The Emergence of Human Rights Politics in the United States

Kenneth Cmiel

In the summer of 1996, the Nike Corporation was buffeted by claims that it mistreated its workers in Asian countries. This was part of a string of such complaints—all against corporations with headquarters in the United States, Canada, or western Europe but with work forces stretching around the globe. Nike responded by agreeing to sit down at the White House and negotiate international labor standards. Sitting at the negotiating table were representatives from Nike, other clothing manufacturers, the Clinton administration, and international labor unions. Also present were representatives from two human rights organizations: the Lawyers Committee for Human Rights and the Center for Human Rights of the Robert F. Kennedy Memorial Center. While the setting as a whole is worth an essay, I want here to draw your attention to the human rights groups. Why were representatives of the Lawyers Committee for Human Rights or the Kennedy center, without a dollar of their own capital in play and unelected by anyone in the whole sweet world, sitting at the table of what potentially were some of the most important international negotiations of the day?

The answer has to do with the emergence of a politics of human rights in the last third of the twentieth century. For the first time since the early 1900s, a set of private organizations has been founded to reshape global practices. And this international civil society is not only interested in the labor policies of corporations like Nike. Human rights claims now challenge the exclusive control of nations over immigration policy. They have been instrumental in reawakening the world to the continued practice of torture. They have been used to attack customs such as female circumcision. Human rights claims have contributed to the delegitimation of Communist East Europe, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's Iran, and South American military dictatorships. By shifting the focus from the sovereignty of the people to the rights of individuals "regardless of nationality," Saskia Sassen notes, human rights are becoming "a force

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that can undermine the exclusive authority of the state over its nationals,” contributing to the formation of a new international legal order.²

The history of this has not yet been written. In large part, this is because it does not fit the nation-state frame. Historians generally remain trained to and limited by the nation. Even historians hostile to the ideology of nationalism still usually work within the frame. Recent interest in “borders” has been especially useful in moving beyond some of these limitations, yet border studies do little to explain the rise of Amnesty International (AI), Human Rights Watch, or other transnational organizations. If border studies explore the mixes and blends resulting from the interplay of local cultures, the modern practice of human rights politics conjures up the swirl of information and image around the globe. Human rights claims weave in and out of nations, coursing through them but not simply a part of them. It is no surprise that metaphors of “circuits,” “networks,” or “global flows” are now commonly used for this sort of activity.³

Just as much as the transnational flow of capital, the new human rights politics are a part of what has come to be called “globalization.” And like transnational capital, human rights politics emerged during the 1970s. There are many stories still to be told about this—financial, ideological, political. Here I will examine just one strand: United States human rights activists, in tandem with partners around the world, devised ways to collect accurate accounts of some of the vilest behavior on earth that no one had bothered to document before. They invented ways to move this information to wherever activists had some chance to shame and pressure the perpetrators. Theirs was a politics of the global flow of key bits of fact.⁴

At the same time, some of these activists were realizing how the sight of a torture victim or starving child could rouse great sympathy. Human rights politics was a

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Communication: The Global Flow of Facts

Human rights has a long intellectual pedigree, yet the contemporary human rights movement only took off in the 1970s. Particularly crucial were the years 1973 to 1978. Most literature on the human rights activism of the decade focuses on the foreign policy of the Jimmy Carter administration. But whatever the strengths and inconsistencies of Carter’s initiatives, they were not as important for the long term as the emergence of new sources of funding for human rights work or the growth of such nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) as Amnesty International or Human Rights Watch. Nor were they as important for the long term as the human rights legislation passed by Congress before Carter became president. The work of Congress
and the NGOs guaranteed that human rights would be a part of the discussion not only in the seventies, but for the rest of the twentieth century.\(^5\)

In the years just prior to the Carter presidency, there was a phenomenal burst of human rights activism in the United States. Signal events contributed: the 1973 military coup in Chile, the publication of Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn's massive *Gulag Archipelago* a few months later, the Helsinki Accords in 1975. But more generally, as the Vietnam War wound down, human rights emerged as a new way to approach world politics.\(^6\)

The 1970s activism mostly attacked state-sponsored repression. It was the classic civil and political rights that mattered: freedom of expression, fair trials, protection from torture, the rights to emigrate or peacefully organize. Many human rights activists understood economic and social security rights to be important, but most, nonetheless, made basic civil rights the priority. But by making these concerns global rather than merely domestic, the 1970s human rights perspective etched a sharp alternative to competing ideas about international affairs. It dismissed as morally bankrupt the Cold War theories of containment that drew the line between anti-communist friends and Communist foes. It also, especially between 1973 and 1976, presented a sharp and explicit challenge to the cynical *realpolitik* of Richard M. Nixon's and Henry A. Kissinger's détente. Exposing the death squads of Latin American military dictatorships or the viciousness of *savak*, the Shah of Iran's secret police, was as important to human rights activists as stories of Communist oppression.

Dozens of new groups started up in the United States, and the few human rights organizations that already existed grew exponentially. Established foundations and church groups began devoting attention to the topic. The number of courses on the subject in colleges and law schools jumped. Reporters, both print and electronic, became more intrigued with the story. All this happened in the 1970s, the point when, it is often argued, reform impulses dissipated in American life. If the explosion of feminist activism is one refutation of that claim, and the increased interest in the environment and gay rights two more, the burst of human rights activity supplies still a fourth. All suggest that the 1970s should be treated neither as a moment of flagging liberal energy nor as a simple adjunct to the sixties but as a moment of more basic political restructuring.

