by far the most significant taping efforts yet known are those of Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson, and Nixon. Over the last few years, many of these tapes have been declassified.

The two books reviewed here represent a small part of this growing body of material that is shedding new light on the presidential office. They delve beneath the glossy exterior to the office of president at a working level. But there is none of the sensationalist Bill Clinton-style revelations here; these contributions aim for the much loftier ambition of trying to come to terms with how the president actually works.

This mystique of the office means that there is something intrinsically fascinating about witnessing the innermost workings of the White House. The mystique makes this fascinating. The office makes it important. But the tapes are all the more fascinating and useful because these are the bits that we were not meant to see. Kennedy never issued explicit instructions for the release of his tapes, but Johnson intended to seal his until at least 2023 (sixty years after he took office). Of course, these tapes must be approached with the knowledge that the President activated the taping system selectively. By a simple choice of what to tape or not to tape, the President determined the content of the tapes. But if it is impossible to speculate on the extent to which this taping affected the President’s behaviour, it can safely be assumed that the behaviour of the other participants – who did not know of the taping systems – is reliable. And at times it is these other participants that have the most interesting things to say.

*Taking Charge* concerns the first nine months of the Johnson presidency. While this volume reveals little that will alter fundamentally the historical assessment of Johnson, it does, nevertheless, provide an interesting insight into a complicated

personality. From the opening transcript of Johnson's call from aboard Air Force One only minutes after his own swearing in to offer his condolences to the slain president's mother, Rose Kennedy, through the difficult transition period and growing problems in Vietnam during 1964, the transcripts presented offer a view of an adroit politician at work. Editor Michael Beschloss has collected mainly short excerpts consisting mostly of telephone calls – Johnson was famous for his extensive use of the telephone – of Johnson's discussions on matters of both domestic and foreign policy with such key figures as Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. Beschloss has kept the commentary to a minimum; on the one hand this lets the tapes speak for themselves, but on the other hand the conversations at times seem to warrant further explanation. In short, this work provides an interesting glimpse at Johnson's personality and the way in which he wielded power, but never becomes more than a supplementary source for researching the Johnson administration. However, since this is billed as the "first volume" of the Johnson tapes, it is safe to assume that more important things are still to come.

Of more substance is the collection of transcripts edited by Ernest May and Philip Zelikow in *The Kennedy Tapes*. In fact, the tapes presented in this volume comprise only a small part of the whole collection of "the Kennedy tapes" now available, but it is an important selection, comprising as it does the recordings made during probably the most dangerous moment of the Cold War, the Cuban missile crisis of October 1962. Despite the vast literature already existing on that crisis, this new addition has made a valuable contribution. Until recently, much of the historical literature has relied upon speculation and recollection. Now, along with recently declassified documents from both the National Archives in College Park (Maryland) and the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library in Boston (Massachusetts) the American side of the crisis can be better understood. We can now witness what the President himself thought during the fortnight of crisis, for not only did he record those several crucial meetings at which he himself was present, but he also dictated his own notes in his office in the early hours of the morning as well as activated the Dictabelt machine during his telephone calls to former presidents Eisenhower, Truman, and Herbert Hoover. Through these recordings, it is now clear that the President's own view of the crisis was quite different from that of many of his advisers, and particularly the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Recognition of this is revitalising the scholarly debate. The format employed by May and Zelikow is more useful than that used by Beschloss. After a long general introduction, which serves as a useful synopsis of the missile crisis, each meeting is introduced with a short contextual essay. Moreover, the editors have drawn on written documents to fill in the gaps in the audio record. The result is a fascinating and, more importantly, very useable collection of primary documents that shed new and important light on one of the darkest moments of the Cold War.

If one feels like an eavesdropper in reading the transcripts of these tapes, it is because that is, in a sense, precisely what one is. These tapes, unedited and with none of the gloss of the White House public relations machine, were never meant to be released in their unadulterated form. But historians of the United States can be thankful that they are.

