

**Patrick William Kelly, *Sovereign Emergencies: Latin America and the Making of Global Human Rights Politics* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. xx + 318, £21.99, pb.**

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Although far from the only region in which Cold War ideological ferment yielded to repressive military rule during the 1960s and 1970s, human rights violations in the Southern Cone produced a dramatic wave of human rights mobilisation and heightened external scrutiny of state actions. By deftly tracing the iterations and innovations of the transnational response to systematic rights abuses, Patrick William Kelly's *Sovereign Emergencies: Latin America and the Making of Global Human Rights Politics* makes a welcome contribution to our understanding of the period.

The introductory chapter provides a lucid overview of the book's themes. Kelly's central narrative sets out to explain 'how and why transnational and local actors began to use the lexicon of human rights' (p. 3), a change that both reflected and shaped the 'sovereign emergencies' of the book's multi-layered, semi-ironic title. For human rights campaigners, the rights crises were self-evident emergencies; exposing and hindering the carnage required chipping away at the norm of state sovereignty, a more feasible task when couched in legalistic rather than revolutionary language. The region's military governments, conversely and often cynically, perceived dual emergencies: the menace of Marxist ideology and rebellion, and the threat posed by activists' attempts to dent the 'impenetrable shield' (p. 6) of sovereignty.

Carefully charting the interplay between activists operating at different sites is Kelly's main task. Moving from 'a politics of revolution to a politics of emergency' (p. 7) required an occasionally awkward, sometimes tense shift from the language of radical politics to the depoliticised rights idiom favoured by transnational NGOs like Amnesty International. Amnesty's leaders saw human rights as 'an ideology above politics' (p. 11); Kelly contrasts this perspective with solidarity activists, for whom rights talk was more instrumental. Amnesty's approach became ascendant, a reality that informs current debates spearheaded by Samuel Moyn and others about what was 'lost' in the move from structural critique to professionalised rights activism and advocacy. While the book engages these debates, it is much more a mosaic that vividly portrays the ways differently placed individuals and groups responded and interacted while facing the urgency of state terror.

The rapid evolution of rights practices is illustrated by case studies at multiple sites. Early-1970s Brazil provides 'one of the first workshops of human rights practice' (p. 29). The gradual, fumbling nature of the embrace of rights talk by

Brazilians – and the persistence of overt calls for armed revolution – contrasts with the acceleration of rights-centred discourse among both domestic and transnational groups scrambling to expose the atrocities following the September 1973 coup in Chile. The genuine ‘emergency’ conditions in the early months of military rule impelled NGOs to hone both their rapid response and deep investigative capabilities. Solidarity groups connected to exiles and the European Left, in contrast, could use more creative tactics to concurrently publicise the abuses and maintain attention to underlying issues of injustice and exploitation.

A very strong chapter examines the mid-1970s emergence of a human rights-focused activist sector within the United States. Kelly chronicles three different groups – the solidarity-focused Community Action for Latin America (CALA), the brand-new Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA) and Amnesty’s US chapter – as each navigates the tensions between practical response and passionate idealism. CALA preserved its structural critique of US and corporate power, but also ‘gained an appreciation for [the] rhetorical fluidity and adaptability’ (p. 180) of rights talk. WOLA carved out an innovative space as an information purveyor with a specific, crucial target: the US Congress, where attention to rights abuses was just starting to gain purchase. Amnesty is again interesting: even as leaders reminded local chapters to scrupulously avoid politics and sensationalism, the organisation’s membership boomed in the United States – and benefitted from exaggerations of Chilean abuses by public figures like Joan Baez. Within a few years, the professionalisation imperative shifted human rights toward ‘a politics of respectability, not a rage against the machine’ (p. 207).

The final setting is Argentina, where both the choice of enforced disappearance as a strategy and the Argentine regime’s adroit mobilisation of propaganda showed new authoritarian sophistication – though international pressure did yield an Inter-American Commission on Human Rights report detailing the regime’s sadism. An epilogue brings the story toward the present, featuring somewhat digressive synopses of the region’s LGBT, Indigenous and women’s rights movements. Another brief exploration uses the evolution of the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo as a window into the complexity of transforming rights demands to combat neoliberal state abandonment rather than violations of bodily integrity. A more focused epilogue would have been better; Kelly might, for example, have compared the evolution of the Madres to the transnational organisations featured earlier as they entered the post-Cold War, neoliberal environment, or more deeply considered the ways the professionalisation and deradicalisation of human rights are reflected in the much-debated judicialisation of social and economic rights demands.

There are a few other minor lacunae. An answer to the big question – did professionalisation and effective transnational action necessarily come at the cost of radical solidarity? – could have been woven into the narrative more consistently. The geographic perspective is somewhat truncated; the rest of Latin America receives little mention. The technique of immersing the reader in contexts of emergency is effective, but without more background about the depth and forms of Latin American radicalism, the sharpness of the turn toward minimalist rights discourse is not always clear. And what about the nature of class within the human rights movement: did the shift away from revolutionary ideology reflect the relative privilege of its leadership?

These gaps notwithstanding, *Sovereign Emergencies* is a solid achievement. It is well written throughout, and Kelly displays a keen eye for telling archival details. The tone of ‘critical empathy’ (p. 12) vis-à-vis rights campaigners, which Kelly establishes in the introduction and maintains throughout the book, is well executed. While firmly a history book, it offers interdisciplinary appeal for social scientists and legal human rights scholars, especially as a demonstration of agent-based power despite untested practices and formidable structural obstacles.

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## **Donald V. Kingsbury, *Only the People Can Save the People: Constituent Power, Revolution, and Counterrevolution in Venezuela***

**(Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2018), pp. xix + 210, \$90.00, hb; \$25.95, pb.**

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Rhetoric is not the same as reality; legitimations are not the same as experiences. The former may shape the latter, but how, to what extent and with what consequences are empirical matters. The relation between them needs to be created and sustained and scholars need to examine its formation in detail. In a word, it needs to be ‘unpacked’. This is not accomplished here. The vast bulk of the exposition in this book is made up of references to writers and debates within critical social theory, mostly Latin American and European.

Donald V. Kingsbury’s *Only the People Can Save the People* concentrates attention on ‘constituent’ and ‘constituted’ power. The author addresses the sources and dynamics of this relation for ‘Bolivarian’ Venezuela, but unfortunately remains mostly on the rhetoric and legitimation side of the equation. Constituted power is more or less what we know as states and organisation: with established procedures, rules and enforcement capabilities. Constituent power is harder to pin down: at issue are social energies and egalitarian urges that break through from time to time in revolutionary moments, social movements or just uncontrolled collective action. For the author the breakthrough moment in Venezuela was the Caracazo of 1989, massive social protests that brought an end to four decades of liberal two-party democracy and ‘marked the emergence of a previously unrecognized or *unrecognizable* political subject ... *la turba*, the multitude, the masses’ (p. 55). The central point for Kingsbury is the presumed new consciousness emerging in these moments. ‘The revolution taking place in Venezuela since the Caracazo’, he writes, ‘has been fundamentally a question of the formation and persistence of modes of subjectivity opposed to the common sense imposed by late