Foreword

LORI ALLEN'S *The Rise and Fall of Human Rights* opens with a double-barreled epigraph. She first gives us the famous—and often misquoted—passage from the American abolitionist Frederick Douglass in which the world-historical catastrophe of American plantation slavery grounds a simple observation with monumental implications: that the physics of oppression can be countered only with an opposite and equal reaction, a struggle with "words or blows, or with both." These lines from Douglass have been used down through the decades as a reminder that structures of injustice do not just fade away; they must be confronted, witnessed, attacked, and if necessary burnt to the ground. Despite Douglass's careful inclusion of "words" as a potential tool of resistance, there can be no doubt that words alone will not make a sufficient "demand" on the ravages of power, as history has shown us time and time again. That it is Frederick Douglass from whom we learn this lesson and not, say, Karl Marx—whose theories of history, power, and conflict also lead to robust and, potentially, violent theories of action—is revealing. Like the victims of the Nazi regime, the generations of enslaved Africans—and the ideological and economic systems that justified such an abomination—have come to represent injustice itself, something absolute that does not admit of reasonable qualification. In other words, there are times, our troubled history teaches us, when the only thing left to do is fight and fight hard, when endurance of suffering is no longer noble but a form of complicity.

The second epigraph is from Hannah Arendt and, like the first, its import hangs over the book like a dark and ominous shadow. The legacy of Arendt's writings has troubled the life of human rights since the early postwar period, when human rights—as international law, as a form of politics, as a new transnational ethics—was deeply incipient, except for the coteries of international

lawyers and diplomats who labored away within the United Nations to establish the rudiments of what would become the international human rights system. In 1951, however, with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights still hot off the presses, Arendt published her masterwork on the origins of totalitarianism. In one of its thirteen chapters, she levels a devastating critique against the "rights of man" as the doctrine had evolved through the first half of the twentieth century. One could hardly find a moment in history in which a politics and ethics based on the principle of human dignity would be more starkly contradicted in practice by the horrors of imperialism, militarism, and genocide. So, with the killing fields of World War I and the Holocaust in full view, it is not surprising that Arendt would look with some philosophical suspicion on *any* assertion of human equality that was anchored in the deontological ether.

As a solution to this yawning gap, Arendt argued that the neo-Enlightenment conception of human rights was not merely "nonsense on stilts," as Jeremy Bentham once put it, but something much worse: a dangerous discursive shell game that takes the place of the hard, and historically rare, work through which political institutions create the social conditions in which rights-bearing and citizenship can have any meaning at all. The idea and necessity of a prior "right to have rights" have, for some, kept the critical light shining on the broader political and social contexts in which human rights have become, especially after the end of the Cold War, such a compelling, inspirational, and even hegemonic geoethical presence.

Allen's remarkable study of the ways in which human rights has transformed a much older conflict between Israel and Palestinians living in the West Bank is profoundly shaped by the two categories of insights with which she begins the book. Given that the Palestinians will not achieve some form of self-recognized emancipation without winning a struggle that they are still losing, and given that the concept of human rights as a factor in the conflict has risen among a stateless people whose ability to create a meaningful political community—and thus legitimately ground a "right to have rights"—is as restricted as the sealed and divisive borders that continue to trap Palestinians in a geopolitical cage, what then? Allen's book is an answer to these questions and is rooted in years of close ethnographic attention to the lives of people who ultimately cannot deny their powerlessness and choked politics and yet must still establish and enact community on the terms they are given.

They do so, as she shows us with keen feeling tempered by a social scientist's equanimity, by finding meaning and cultural creativity in the performance of

what Allen calls a "shared charade," the performance of the contested roles that have come to define the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in terms of human rights abuses, victims, perpetrators, activists, and institutions. A key to understanding the charade is the desire of many involved—the international donor community, the Palestinian Authority, opposition groups like Hamas—to look like a state. The examination of these cultural performances leads Allen onto an open, critical terrain on which human rights is only one among several key modes by which the conditions of domination are negotiated. Allen's book is a sobering reminder that the promises of human rights can appear to recede at the speed of light when they are taken seriously by those whose lived reality is defined by exclusion, deferred dreams, and what she calls the politics of "as if."

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