

BOOK REVIEW: *The Divided World – Human Rights and Its Violence*

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Human rights are abused every day all over the world. Many people are aware of the wrongs being committed, yet they do nothing. Randall Williams (2010) examines this problem in his book, *The Divided World: Human Rights and Its Violence*. Williams is a professor at the University of California and has taught classes in film and visual culture, literature, and ethnic studies. After being involved in various social movements, he decided to publish his book in 2010 through the University of Minnesota Press. In *The Divided World: Human Rights and Its Violence*, he looks at specific cases of violent human rights abuses across the globe and focuses on why things were not done to stop them. While every case is different, Williams shows that it while the government has the power to oppress its people, it also holds the power to help them. The choice between violating or protecting human rights can make all the difference. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other actors seek to influence that decision and pressure leaders to respect human rights standards. In many cases, human rights protection is a complex task that may result in negative consequences.

One of the strongest cases that Williams considered was the controversial and pivotal relationship between Nelson Mandela and Amnesty International. When Nelson Mandela, a South African activist, was first unjustly arrested for allegedly organizing strikes and leaving the country without proper documentation, Amnesty International took up his case and made him one of their “Prisoners of Conscience”. After spending some time in jail, however, Nelson Mandela moved away

from pacifism and began to promote violence to end the apartheid in South Africa. Amnesty International then had an important decision to make: They could either continue their support of Mandela, thus condoning political violence that they had long been opposed to, or they could remove their support from Mandela as a Prisoner of Conscience. Mandela encouraged violence only after the black South Africans had exhausted every other option, and resorting to violence was not a decision he made easily. However, he felt that the violence was “imposed” upon them after years of nonviolent struggle: “I did not plan [sabotage] in a spirit of recklessness, nor because I have any love of violence. I planned it as a result of a calm and sober assessment of the political situation that had arisen after many years of tyranny, exploitation, and oppression of my people by the Whites,” Mandela argued (p. 5). In the end, many blacks in South Africa viewed violence as a matter of self-defense; the black South Africans had to stand up for themselves against their oppressors.

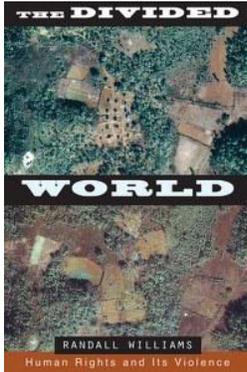
The case of Mandela and his struggle against South African apartheid raised the question across the human rights community: Is violence acceptable in the context of self-defense? The black South Africans had long suffered violence at the hands of the whites, and apartheid was internationally recognized as a violation of international human rights. If there were truly no other options and some violence would help to save some lives in the long run, should a group fight violence with violence? This is no easy question, and it shook the human rights regime to its core. Amnesty International eventually decided to remain firm in their commitment to nonviolence, re-establishing how the NGO would operate in the future. This decision, however, left Mandela without a strong ally and hurt his chances of getting out of jail, since he was a black man in a South Africa controlled by the white minority. By revoking Mandela’s Prisoner of Conscience status, Amnesty made the difficult decision to limit attention to his cause and to the issue of South African apartheid. By limiting its support to black South Africans who only engaged in nonviolent activism, Amnesty International – in some ways – furthered oppression through inaction.

Another case that Williams examined was the violence endured by members of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning (LGBTQ) community in Mexico. In Chiapas, Mexico, at least fifteen *travestis* (transvestites), gay, and lesbian people were murdered in one case study. They were all killed with military-issued guns that only the police had access to, but for a while no one investigated these crimes because the victims were people who were looked down upon by society. Someone only took notice when a gay doctor was murdered in his home. Even then, the investigation did not go as far as it should have because of the doctor's sexual orientation. According to Williams, violence was only noticed if those who were affected were upper or middle class. One point that Williams made was that it was not simply homophobia at the root of the murders, but a belief that their deaths helped society to move forward. Those in positions of power cast "the homosexual as a non-reproductive drag on the advancement of the proletariat" (p. 41). In short, violence only matters to some if it is inflicted on those in power. If a gay person is murdered, some people see it as acceptable because they are seen as bringing society down instead of helping it advance. They see a gay being murdered instead of a person being murdered. In this situation, the police – who are an arm of the government – may be brutally killing members of the LGBT community and being left unpunished for it. The police are supposed to be there for every member of society to serve and protect them, but they are abusing this power. Where they should be helping people, they are hurting them instead.

The case of the "War on Terror" shows how imperialism and colonization have remained a large part of the world's history, and continue to impact human rights today. Former United States President George W. Bush used the Guantanamo Bay detention facility as a site of violence and torture to interrogate terrorism suspects. U.S. soldiers were given permission to use questionable methods, such as water-boarding, to get answers to their questions. While Bush's main goal was to protect the American people, he was violating the rights of those imprisoned. In response, President Barack Obama disbanded the torture chambers in Guantanamo Bay as one of his first acts in office, and claimed to put

an end to any use of torture anywhere else. The claim was that torture was not something that would be used anymore in an effort to “soften the edges of U.S. imperialism” (p. 112). This was not the United States’ way of backing down from a fight, but an effort to take responsibility for human rights abuse in America. In this instance, the power that was committing these acts of torture – the office of the president – was the same power that helped bring the abuse to an end. Instead of sweeping the issue under the rug, President Obama got in front of it and put a stop to it. This was a very admirable act; while he may have had other political motives for exposing the torture chambers in Guantanamo Bay, what perhaps matters most is that Obama put a stop to it. This was a good example of the good and bad sides of the power of government, and also what can happen to human rights protections in times of crisis.

Overall, William’s book is very well written and it is important for understanding current human rights issues. He incorporates many case studies to prove his points, and he is willing to explore the darker sides of the human rights regime. I highly recommend this book to anyone who has an interest in human rights, especially the cases that do not receive the same exposure as others. There were several cases that I had never heard about before or wanted to learn more about, such as the LGBTQ abuses in Mexico, the mass murders of Algerians, and the horrors of Guantanamo Bay. This book was easy to read and very fast-paced. Williams provided a new look at some old issues, as well as some new concerns. Attention to these human rights problems help to ensure that those who have suffered are not forgotten.



Book Information

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Randall Williams (2010)

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