

Are we just arguing over different iterations of teleology, whether the order of the universe the scientist needs to presume, the underlying mystery of meaning that phenomenology seeks to reveal in the mundane, or the awe and wonder of consciousness (individual or collective) that inspires mystic religionists (Heschel 1955:5–9; Kushner 1990:xv–xix)? All we know is that something about the pure analytics of social science leaves us turning to poetry both to frame the question and express the answer.

### References

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*The Degradation of the International Legal Order? The Rehabilitation of Law and the Possibility of Politics*. By Bill Bowring. New York: Routledge-Cavendish, 2008. Pp. 243. \$170.00 cloth; \$59.95 paper.

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This book provides a challenging and innovative outlook on human rights from the viewpoint of Russia; an interesting and refreshing perspective in an era apparently dominated by the triumph of Western capitalism. The orthodoxy of traditional Western-based notions of philosophy and law are tried and tested as the development of the Russian legal and political system is traced from Tsarist pre-Revolutionary times through 1917 on to the upheavals of the disintegration of the USSR in 1991 and beyond, to the present day. It is important to note that this book sets such developments against their sociocultural background as, from 1917 onward, the newly created USSR found a novel global position during the twentieth century. This book continues such analysis into the twenty-first century, as Russia, the successor-state to the former USSR, was likewise forced to discover a new world role from 1991 onward.

Various geopolitical themes, often contradictory, are explicated, such as the trend toward decolonialization contraposed with the increased realpolitik dependency of superpower satellites. This contradiction was a feature apparent on both sides of the Cold War. Bowring raises crucial questions such as: Could a Soviet republic

actually exercise its theoretical right to secede from the union? And could an American state do the same within its “democratic system?” Engaging with the Eastern side of the Cold War divide, events in Hungary in 1956 and in Czechoslovakia in 1968 as analyzed in this book illustrate the possible paradoxes of any putative Marxist theory of international law, and just how compatible Marx was with practice “on the ground” in the USSR post-1917 and post-1945. Present-day ongoing conflicts such as those currently being fought in Chechnya and Kurdistan have historical roots going back to the early twentieth century; the precipitate British withdrawal from Iraq in 1923, for example, and such historical background and context is fully explicated here.

Bowring also clearly explicates the international legal background of such political events, and the manner in which such events feed back into the development of human rights and international law. Earlier times of political conflict that led on to advances in the rights of the ordinary citizen, such as the French and American Revolutions of the eighteenth century, are integrated with the development of the political citizen of the twentieth century; Bowring explicates such developments from the unusual perspective of Leninist Russia in the 1920s. Readers will find considerable relevance for more recent conflicts such as that which erupted between Georgia and Russia in summer 2008. As the West faces often unexpected and unusual challenges to the hegemony it assumed it had won from 1991 onward, this book will prove a timely and important reference to those studying the legal, moral, and political background to such challenges.

The author describes how the end of the bipolar world brought not a peace dividend but increased international tension, often focused on the Middle East but encompassing nations from Afghanistan to the former Yugoslavia, right on Western Europe’s back doorstep. The political optimism of the early 1990s was replaced by a new pessimism as the world witnessed increased U.S. adventurism and new theaters of global conflict. Such developments are shown to have heightened international tensions and increased human rights violations even as individuals and national and international institutions have sought as never before to highlight and eradicate such violations through legal and political machinery and institutions. Yet as this book describes, even the UN has changed its colors to the point where some see the need to reclaim it to its original objectives. Kurdistan, Iraq, and Chechnya are all stark reminders of how far ideals and theory still lie from reality. As noted in this book, the Soviet Union was far from free of such contradictions, from its earliest days onward. The author also explores the role of European legal and human rights institutions such as the Council of Europe and the European Court of Human Rights during these conflicts.

The legal and philosophical underpinning of such ideals is fully explored in this book. Marxist philosophy is grounded in earlier thinkers, from the Greeks through key political philosophers such as Hegel and Habermas to Žižek and Derrida. Such theories are linked to the legal-philosophical contradictions inherent in many large world-states today, including the former Soviet Union, now Russia, but also Western Europe and the United States. For example, Bowring asks how minority groups can be afforded special rights if simultaneously all are equal before the law—a key debate now in the era of increased migration flows and international interdependence. As such legal debates transmit themselves across frontiers, the author explores the crucial question of whether legal systems can be “transplanted” from one sociocultural context to a different one, with different historical roots and experiences.

This concise yet comprehensive book has both theoretical and practical appeal. It will appeal to both political campaigners and postgraduate researchers and academics, from a wide range of backgrounds: legal, political, human rights, and modern history. It tackles a complex subject in a clear and accessible manner that will be of considerable relevance and interest to schools of both politics and law. It is a crucial addition to the library of any student and scholar who is concerned with political philosophy, the development of international law and human rights, and the manner in which the agendas of these vitally important issues has been appropriated and often distorted by both Left and Right.