Competing for the Last Utopia? The NIEO, Human Rights, and the World Conference for the International Women’s Year, Mexico City, June 1975

In the mid-1970s, the United Nations hosted a dramatic attempt to totally transform the world economy, which appeared to be on the cusp of victory at the Sixth Special Session of the General Assembly in April and May 1974. In a moment that represented the highest tide of southern self-confidence, the Group of 77 (G-77), unleavened by the language of compromise, demanded global redistribution as a matter of right. The manifestos of this revolt of sovereigns were the Declaration on the Establishment of a New International Economic Order (NIEO), adopted in May 1974, and its sister document, the Charter on the Economic Rights and Duties of States (CERDS), passed in December 1974. Although both texts held an ideological lineage dating back to the 1950s, the NIEO flowered in a period of disruption and found purchase in a moment when Western intellectual and political currents ran to the abstractly global and planetary. It repositioned an older generation of Third World claims within the new vocabulary of the interdependent and pluripolar world system, submerging the older terms of economic sovereignty under the new slogans of justice and solidarity. The NIEO’s brief ascendancy unfolded in the same habitat of pretended international moralism that hosted the “breakthrough” of human rights activism.

This essay addresses the interaction between the NIEO’s claims and the language and philosophy of human rights, with a focus on the year 1975. Coincident almost precisely with the “breakthrough” phase of global human rights mobilization, the NIEO presented a competitor vision of universal justice. As did advocates of the nascent transnational human rights movement, proponents of the NIEO advanced a utopian program, explicitly global in ambition. Yet the NIEO’s central object was an augmentation of the southern state, deploying the internationalist language of rights and solidarity to enhance the status not of the citizen but of the sovereign. The NIEO involved an emphatic deployment of terms and categories from the human rights milieu: equality, solidarity, and improved material conditions. These sat under an insistently globalist rhetorical carapace, placing the NIEO program proximate to the conceptual territory of human rights. This pidgin globalism facilitated a level of co-option and confusion of human rights terminology quite unlike the bald instrumentalist quests of antiracism and anticolonialism that had preceded it in the 1960s. Often, NIEO language was human rights language, merely with different chirality: its primary axis aligned to state and peoples. Fractionation of these two lexical isomers required serious introspection among movements that had taken a cluster of terms
around development, freedom, equality, solidarity, and justice for granted. Foremost among those engaged in this haphazard process of differentiation was second-wave feminism, which was among the first to encounter the NIEO in full force in 1974 and 1975.

The Statist Road to Mexico

After a meteoric rise through the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) and the General Assembly, the implications of the totalizing quest for the NIEO became apparent across the second half of 1974, as it consumed first the World Conference on Population (August), and shortly afterward, the World Conference on Food (November). Hosted by President Nikolai Ceaușescu, the world’s most notorious champion of coercive pronatalism, in a sweltering Bucharest, the Population Conference demonstrated both the UN’s endless facility for locational irony and the NIEO’s capacity to exsanguinate the meaning and purpose of a thematic summit. Paternalist Western technocrats were stunned as Algeria, the PRC, the Soviet bloc, and a Latin American group shepherded the proceedings away from population questions and toward the more pressing matter of the NIEO. The rising feminist star Germaine Greer and the established face of the second wave, Betty Friedan, attended. Although the two had discovered their mutual dislike while on a joint tour of Iran, conducted on the invitation of Princess Ashraf Pahlavi, twin sister to the shah, both were appalled by their first experience of a UN conference in operation. Both also encountered firsthand the apparatus of political repression. At Bucharest’s Athénée Palace Hotel, Greer’s floor housed dozens of Ceaușescu’s Securitate. The complete lack of interest in the rights of women, and the obliteration of all individuals under the weight of two competing, technocratic visions of humanity in the abstract, was a depressing portent for Mexico.

After three decades of pondering the merits of state patronage, a significant swathe of Western women’s rights advocacy began to hew much closer to the sort of liberal and social democratic philosophy elaborated by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, treading more warily around development and progress. There was a recognizable trend toward universalism, independent organization, and translocal citizen activism. This marked a retreat from the search for sympathetic Solons and state feminism, which had especially preoccupied Friedan for a portion of the 1970s. As late as April 1974, Friedan remained entranced by the successes of state feminism under the shah’s White Revolution and its international standard bearer, Princess Ashraf. Friedan toured Iran in March 1974, meeting the shah himself for an interview, and later extolled the virtues of the White Revolution for women in an extended piece for *Ladies Home Journal*.

More than any single figure, Ashraf was custodian of the case for state-led modernization as the means to “human rights,” a vision she sold insistently at the UN and across the Western press. As the titular head of the Women’s Organization of Iran (WOI) and the Iranian Human Rights Committee, Ashraf had established a refashioned vision of rights as the product of economic and social development. Between 1965 and 1974, she had pressed the case with considerable skill, aided by some substantial achievements within Iran, and emerged as one of the most visible presences...
in the UN’s headquarters at Turtle Bay. Her initiative, as well as donated funds, had
played a decisive role in securing the World Conference for the International Women’s
Year (WCIWY), in Mexico City. As chair of the Consultative Committee for the
WCIWY, Ashraf presided over the preparations for Mexico City across 1974 and 1975.

