

BOOK REVIEWS

International Human Rights, Decolonisation and Globalisation: Becoming Human by Shelley Wright (London: Routledge, 2001) pages i–xiii, 1–274. Price £60.00 (hardcover). ISBN 0415259517.

[T]he nightmare of our encounter is not over
your overgrown offspring
swear by the western god of money and free enterprise
that they are doing their best for Africa ...
My son built your cities
What did your son do for me?¹

These words by Grace Akello introduce the last chapter of Shelley Wright's book. They hauntingly encapsulate some of the key issues dealt with in the book, such as colonialism, globalisation and human rights, as well as questions of identity, culture, history and even the importance of the written word. Indeed, Wright's broad and incisive coverage of difficult, contentious and compelling issues is remarkable.

The purpose of this book is to offer a critical analysis of some of the fundamental premises of international human rights. This analysis is justified because international human rights 'have developed into a powerful ideological device both for and against the peaceful resolution of disputes and the equitable division of political and economic power'.² The method of analysis is designed to unearth the history of international human rights by examining colonialism and the construction of the 'individual' and of 'history', as well as the development of international human rights law. The last part of the book applies this knowledge to particular problems, such as intellectual property, self-determination, violence and socio-economic rights, primarily through the prism of indigenous peoples' and women's perspectives. Throughout the book there is evidence of Wright's personal warmth, experience and, at times, impatience, which enhance the approach taken.

The arguments made by the author are strong and persuasive, showing her strength in conceptual reasoning and drawing on some of the ideas expressed in

¹ Grace Akello, 'Encounter', cited in Shelley Wright, *International Human Rights, Decolonisation and Globalisation: Becoming Human* (2002) 212.

² Wright, *International Human Rights*, above n 1, 12.

her other publications.³ Her stance on particular problems can also be surprising and revealing. For example, she asserts that

the formulation of basic social and economic needs as ‘rights’ similar to individual civil and political rights facilitated the submergence of women’s central role in their creation and provision [because] the liberal state became the paternal state with duties to protect women, children and the ‘less fortunate’ not as equal citizens but as beneficiaries or dependants.⁴

She also demonstrates the importance of the literary word in the retention and power of ‘culture’.⁵ Further, she shows how the processes of economic globalisation are partly a continuation of colonialism, though it would have been interesting to see her application of this idea to other forms of globalisation, such as cultural globalisation.

Her conclusion is that there are five major challenges to the legitimacy and acceptability of international human rights today. These are (in summary): its failure to address adequately European colonialism; its limited role in comparison to global capitalism; its reinforcement of a state-based international system and blind commitment to universalism; its lack of condemnation of all forms of violence; and its ineffective implementation. This conclusion is well argued and coherent. She also offers a challenge, as she notes that ‘those of us who are most certain about our own identities may be the least able to escape from this blindness [about assumptions of truth] or resistance [to alternative histories]’.⁶

The diversity and range of resource materials used in the book is extraordinary. My main difficulty, however, is that the structure of the argument is not always easy to follow, particularly as there are often no clear links between sections within a chapter. For example, there are no substantial justifications for including sections on Kant and Jefferson in chapter 2 (who are only intermittently referred to subsequently) or beginning the chapter on socio-economic rights by considering international criminal law (which may have been more appropriately placed in the previous chapter). In addition, there is insufficient clarification as to why Wright examines particular human rights, such as the right to freedom of expression, rather than minority or cultural rights.

³ See, eg, Hilary Charlesworth, Christine Chinkin and Shelley Wright, ‘Feminist Approaches to International Law’ (1991) 85 *American Journal of International Law* 613; Shelley Wright, ‘Economic Rights and Social Justice: A Feminist Analysis of Some International Human Rights Conventions’ (1992) 12 *Australian Yearbook of International Law* 241; Shelley Wright, ‘Human Rights and Women’s Rights’ (1993) 18 *Alternative Law Journal* 113; Shelley Wright, ‘The Individual in International Human Rights: Québec, Canada and the Nation-State’ (1995) 59 *Saskatchewan Law Review* 437; and Shelley Wright, ‘The New Economic Imperatives of Colonial Enterprise’ (2001) 6 *Asia Pacific Journal of Environmental Law* 89.

⁴ Wright, *International Human Rights*, above n 1, 75.

⁵ See generally, Wright, *International Human Rights*, above n 1, ch 5.

⁶ *Ibid* 226.

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Overall, this is a very good book by a fine scholar. It brings together some of the array of arguments made by feminist, post-colonial, indigenous, postmodern and critical scholars about the international legal system and applies them to some key issues for the 21st century. In doing so it perhaps offers a way out of the 'nightmare encounter' described by Grace Akello.

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