Amnesty International, no doubt the most famous human rights organization, provides an example. It was founded in London in 1961. The United States section, Amnesty International USA (AIUSA), was organized four years later. The organization had its successes, yet it lived a precarious life at first. The international organization almost collapsed in 1967, thanks to internal bickering. Three years later the United States section almost folded, deep in debt. But the next decade told a very different story.

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Between 1970 and 1976, the number of dues-paying members in the United States went from 6,000 to 35,000. AIUSA had one paid, half-time staff member in 1970. The organization, such as it was, was run by a volunteer board of directors. A decade later, however, there were fourteen paid staffers with offices in New York City, San Francisco, California, Chicago, Illinois, Colorado, and Washington, D.C. The international organization grew similarly in those years. In 1977, it was awarded the Nobel peace prize.7

Amnesty International was just one of more than two hundred groups working on human rights in the United States by the end of the seventies. The Lawyers Committee for Human Rights, in 1997 negotiating with Nike at the White House, dates itself to 1975. Human Rights Watch, now arguably the most important human rights NGO, started in 1978. Human Rights Internet dates from 1976; the Ford Foundation began funding human rights work in 1973. The list could go on. There were a handful of human rights lobbying groups in Washington in the early seventies. By the end of the decade there were over fifty.8

Congress was also getting interested. Such House liberals as Democrats Don Fraser of Minnesota and Tom Harkin of Iowa led the way. Fraser chaired the first congressional hearings on the topic of human rights in 1973. More followed. But if key liberals were at the center, there emerged an ideologically eclectic group willing to support one human rights initiative or another. Deeply conservative Republicans, such as John Ashbrook of Ohio, and anticomunist Democrats, such as Henry “Scoop” Jackson of Washington, could also be counted on as allies. Between 1974 and 1976, Congress passed legislation tying foreign aid, both military and economic, to human rights performance. Particularly important were several amendments that Harkin introduced in 1975 and 1976. In them, Congress agreed to stop economic assistance to any country that routinely violated certain human rights and to oblige United States representatives to the Inter-American Development Bank and the African Development Fund to vote down any loans to regimes guilty of gross violations of human rights. (This was later extended to World Bank loans.) Also important was the Jackson-Vanik Amendment (1974) tying most-favored-nation trade status to respect for the right to emigrate. All this legislation remains in force today.9

Human rights was preeminently a politics of the information age. That this politics worked by amassing knowledge of human rights abuses was explicit from the start. One of the suggestions Martin Ennals, the international secretary of Amnesty International, made to Fraser’s House committee during the very first congressional hearings on human rights in 1973 was that Congress work for “the maximum exchange

8 For the number of human rights groups, see Human Rights Internet, North American Human Rights Directory, comp. Laurie S. Wiseberg and Harry M. Scohle (Garrett Park, Md., 1980); for lobbying groups, see Vogelgesang, American Dream, Global Nightmare, 144–45.
of information” with all human rights NGOs. Academic activists started analyzing better and worse methods of human rights “fact-finding.” Amnesty International’s bylaws put it succinctly: “Information is the core of the work of the movement.”

Indeed, between 1965 and 1980 the sheer quantity of information available on human rights abuses around the world rose dramatically. Fact-finding missions, academic studies, and congressional hearings all poured out. There were books on the subject, annual reports, and special reports. One university librarian, writing in 1978, wondered if anyone could keep up. The field, he thought, was “in a state of explosion, not just explosive growth, but explosion.”

NGOs were important but not alone. The first publication of a congressional hearing on human rights came in 1974. In the next two years, the Government Printing Office issued reports on human rights abuses in South Korea, Iran, Haiti, India, the Philippines, Africa, Central America, North Korea, Uruguay, Paraguay, and Chile—the cumulative results of numerous different congressional hearings. When Congress passed legislation tying foreign aid and trade status to human rights performance, State Department officials in countries receiving United States economic or military aid were required to report back to Washington on local human rights situations. After Henry Kissinger initially tried to circumvent the procedure, Congress in 1976 wrote into law a requirement that the reports had to be published. Two years later, the first published State Department report on human rights around the world appeared. The reports, at first, were not uniformly reliable. Certain members of Congress were very angry about the reports’ failure to confront directly Central American horrors. Robert Bernstein, founder of Human Rights Watch, has said that the Americas Watch branch was founded in 1981 to correct “all the lies” of the early State Department reports. Over the years, however, the reports have gained credibility. To the present day, each time this annual report appears it is widely discussed in the media, not only in the United States but all over the world.

The information revolution also included new publications. The Index on Censor-

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Producing all this information depended upon the creation of transnational networks. In the early 1960s, Peter Benenson, Amnesty International’s founder, had discovered the importance of the fact-finding mission, heading off to a distant country to talk with sympathetic locals about a particular human rights situation and returning to the safety of London to write up and distribute the information. In 1969, Ivan Morris, professor of Japanese history at Columbia University and one of the most important early AIUSA activists, became the first United States member to go on such a mission. While he was refused entry to Taiwan, Morris did get into South Korea, where he discreetly talked to journalists, lawyers, and politicians about the curbs on movement and expression in the country. His findings went to London, part of the organization’s growing body of research. As AI became wealthier during the seventies, such missions became more frequent. By the last half of the decade, more than thirty of these missions took place each year. AIUSA members often participated.

