

Book Review: *Because We are Human: Contesting US Support for Gender and Sexuality Human Rights Abroad*

Because We are Human: Contesting US Support for Gender and Sexuality Human Rights Abroad by Cynthia Burack. SUNY Press, 2018. ISBN 978-1-43847-0139. 294 pp., \$8.59 (US).

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Cynthia Burack's book *Because We Are Human: Contesting US Support For Gender And Sexuality Human Rights Abroad* (2018) is an essential contemporary book for scholars, students, and practitioners who address LGBTI rights and international affairs. Burack provides a unique normative political theory perspective on US foreign policy and sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI). Often unknown to the general public, US diplomats advocating for SOGI human rights globally and their work are meticulously investigated by Burack. Currently, the United States provides the Global Equality Fund, the single largest source of financial support for LGBTI civil society worldwide.¹ From Uganda to Chechnya, this fund offers critical support to local human rights activists carrying out the dangerous work of advocating for SOGI human rights in their countries. Burack demonstrates how the US has become the biggest global player for SOGI human rights. This is remarkable, given the continued contestation domestically in the United States for LGBTI equality. It is also notable in that Burack reveals how some LGBTI activist themselves, as well as groups on the political left side of the spectrum, criticize American support for SOGI human rights globally.

American Christian Evangelicals are known to censure US government support for LGBTI rights; this criticism from the right wing is commonly reported on in the news.² By contrast, critique of foreign aid from the left wing of the American political spectrum is often much more subtle and less analyzed. Burack addresses this gap and investigates the deep skepticism of international donor aid that dominates contemporary academic human rights literature.

Burack coins this camp as the "humanist academic left" (3). She analyzes how human rights international studies literature centers upon tropes of human rights as a "western concept" and upon debates of universalism versus cultural relativism.³ Rarely does a contemporary human rights book cover the endeavors of

1 US Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, *Global Equality Fund*, accessed January 24, 2020, <http://www.state.gov/globalequality/about/index.htm>.

2 Ongoing editorial column on "Uganda Kill the Gays Bill," *Huffington Post*, 2009–2020, <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/news/uganda-kill-the-gays-bill/>.

3 Mark Goodale and Sally Engel Merry, *The Practice Of Human Rights: Tracking Law Between the*

human rights diplomacy. Human rights practitioners and LGBTI advocates may take it for granted that individuals from the American left-wing political spectrum advocate for support of LGBTI civil society in places such Saudi Arabia or Pakistan, or other places where sexual minorities face the death penalty. However, Burack addresses the fact that many scholars and leaders from the humanist academic left reject universalisms, if and when these principals are perceived as usurping local beliefs.

In between the lines of her analysis, Burack uncovers the wide chasm between theorists of human rights and practitioners in the field. Critiques of the implementation of human rights are important for programmatic improvement. Burack provides a close analysis of what she terms the “internal” critique of SOGI human rights (159). She defines “internal” as scholars who are well disposed towards LGBTI equality and “generally concerned about the well-being of those who engage in same-sex sexual relations” (159). Mainly derived from the political left wing, these individuals and organizations have been the foundation for private philanthropic funding in the US and the center point for LGBTI-equality advocacy work. And yet, Burack highlights that people from within this internal part of the movement have become some of the most vocal critics of human rights international programs focused on SOGI.

International humanitarian aid is also heavily condemned from the right wing of the political spectrum. Burack provides a unique comparative analysis of these two opposite sides, juxtaposing how these conflicting political ideologies surprisingly converge ultimately to oppose SOGI human rights diplomacy. Burack demonstrates how conservatives decry American promotion of SOGI human rights as hypocritically perpetuating American immorality. It is challenged as a political calculation to solidify support of LGBTI people and as a form of US imperialism that forces people internationally to accept unwanted American gay rights norms. On the other side, Burack presents the left resistance to SOGI human rights work. She reveals how the progressive left denounces SOGI human rights diplomacy also as hypocritical, where US officials intervene in the domestic affairs of other countries with the potential result of perpetuating discrimination and oppression of LGBTI persons. The left also contends that SOGI human rights diplomacy is a political calculation intended to attract the support of LGBTI people and distract them from racism and the failures of the government to deliver other progressive goods. Finally, Burack presents how arguments from the left wing denounce SOGI human rights work as a mere excuse of US government officials to intervene in the internal affairs of other countries, with the real ulterior motive of enhancing US political and economic power (88). By clearly documenting these arguments side-by-side from the opposite ends of the political spectrum, Burack provides unique evidence for an unsettling conclusion: both sides of the aisle in

Global and the Local (Cambridge, UK/New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 7.

US politics ultimately exhibit similar skepticism of US international promotion of SOGI human rights. This evidence is both startling and important for reflection by practitioners of theorists of human rights diplomacy.

Burack astutely explores the tension between the theory and practice of global human rights work. At one point, she focuses on the word “intervention” from a human rights practitioners’ point of view versus an academic’s vantage point (159). The practitioner perceives intervention as programmatic: how to work with local human rights groups, how to develop a plan for implementation, and how to demonstrate programmatic sustainability. By contrast, the word “intervention” has an entirely different meaning in contemporary academic literature. Intervention conjures negative thinly veiled references to colonialism and imperialism in most human rights theoretical scholarship. The international development aid industry has been heavily criticized by international affairs scholars. Beyond the vocabulary, the production of international humanitarian aid is met with suspicion at best and with utter abhorrence in some journals and academic studies.⁴ Burack navigates this space brilliantly. She speaks to her academic peers and colleagues, while grounding her research in how theoretical critique potentially impacts foreign policy development related to SOGI rights.