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Originally published from 1977, Robert Remini's three volume biography of Andrew Jackson was re-released last year in paperback form. Constituting over 1500 pages of text, Remini's monumental work is most assuredly targeted towards those with a deep and abiding interest in American antebellum politics. Nevertheless, it would be a great pity if the work's length confined it to this somewhat narrow audience, for it contains much that is relevant to students and observers of modern day republican politics. More than any of his predecessors, as Remini points out, Jackson defined the office of president and party politics. Rising from humble surroundings in territory later to be disputed between North and South Carolina, Jackson was the first man to capture the office through a carefully planned political campaign that appealed to the people. Jackson's conception of the 'people', Remini emphasises, was not the rising entrepreneurial middle class but the "great masses of people as farmers and workers." Much more than had the six previous holders of the office, Jackson was the first to strongly exercise the power and authority of the presidency, as evidenced by such pivotal events during his presidential tenure as the Bank War, the Nullification crisis and Indian removal. Jackson surrounded himself with a trusted group of political advisers that helped him transform a loose political faction into the Democratic party, the nation's first modern political party. Moreover, Jackson was at the centre of America's first political sex scandal when his National Republican opponents attempted to use the circumstances of his marriage to his beloved wife, Rachel, to discredit him during the presidential election campaign of 1828.

Given the importance of his presidency in shaping conceptions of the office, it would be easy to gloss over his prior experiences and achievements. Thankfully, this is something that Remini does not do. In volume one, *The Course of American Empire*, Remini examines Jackson's role in America's territorial expansion. In contrast to the popular perception of Jackson as a rough-hewn general, something that, no doubt, contributed to his popularity, Remini portrays him as an efficient and headstrong military commander whose bold actions against the Spanish in 1818 and 1819 were instrumental in hastening the acquisition of Florida by the United States demonstrate. Interestingly, since the work's original publication, the author has come across a document that shows Jackson as giving an oath of allegiance to Spain in 1789 while in Natchez. An unlikely person to take such an oath, Remini argues that it was wholly in keeping with Jackson's pragmatic nature as such an oath was required by all who sought to do business in Spanish territory at the time, as Jackson did.

In the second volume, entitled *The Course of American Freedom*, Remini traces Jackson's senatorial career and his first presidential term. Here, Remini argues that Jackson should be seen as America's first reforming president. Heavily influenced by the Founding Fathers and their conception of republicanism, the author

asserts that Jackson had a definite program of reform by which he sought to end the corruption of the so-called Era of Good Feelings and restore virtue and honesty in government. It needs to be emphasised, however, that the intention to restore American government to the pristine condition intended by the Founding Fathers has been a constant refrain of presidents. Indeed, in two terms in the office, Jackson only removed twenty percent of federal office-holders.

In the final and most lengthy volume of the trilogy, *The Course of American Democracy*, the author examines Jackson's re-election and the central issues he faced, notably, the Nullification crisis, Indian removal, the increasing sectional agitation over slavery and Texas annexation. Above all, Remini argues, Jackson's most important guiding principle was the right of the majority to govern the nation. This largely explains his actions in the removal of Georgia Indians beyond the Mississippi. Furthermore, Jackson's overriding commitment was to the Union and its defence, something that brought him into conflict with the abolitionists, who he saw as bent on destroying the Union and the democratic principle of majority rule.

One critic has suggested that had Jackson set forth his own case, then Remini's biography would be how he would wish to be remembered. I must admit that I find this a little discomfoting. Almost everyone, be they famous or not, wishes to be remembered fondly. This should, however, not be to the detriment of critical analysis. As a president and man, Jackson did things that were not entirely wholesome—his treatment of the Georgia Indians helped perpetuate a pattern of federal abuse of native Americans that almost resulted in them being wiped out. Moreover, Jackson at one time owned 150 slaves and like all antebellum political figures, he must shoulder some blame in perpetuating the 'peculiar institution'. Is Jackson's love of the Union sufficient excuse for some of his actions? Remini's work deservedly remains, nonetheless, the essential reference on 'Old Hickory'.

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