Just as important was AI’s research department in London. Practically nonexistent until the very end of the sixties, in the next decade it became a key source of new information. By 1976 it had a staff of thirteen. As AI’s reputation grew, so did its ability to gather information. Letters came in from family members of prisoners, from lawyers, and even occasionally from prisoners who managed to smuggle them out of jail. Clergy from around the world regularly reported abuse. The London researchers scoured newspapers from every continent and sought out anyone passing through London who might have knowledge from remote areas of the globe. By the middle of the decade, Amnesty International was known as having perhaps some of the most reliable information about human rights in the world.

Information was immediately passed to AI activists in the United States. By 1974, phone calls, letters, and memos routinely crisscrossed the ocean. The headquarters of AIUSA then sent information to local chapters. In 1973, the international organization started commercially publishing its annual reports, which included discussions of the human rights situation in countries around the world. The same year, as

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part of a special campaign, the organization published its influential *Report on Torture*, chronicling this particular horror around the globe.\textsuperscript{15}

The new information networks brought activists into contact across borders, spurring still more activism. In 1971, the International League for Human Rights became the first organization in the West to establish ongoing ties with a human rights group behind the Iron Curtain. The league agreed to affiliate with the Moscow Human Rights Committee, whose most famous member was the dissident physicist Andrei Sakharov. The league lobbied in the West for the group. Weekly phone calls were instituted, keeping both sides abreast of the latest news. Similarly, when Andrei Tverdokhlebov, another Russian physicist, explored founding an Amnesty International group in Moscow in 1973, he received much of his information from the Madison Avenue A\textsc{iusa} group in New York City. The first contact came when the United States group simply telephoned Tverdokhlebov. And the Ford Foundation, funding South American academics who had lost their jobs under the military dictatorships, worked almost entirely through private international contacts. The foundation used its network of caseworkers to identify possible grant recipients around the globe. In this way it not only funded some of the most articulate opponents of military rule in Chile and Argentina; the foundation also contributed to the growing body of research documenting the assault on civil liberties in those nations.\textsuperscript{16}

By the middle of the seventies, the information revolution on human rights was in full swing and the network of activists increasingly agile. Communication circuits that had not existed ten years before were confidently pushing politically charged information around the globe. NGO activists also had a growing number of allies among politicians, who were more likely to receive media attention. In 1975, when several members of the House of Representatives complained about Georgetown University’s decision to give an honorary degree to the shah of Iran’s sister, they used Amnesty International research to make their case.\textsuperscript{17}

The networks could also work in more discreet ways. In the spring of 1976, Stephanie Grant of the London A\textsc{iusa} office received a quiet visit from Ronald Palmer, the deputy coordinator for human rights in the State Department. Palmer explained that Kissinger was managing to circumvent Congress’s human rights legislation via a strategy of benign neglect. Congress had given the State Department the job of reporting on human rights abuses, but Kissinger was uninterested, and very little information was being passed from United States embassies to Palmer’s office. The best way to proceed, Palmer argued, was to have Amnesty International develop questions based on its research and then hand them to sympathetic members of


\textsuperscript{17} Congressmen Don Edwards, Ron Dellums, Michael Harrington, and Pete Stark, press release, May 16, 1975, folder 17, box 73, A\textsc{iusa} New York Office Papers.
Congress. Although the State Department could ignore any question from Al, by law it had to answer all congressional inquiries within two days. If Al fed the information to the right members of Congress, they could demand an answer from the State Department, which in turn would have to alert Palmer’s office to the inquiry. This London discussion was sent on to AUSA in a confidential memo, along with the advice to implement Palmer’s suggestions.18

This incident was an excellent example of how the new global human rights network was supposed to work. An American government official spoke in Great Britain to a representative of a transnational organization who then relayed that conversation back to American activists inside the United States. The relevant information about suspected human rights abuses was gathered in London from worldwide sources, then passed on to the United States where activists gave it to the legislative branch to affect the foreign policy of the executive branch. Concern expressed by the State Department would, it was hoped, prod the offending nation, usually on another continent, into changing its behavior. Activists, information, and pressure all bounced across the globe. Ten years before, such networks simply did not exist.

None of this, however, meant that the nation-state was dying, as some overenthusiastic writers on globalization have suggested. For many activists in the United States, a commitment to human rights was a form of patriotism, reaffirming the best ideals of the American nation. When Fraser and 104 other members of Congress sent a letter to Kissinger urging him to pay more heed to gross violations of human rights in his foreign policy calculations, they cited “the traditional commitment of the American people to promote human rights.” Such sentiments were heard often.19

Other activists, mostly younger veterans of the antiwar movement, were decidedly wary of nationalist sentiment. Yet they too could betray “national” proclivities despite themselves. AUSA fought with the parent organization over a number of issues during the decade. The United States section, at least until 1975, was very skeptical of the London office’s criticisms of Israel. United States activists were incensed that London wanted the organization to keep its distance from the Ford Foundation. And late in the decade, the Americans pushed hard (and unsuccessfully) to expand Amnesty International’s mission to cover the persecution of homosexuals. All these were seen by London as typically American interests.20

20 For disputes over Israel, see “Minutes of the Board of Directors,” March 7, 1970, folder 7, box 2, AUSA New York Office Papers; “Minutes of the Amnesty International of the USA [Board of Directors],” May 4, 1970, ibid.; and “Board of Directors Minutes,” April 17, June 12, 1975, Board of Directors—Minutes File, box 4, Morris Papers. For disputes about the Ford Foundation, see Al—Fundraising Folder, box 5, Morris Papers. For disputes about gay rights, see “Homosexuals” Folder, box 7, Barbara Sproul Papers (Nolan Library Archives, University of Colorado).
Human rights activists never dreamt they were undermining the nation-state. Rather, they were building international research and activist networks that would be a counterweight to entrenched defenders of national sovereignty. Human rights talk and national interest discourse had to learn to jostle with each other.21

**Tactics: A Postpopulist Reform**

Yet what good was all this information? One thing was certain: As the decade wore on, more and more outsiders were getting interested in it. And as this happened, activists started to ponder the implications for reform politics, seeing that change could happen by directly pressuring elites. There was no need for mass mobilization. Human rights activists were inventing a postpopulist reform style tailor made for the information age.