Burack highlights a critically important weakness among many advocates, and the American public in general. That is, the misconception of “the State” as a big black box and monolithic presence. Many advocates conceptualize the government as only a handful of people at the top surrounding the president. Some do not know, or understand, how to advocate and work with diverse offices of the executive branch responsible for human rights and LGBTI concerns. And yet, there is a wide depth of work that the US government engages in concerning SOGI human rights. Burack adds to the developing scholarship that recognizes the critical work of insider government allies.⁵ She interviews key personnel within the Obama Administration, such as Ambassador Daniel Baer, who served as the State Department’s Deputy Assistant Secretary for the Bureau of Democracy and Human Rights and Labor and Ambassador to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. Ambassador Baer helped craft some of the first LGBTI foreign policy directives from the United States when Uganda proposed the death penalty for homosexual acts in 2009. Later, Ambassador Baer was a key official in drafting Secretary of State Clinton’s pivotal speech on International Human Rights Day in Geneva in 2011 when she proclaimed, “Gay rights are human rights and human rights are gay rights.”⁶ As an openly gay US am-

4 William Easterly, *The White Man's Burden: Why the West's Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done So Much Ill and So Little Good* (New York: Penguin Books, 2007).

5 Lee Ann Banaszak, *The Women's Movement inside and Outside the State* (Cambridge, UK/New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

6 Hillary Clinton, Address in Geneva on International Human Rights Day, December 6, 2011, <http://>

bassador, and insider ally, Ambassador Baer is an important example of a social movement actor who works towards LGBTI equality from within the state. More broadly in the human rights practitioner field, worldwide diplomats observe trials of political prisoners, deliver seed funding to LGBTI civil society, and provide emergency funding for LGBTI persons in danger.⁷ This work rarely makes the news or rises to the focal point of academic analysis. It is in part marred by the fact that governments are the biggest global human rights abusers. Nevertheless, most liberal democracies include human rights in their foreign policy pillars. This lack of awareness of the complexity of the vast federal government and work of diplomats abroad in support of SOGI human rights is a significant problem in the academic literature and in the advocacy community. This disconnect is one factor that hinders garnering support for SOGI human rights diplomacy.

The organization of the book is concise, clear, and highlights the most important issues in contemporary SOGI human rights diplomacy. The book gives the historic trajectory of SOGI human rights in US foreign policy. Burack begins her text in the 1990s, juxtaposing the Department of Defense's "Don't Ask Don't Tell" with the blossoming of LGBTI groups, including organizing of LGBTI federal employees and the first US government-sponsored projects to assist LGBT people in other countries. Burack deems 1999–2011 to be the early period of US government policy supporting LGBT rights. She bookends this period in 2011, as this is the year that President Obama released a memorandum for all heads of departments and agencies: "International Initiatives to Advance the Human Rights of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Persons."⁸ The book then turns its focus to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's leadership of the State Department, and specifically her remarks made in Geneva on International Human Rights Day.⁹ As a pivotal speech that marks the formal commencement of SOGI human rights in US foreign policy, and the basis for the book's title, this speech is also the target of much criticism and scrutiny in academic analysis. Burack provides a unique examination into how this speech converged the political left wing and right wing in subsequent criticism of the Clinton's policy change to address SOGI concerns internationally. Decrying hypocrisy from both sides, critics began condemning

translations.state.gov/st/english/texttrans/2011/12/20111206180616su0.4842885.html#ixzz3KP317fjN.

7 US Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, "Human Rights and Labor," accessed January 22, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/j/drl/>.

8 White House, "International Initiatives to Advance the Human Rights of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Persons," Presidential Memorandum—International Initiatives to Advance the Human Rights of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Persons. Memorandum For The Heads Of Executive Departments And Agencies," December 6, 2011, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/12/06/presidential-memorandum-international-initiatives-advance-human-rights-l>.

9 Clinton, Address in Geneva on International Human Rights Day.

this new policy before ambassadors and diplomats had even generated policies and programs to support local LGBTI equality work in foreign countries.

After addressing Clinton's speech, Burack then goes into the commitments and subsequent programming related to SOGI human rights work internationally. Beyond government official reports, there is very little research published on US policies and programs promoting SOGI human rights globally. Thus, this book presents a new and important clearinghouse of information for scholars interested in US government policy for SOGI human rights globally. Burack ends the book with an argument for advocates to be open to US government involvement in SOGI human rights and international affairs.

To conclude, this book is important for scholars and practitioners seeking to raise awareness of LGBTI rights in foreign affairs. While right-wing condemnation for SOGI human rights is well documented, it is rare for the academic literature to examine the skepticism that pervades the theoretical human rights literature. Both sides have played an unexpected role in eroding support for international human rights engagement. Upon reading this significant book, the reader is left with the chilling question: if the political right wing and the political left wing equally criticize SOGI human rights foreign policy, albeit for very different reasons, who in the American electorate remains to support international SOGI human rights engagement? What may be lost or is the net result of disengagement from SOGI human rights policies in international affairs? Raising these contemporary debates of cutting edge SOGI human rights diplomacy makes Burack's book an imperative contemporary analysis for researchers and scholars of international affairs.

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