That was not the initial assumption. Many 1970s human rights activists had worked in traditions that assumed mass mobilization was a critical part of protest and reform. Politicians such as Don Fraser were long-time supporters of organized labor, and most of the younger activists had been active in earlier reform. David Hawk, for example, the executive director of AIUSA in the mid-seventies, registered voters in the South during the civil rights movement, organized campus antiwar activities around the country, and in 1969 became one of the co-founders and principal organizers of the Vietnam Moratorium Committee. He had helped organize some of the largest protests of the antiwar movement. Nearly all of the 1970s AIUSA staff had done antiwar and civil rights work. Such activists brought their grass-roots organizing talents to human rights. AIUSA’s 1970 decision to throw energy into organizing local groups around the country seemed a natural outgrowth of the antiwar movement. Indeed, especially in the first years, the work felt and looked like earlier antiwar organizing. Young AI staffers, paid a pittance and scruffily dressed, crossed the country with beat-up cars and shoestring budgets to recruit principally on college campuses. The passion bore fruit. Between 1970 and 1976, the number of local chapters in the country shot from two to over one hundred.22

There was a reason for this activity. The original center of Amnesty International activism had been letter writing, a tactic that put a premium on mass membership. Every local AI group was supposed to generate letters in support of its own prisoner of conscience. The system worked like this: The international organization assigned a particular prisoner to a local group made up of ten to twenty-five members. The group then adopted that prisoner. (The local groups were known as “adoption groups.”) Then the group wrote letters to the prisoners themselves, to their jailers, to ministers of justice, to heads of government, to Western reporters and politicians. The missives politely but firmly inquired into the detention of a prisoner of con-

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21 For an excellent analysis of this jostling in Western Europe, see Soysal, *Limits of Citizenship*.

science and asked for his or her release. If the letters did no good one month, more were sent the next. Thousands of letters were mailed to every corner of the globe.

Prisoners were freed this way. It was a strategy that worked, and it was premised on large numbers. The more letters a government received, the more likely it would be to sit up and take notice. The more members, the more letters. Grass-roots organizing was important in those years because local chapter members did work central to the organization.

Yet the success of the movement’s information revolution put new and different demands on the AI staff. All the human rights organizations, Amnesty International included, found themselves becoming lobbyists, trying to influence politicians and the press. As the decade wore on, journalists called more often, looking for reliable facts on some pattern of abuse in some distant nation. And if a human rights catastrophe erupted somewhere, media and politicians now looked to AI for the most up-to-the-minute information. Such information had to be gathered.23

An especially important turning point in the United States was the 1975–1976 human rights legislation. It forced Washington to take human rights information seriously. AI opened a Washington office in 1976. Within a year it was a whirlwind of activity. Staff monitored hearings and consulted with members of Congress and State Department officials. They briefed sympathetic business and religious leaders who were about to meet with ambassadors of countries with brutal human rights records. Even conservative members of Congress were now meeting with Amnesty International. A Washington lawyer and AIUSA board member could speak of the “excellent new access to the State Department.” In 1976, Henry Kissinger, a strong foe of human rights initiatives, had at least to give public lip service to the issue, urging the Chilean military dictatorship to mend its ways. He even met with AI activists to discuss the issue.24

It was the quantity and quality of the facts gathered that mattered. Human rights NGOs collected troubling information that could be trusted and could not be ignored. In 1976, the Washington Post observed that the human rights legislation would probably not have passed except for “the large volume of detailed information that has become available to American lawmakers about just how badly many of Washington’s client states are abusing their own citizens.” John Salzberg, staff consultant on human rights to the House of Representatives, found the human rights NGOs to be the most credible witnesses they had, better than missionaries, exiled nationals, pro-and antipartisans, and State Department officials. Salzberg singled out Amnesty International, the International Commission of Jurists, and the International League for Human Rights as noteworthy contributors to congressional investigations.25

On their end, activists were discovering that they could better a human rights sit-
uation by talking with politicians in Washington. Here, too, Harkin’s legislation proved critical. Suddenly, the United States might veto a World Bank loan because of a bad human rights record. It might reduce or withhold military aid. Already in 1977, eighteen different countries were adversely affected by the new legislation. In 1978, Argentina lost all its military aid. Economically dependent countries had to take seriously Washington’s talk about human rights.26

And it meant that a human rights activist might help free a political prisoner on the other side of the world by talking to a member of Congress in Washington. This became known as “third-party influence.” A human rights organization could help a victim in Asia, for example, by influencing a “third party,” the government of the United States. Human rights NGOs were discovering this tactic in 1975–1976. It shifted considerable attention to Washington. By the end of 1976, AIUSA was in regular contact with forty to fifty members of Congress.27

Third-party influence was a game for insiders, working on a very different plane from the mass letter writing of Amnesty International. It worked by lobbying elites instead of harassing tyrants. It depended upon a few, very well informed activists winning entrée to the corridors of power (in contrast to huge numbers of concerned citizens dunning dictators from afar). Those were very different tactics. And, by the middle of the decade, they were coming into conflict.

By 1976, there was talk of restiveness in the adoption groups. The London office, overworked and understaffed, could not certify enough prisoners of conscience for the local groups to adopt. Other demands on the staffers’ time were getting in the way. New groups, eager to get going, had to wait weeks before they were assigned a prisoner of conscience. They became “extremely frustrated and I think rightfully so,” claimed the membership director of AIUSA. By 1976, the strategy of passing information to influential officials was colliding with the need to feed information to local adoption groups. The elite-influencing AI had to be reconciled with the grass-roots AI.28

Between 1975 and 1977, both the international AI and the AIUSA engaged in an ongoing discussion of the conflicting information demands on the organization. Some board members in the United States argued that all resources should be used to support local letter-writing groups and that it was wrong to slight the grassroots base of the organization. The research department in London had to find more prisoners of conscience. Letter writing, these activists asserted, was the core of Amnesty International.29

Others, however, saw this as shortsighted. AI was growing, and the function of the groups had to change. Martin Ennals announced that local adoption groups were only one dimension of AI, a statement that appalled people on the other side of the issue. Yet Ennals had his supporters. It was important to realize, one AIUSA board

28 Lynne Shatzkin Coffin to Morris, Nov. 18, 1975, Correspondence Folder, box 4, Morris Papers.
member asserted, that Amnesty International did other things than work for individual prisoners. There were the campaigns against torture and the death penalty, general publicity about human rights, and now lobbying Congress. Local groups did not always understand that, but the staff and board had to make members see that “AI has become a movement for human rights and not just an ‘adoption’ agency.”

No AI leaders, either board or staff, thought that the local adoption groups were expendable. The discussions of the mid-seventies were full of practical suggestions on how to balance the two sides. Disagreements were about tactics and emphasis. But if AI had to discuss how to mediate its elite and grass-roots constituencies, other human rights organizations were learning that a large mass base was simply unnecessary. The ability to influence elites, a fresh approach in the mid-1970s, meant that networks of activists could do the work themselves. I do not suppose it is surprising that something called the Lawyers Committee for Human Rights never tried to build a mass base. Yet such a decision was common even for organizations that were not simply a gagle of attorneys. Human Rights Watch, first founded in the late seventies, has never had an activist mass base or been particularly interested in organizing mass demonstrations. The same can be said for the Human Rights Internet, first formed in 1976, the Freedom House, the Jacob Blaustein Institute for the Advancement of Human Rights, the International Commission of Jurists, and the International League for Human Rights. The fact that so many of these organizations are well known to human rights activists but remain generally unknown to people outside the community is itself a testament to the postpopulist nature of the movement.

How could such organizations survive? That answer, too, comes back to the mid-seventies. As human rights activists were discovering the possibilities of third-party influence, they were also finding new ways to raise money. These new sources of fund raising also helped liberate human rights organizations from the need for a large, active membership base.

In 1970 the AIUSA section was broke. Four years later, however, it discovered the beauties of direct-mail fund raising. It was a board member, Whitney Ellsworth, who convinced the organization of its value. Ellsworth, the publisher of the New York Review of Books, was unique on a board of mostly academics and lawyers—he had business acumen. The first mailing went out in December 1973 with lists bought from the Southern Poverty Law Center, the American Civil Liberties Union, Ralph Nader, and the United Farm Workers of America, as well as from such magazines as the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, the Progressive, and Foreign Policy. In the next years, the program was fine tuned, with stunning results. In 1974, AIUSA’s budget was $140,000. Six years later, it was $2,000,000, making AIUSA the richest section in the world. Almost all of this money came from direct-mail solicitations.

Direct mail cut costs dramatically by restricting delivery of the solicitation to

30 Sproul to Weissbrodt and Morris, Sept. 13, 1975, ibid.
pre-selected audience. You did not send to everyone, just to those likely to respond favorably. And you could tailor the message to appeal precisely to the interests and emotions of the targeted group. The discovery of direct-mail fund raising changed AI's financial relationship to its membership. By 1977, AIUSA was substantially funded by social workers, doctors, lawyers, academics, and people in business who, for the most part, never went to an Amnesty International meeting, never wrote a letter for the organization, and never had to gather in a public forum to express support. Each simply wrote a check at home.

While AI pioneered direct-mail fund raising in the field of human rights, a few other groups followed. Direct mail turned into one of the most successful fund-raising mechanisms of the 1970s and 1980s. Yet human rights groups without the high profile of Amnesty International found another way to raise money without a mass base. The small but wealthy universe of philanthropic foundations was becoming more and more receptive to human rights projects. Many small, family foundations were starting to finance human rights in the early seventies. As Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink have pointed out, it was in 1975 that "human rights" first became an entry in The Foundation Grants Index. The Ford Foundation began thinking seriously about the issue in the aftermath of the Chilean coup in the fall of 1973, part of its own drift to a new sort of liberalism under McGeorge Bundy. Two years later, it decided to give a half million dollars to human rights causes. Within a couple of years, the Rockefeller Foundation also was supporting human rights work. By the end of the decade, foundations were giving hundreds of thousands of dollars to support human rights work, a number that jumped to $18 million by the end of the next decade. In 1980, the International League for Human Rights had grants from twenty-one separate philanthropic foundations. As with direct mail, foundation support allowed human rights groups to grow without large, grass-roots organizing. Fund raising meant convincing foundation officials instead of collecting dues from members.32

The competing views about how human rights activism should proceed engendered different member relationships to the organization. Local Amnesty International adoption groups, at least the good ones, almost always were in contact with the prisoner and his or her family. Details about the prisoner of conscience became part of the group's accumulated information base. It was a very personal, textured sort of knowledge, including life history, religious affiliation, political sensibilities, and family deprivation. There were, in the best groups, relationships established with the prisoners' families, especially spouses. (I once took part in a debate about whether it was appropriate to send cosmetics to the wife of a prisoner of conscience.

When we wrote asking if she needed anything, she asked for makeup.) Direct mail, however, while it also established a mass membership, led to no personal contact with prisoners or their families. Obligation stopped when the check was written.

No doubt some will be dismayed by the general lack of concern for an active grassroots base. Still, one should not forget the sense of urgency felt in the mid-1970s. It was common to hear in those years that we were in a “global human rights crisis,” that there was a “worldwide growing abuse of human rights.” Literally thousands of people, activists knew, were being detained, tortured, and murdered in Chile, Brazil, Argentina, and Uruguay. Very credible reports of stupendous horrors in those places had reached the desks of activists. Meanwhile the Soviet Union was digging in against Jews and dissidents; its Eastern European allies were following suit. There were massacres of Hutus in Burundi (1972) and a true butcher ruling Cambodia (1975–1979). One of the United States’ staunchest allies, the shah of Iran, had one of the nastiest security forces in the world. South Korea and the Philippines, other allies, had recently stripped citizens of civil and political rights they formerly held. With so much brutality encircling the globe, it was thought, whatever tactic might work should be tried. If talking to a member of Congress or a State Department official could save somebody’s life, it seemed ludicrous to pass up a chance to mitigate the suffering in the name of tactical purity.

Human rights groups were not the only activists to use research to influence media and policy elites. Establishment environmental groups developed the same tactics, making alliances with ecologists in universities and politicians in Washington. And they were also doing direct-mail fund raising. Similarly, George McGovern’s direct-mail fund raising was an important source of money for his 1972 campaign for the presidency. Nor was the turn only a liberal one. Richard Viguerie, the conservative activist, pioneered direct-mail fund raising for conservative causes between 1972 and 1976, the same moment Amnesty International did. And the new group of think tanks emerging in Washington during the seventies mostly had a conservative tint. As David Ricci has noted, think tanks such as the Heritage Foundation, founded in 1973, were created to organize and push huge piles of information to relevant places on Capitol Hill. The human rights community was not alone. In the era of power/knowledge, all sides were playing the game. Information activism was a growth industry during the 1970s.34

33 Donald Fraser, “Freedom and Foreign Policy,” Foreign Policy, 26 (Spring 1977), 140.

Aura: Inventing Icons/Managing Images

If ours is the era of the information superhighway, it is also, we often hear, the “age of the image in all of its complexity.” We live with television, the sound bite, photo-ops, video culture, infotainment. Politics, we are told, is turning into a battle of images, increasingly remote from the “real world.” Much of this culture was emerg-
ing in the seventies. In 1976, the popular film *Network* tackled the sensational blur of news and entertainment. What did the new human rights activism have to do with all of this? How do we square its dense informational politics with the drift toward such an image-driven public life?35

Image and information politics were not incompatible. Just as the transnational flow of fact did not imply a substantial weakening of the nation, so too the documentary impulse existed side by side with a heightened respect for a culture of images. Human rights activists during the 1970s pioneered a new style of reform politics that succeeded by combining thick rivers of fact to influence elites, direct-mail and foundation money to keep going, and media savvy to appeal broadly.

It was during the seventies that the AI logo, the candle and flame wrapped in barbed wire, became a recognizable icon in the United States. As the human rights community moved away from the politics of grass-roots organizing and mass demonstrations, it learned how to purchase public support through icons and mass media. Human rights campaigns might not have been populist, but they were, in their own way, popular.

Amnesty International was the important pioneer here. More than any other organization in the United States, AIUSA dedicated itself to making the notion of human rights well known. One thing it had was celebrities—not megastars but entertainers who still had drawing power and were attractive to the organization’s target audience. The folk singer Joan Baez was one. For much of the decade she was very active in the West Coast branch of AIUSA, working hard for the organization and willing to use her fame for the cause. Baez was one of a number of celebrities who made promotional tapes to be played at local meetings and as a public service message on television or radio. Baez’s concerts for AI brought in money and spread the word. And when she talked about Amnesty International on the *Tonight Show* in 1973, it was duly reported as a coup.36

Public service announcements and concerts by such celebrities as Baez did not spread information about specific cases except incidentally. Their main purpose was to advertise the cause of human rights as something to care about and the organization Amnesty International as an important institution. By 1974, this turn was becoming more explicit. To push to the next stage, one organizer argued, AI needed more than “direct mail appeals, word-of-mouth, occasional articles in national publications.” It had to develop all the “media tools” that could “inform the public about issues of human freedom and bring more people into its efforts to free political prisoners.” In 1974 AIUSA started advertising T-shirts carrying the Amnesty International logo and the caption, “Torture is a Curable Disease.” By then it was making stickers with the AI logo, pens with the logo, and even return address labels with the logo that could

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be passed out to members and donors. Ads for Amnesty International turned up in the New Republic, the Progressive, and Ramparts, three liberal and left magazines. The cartoonist Jules Feiffer drew some of these advertisements. The use of well-known artists became a stock-in-trade. In 1976, AUSA began its “Artists for Amnesty” campaign. Artists such as Alexander Calder, David Hockney, and Botero donated artwork with a human rights theme that could be sold to raise money for AI. It would also, activists knew, reap good public relations.37

In 1974 some inside the organization still worried about the trend. When two Madison Avenue ad executives, both active AI members, proposed creating a “modest, in-house agency” to oversee all advertising and promotional work, not everyone was convinced. The two presented ideas, and incredibly slick ideas, about a wealth of products—stationery, radio and television spots, press kits, print media advertising campaigns, connections to the popular music business, new “corporate” logos, even AI lapel pins and Christmas cards. Yet the whole package was too smooth for some of the board. One of the most energetic board members, Barbara Sproul, a professor at Hunter College, thought that such “professional looking posters” would turn people off. “I would rather people thought we were not a high-powered group but just a band of ordinary citizens.” The board rejected the proposal, yet Sproul’s victory was short lived. For most of the board members, the key objection was cost, not content. One month later, the board created a new publicity committee to coordinate all news releases, television appearances, advertising, and promotion. It was overseen by Norman Schorr, himself the president of a New York City public relations firm.38

By 1976 both AUSA and the international organization were actively selling the image of Amnesty International and human rights. The parent organization decided to mount a two-year “international promotion campaign.” A European public relations expert was hired to run it. Leonard Bernstein agreed to give a concert for the cause and donate all radio, television, and record rights from the performance to AI. “It has been decided to lift AI to the next level,” the AUSA board was told. The campaign would not principally discuss specific cases of prisoners of conscience but rather introduce the organization to the world: “The basic idea is to promote the aims and ambitions of AI.” Hawk, AUSA’s executive director, listed “visibility” as the leading goal for the organization in 1977. (Influencing elites was second. Grass-roots membership was third.) Increasing visibility included such strategies as introducing the term “prisoner of conscience” to the American public, making more people recognize the AI logo, and persuading electronic media to give the same attention to AI activities as the print media did.39

Amnesty International was more assertive about image building than any other human rights group of the time, but it was not alone in spreading the general message. Politicians who talked about the issue not only reported on specific cases but also raised awareness. Reporters who picked up the issue did so as well. Throughout the decade, even before Carter became president, there was growing media interest. High-profile events were reported through a human rights lens: the 1972 Soviet decision to make emigration much harder for Jews; Augusto Pinochet’s 1973 coup in Chile; the Helsinki Accords of 1975; and President Gerald R. Ford’s 1975 decision not to meet with Solzhenitsyn after he was expelled from the Soviet Union.

All this contributed to public awareness. In 1968 human rights might have been a noble phrase, but it was not yet a politics that the public recognized. Ten years later it was. The NGOs were maturing; the information networks were in place; important legislation had been passed. And the idea of human rights was developing a warm public image. Survey researchers in 1977 discovered that there was a strong and visceral positive reaction to the mention of “human rights.” Pat Caddell, the pollster for Jimmy Carter, found focus groups overwhelmingly in support of Carter’s discussions of human rights, irrespective of political party. Even when they did not like Carter they liked his human rights talk. Other independent polling confirmed this. “Human rights is suddenly chic,” noted Roberta Cohen of the International League for Human Rights. “For years we were preachers, idealists or busybodies,” she added, “and now we are respectable.”

The cumulative result of the new human rights talk, in all its manifestations, was that the very phrase “human rights” developed an aura around it. It was something to be taken seriously. That did not mean that everyone knew exactly what the term meant. “Human rights,” in point of fact, is a remarkably pliable term, perhaps the ultimate empty signifier. It can mean remarkably different things to different people. While it conjured up civil and political freedom in most 1970s United States human rights organizations, a unified and articulate Third World bloc in the United Nations was at that time deriding such concerns, arguing instead that economic rights, a non-racist environment, and self-determination were the fundamental human rights. Even within the United States human rights community there were a number of sharp fights about particulars, including capital punishment and lesbian and gay rights. What was important enough to be labeled a “human” right was not always clear-cut.

Yet if human rights talk was something to fight over, it nevertheless injected itself into global debate. It has become part of late-twentieth-century globalization, one of the lingua francas used to communicate across cultures around the globe, just like statistics or money or pidgin English. Such idioms do not undermine particular cultures, they rather float on top of them, providing a second, “thin” culture that communicates without nuance across thicker cultural divides. They are, to use

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Anthony Giddens's term, "disembedded" forms of communication, idioms lifted out of local context yet able to communicate in basic ways to those rooted in radically different cultures. They are central to the global flows of information in the late twentieth century.\(^{42}\)

Most of us have been taught to think of imprecision as a weakness. Yet the phrase "human rights" can rally people to action around the world precisely because the term is not pressed into too definite a meaning, precisely because it does not need extensive context to be understood. To the extent that the ideal of human rights captures wide public support, it does so because it allows people to attach their own meaning to the term. Beyond the elites who demand concrete and reliable information, human rights talk works through its vagueness. Certain images—a woman suffering clitoridectomy, a man being tortured, an ethnically driven bloodbath—click on "human rights" in people's minds thousands of miles away. These images can be icons much as the Amnesty logo is. They can be drawn with a few words, as in "the horrible torture under Pinochet." Increasingly, however, such images are made with video—piles of slaughtered bodies in Rwanda, haunted Albanian refugees in Macedonia, the lone soul trying to block the tank in Tiananmen Square. Such pictures scream a pathos or heroism that, occasionally, can still rouse a media-jaded United States public. These images, in other words, allow viewers to ignore any thicker, local context and to click on the phrase "human rights" in their minds.

The new attention to public relations in the mid-seventies indicated that AIUSA understood that human rights politics was going to be a fight over images. Others, however, had already grasped the insight. It was the perpetrators of gross human rights violations who first recognized the importance of image management in human rights struggles. In 1968, the Greek military junta paid a public relations firm a quarter of a million dollars to "promote the image of Greece" in the United States, France, and Great Britain. (Previous Greek governments had spent a couple of thousand dollars on such promotion.) The junta, a thuggish bunch, grabbed control of the government in 1966, then crushed civil liberties and tortured political prisoners. Their fervent public relations were designed to convince Westerners that Greece, despite its troubles, remained a fine place for both tourists and investors. Nor was Greece alone in paying to manage its image abroad. Ten years later, it was the Argentinian military government's turn to look for public relations help. In both cases, the United States company doing the work was the prestigious firm of Burson Marsteller. Repressive regimes knew that image mattered.\(^{43}\)

Contemporary historians tend to explore the complexities of cultures. Whether studying medieval nuns, sixteenth-century peasants, nineteenth-century artisans, or the rise of the department store, historians like to focus on a particular culture and explore it in depth. Such thick descriptions are a staple of much contemporary his-

\(^{42}\) Anthony Giddens, The Consequences of Modernity (Stanford, 1990), 21–29. See also Appadurai, Modernity at Large, 27–47. For the use of statistics as a lingua franca, see Theodore Porter, Trust in Numbers (Princeton, 1996).

toriography. Yet the way human rights talk has circulated throughout the globe since the 1970s is a reminder of the power of thin descriptions. Each of us can only develop a “thick” description of one or two cultures. We cannot craft textured understandings of every one on the planet or even read about them. The inalterable plurality of the world is both a part of the human condition and a barrier to full understanding. When the larger public becomes interested in a brutality somewhere in the world, it is usually because some image has successfully conjured up the icon “human rights.” From Chile in the 1970s to Rwanda in the 1990s, I think it is safe to say, bursts of public sympathy have not depended upon a “thick” understanding of those cultures. They have depended upon reliable and concrete information about infractions making its way to key media and political elites, convincing them that the horrors are really taking place, and wider public response purchased with images that seem almost too horrible to be true.

Modern human rights politics has been one way to confront the “dilemma of democracy in our mass-media age.” Influencing elites and using popular imagery bypass active citizen participation in the name of citizen, or human, rights. Human rights politics turns out to be one of both information and image. The growth of its iconic status means that one important part of our civic life depends upon the liberation of our imagination through thin descriptions. Indeed, if our sense of responsibility is to be global, I do not see how it could be otherwise.44

If vagueness is a strength, it is just as much a weakness. Human rights politics expects us to keep the whole world in our sights. Yet that is impossible. Our neural synapses will not allow it. We can only assimilate so much. Every time Bosnia is on the front page, something else—Rwanda, say—is pushed to page 12. And still other things—violence against women or the use of chemical sprays and stun guns in United States prisons—are cut entirely that day. Human rights, this thin lingua franca that competes for attention with the thicker idioms of our own culture, has only limited potential to capture our attention. The public’s devotion, and politicians’, turns out to be intermittent, fleeting, and unpredictable. Future historians, I am sad to say, will no doubt reckon this too as part of the moral imagination of our time.45

44 David Thelen, Becoming Citizens in the Age of Television (Chicago, 1996), 3. Michael Walzer points out that minimal, “thin,” moral judgments are not “substantively minor or emotionally shallow.” In fact, the “opposite is more likely true: this is morality that is close to the bone.” Michael Walzer, Thick and Thin: Moral Argument at Home and Abroad (Notre Dame, 1994), 6. I would add to Walzer’s comments in one way: He argues that we translate “thin” morality into the “thick” idioms of our own culture. This might be true, but discussing human rights violations in a distant part of the globe also often entails projecting some sort of implied fantasy about what that remote culture actually is. This has more to do with what French theorists have called the “Imaginary,” a process that is deeply bound up with our own misunderstanding (méconnaissance) of that culture. Given the phenomenal plurality of the world, such misunderstanding is an inevitable part of globalized thinking. Projections about foreign cultures in human rights discourse are akin to European uses of American culture as described by Rob Kroes, “America and the European Sense of History,” Journal of American History, 86 (Dec. 1999), 1135–55. On how the man in front of the tank at Tiananmen Square has been interpreted to suit Western fantasies and divorced from Chinese context, see Richard Gordon, “One Act, Many Meanings,” Media Studies Journal, 13 (Winter 1999), 82–83.

45 For works that explore the contradictory nature of specifically global efforts at humanitarianism or justice, see Michael Ignatieff, The Warrior’s Honor: Ethnic War and the Modern Conscience (New York, 1997), 9–33; Luc Boltanski, La Souffrance à Distance (Suffering at a distance) (Paris, 1993); and Susan Moeller, Compassion Fatigue: How the Media Sell Disease, Famine, War, and Death (New York, 1999).