While Ashraf represented the UN orthodoxy and its statist emphasis on devel-
opment, social progress, and specialist modernization, elements of Western feminism
were retreating from the state as savior. Arvonne Fraser, a Democrat and activist from
Minnesota, engaged with the UN, bringing a strong disposition for popular mobili-
zation to the American delegation for Mexico, a project that ran parallel to that of
Donald Fraser, her husband, who was then in pursuit of a human rights foreign
policy. The increasingly well-organized coalitions of the Western second wave began
to look on the UN’s apparent institutional preference for modernizers and the rhetoric
of progress and development with skepticism. Within Friedan’s circle, the National
Organization for Women (NOW), there was disquiet about a UN establishment
increasingly disposed to the vague language of social progress and development, where
specialist knowledge remediated all problems, and where differences of development
rendered women’s individual rights irrelevant in the immediate term.

Writing to Friedan in late February 1975, Sonia Nusenbaum, a NOW member,
expressed her concerns about the preparations for Mexico. Provoked by ill-considered
warnings against excessive enthusiasm for universal rights, delivered by Mildred
Persinger, chair of the organizing committee for the Conference’s NGO Tribune,
Nusenbaum decried the tendency toward “naivety” among the circle close to the UN.
Nusenbaum was “discouraged and indeed offended by the view . . . that ‘American
feminists would necessarily impose their own narrow views’ on an international
conference.” According to Nusenbaum, Persinger’s message was “symptomatic of the
gross political naivety I have observed in many women when they conceptualize what
they believe what they believe universality to be.” Universality did not involve the
cheerful acceptance of state claims.

The potential for co-option of the Conference in the name of statist development
was foremost among Nusenbaum’s concerns. “I have not doubted for a moment,” she
opined, “that the selection of representatives from so-called ‘developing nations’ will
be made by those men who are getting increasingly sophisticated on how to get an
agenda through which represents their vested interests.” Pretending that the state
legations and their coterie of marionette NGOs were “representative” was ridiculous.
As she surveyed the field, Nusenbaum worried about the senior UN Secretariat staff
who were responsible for the preparations, principally Helvi Sipilä, the long-serving
Finnish diplomat and assistant secretary-general for social development. Sipilä seemed
less interested in the extension of universal human rights than in the ethereal promises
of “development,” social progress, “programmes,” and “plans of action.”

The Conference itself would be held on the home territory of perhaps the most
vorable champion of the NIEO, Mexican president Luis Echeverría. Echeverría had
 articulated a proto-NIEO in 1972, and by December 1974 it was manifest that the
Mexican president was the chief evangelist for the NIEO. Its augmented sequel, the
CERDS, had promptly been christened “Carta Echeverría.” During the final prepa-
ratory phases at the Consultative Committee in March 1975, the impossibly large
Mexican legation attached itself to the Iranian princess, with Mexican attorney general Ojeda Paullada, the nominated chair of the Conference, conspicuously obsequious in his response to Ashraf’s first speech. With the shah courting Echeverría, seeking to bring him into the OPEC fold, and Echeverría one of the earliest exponents of “economic solidarity” between states, the conditions were ripe for an entente bound by shared advocacy of the NIEO.

Ojeda Paullada’s speech to the Consultative Committee openly repudiated the idea that this was a conference for pursuing women’s rights. Along with the normal tasks attendant to holding an international summit, Mexico had a further “special obligation”:

We must assure that the Conference of the International Women’s Year does not become a forum for enumerating the political and social problems that women face in contemporary society; on the contrary, the meeting must approve a series of international documents of fundamental political value which are defined in accordance with the principle of international responsibility.

The solution, according to Echeverría’s attorney general, was “first of all to overcome economic, political and social backwardness which characterizes the larger part of humanity.” American diplomats gave a pithy précis of the NIEO’s cascading logic: “Problems of women are the problems of society… problems of society… are caused by unjust world economic order; therefore to improve the situation of women we must first achieve… new, more just and equitable economic order.”

On the other hand, the Mexican president’s efforts to co-opt local feminists to the NIEO alliance were clumsier. An April 1975 meeting in Guanajuatro, designed to ratify the primacy of the NIEO and the CERDS as the sole objective of Mexican women, ended badly for Echeverría. The U.S. observer reported a perceptible rift “when women preferred to ‘demand’ solutions [regarding the] status of women’s issues instead of praising the Charter.” Friedan’s colleagues recorded the same; local feminists were eagerly sought after by Ojeda Paullada and misunderstood that their role was not actually the advocacy of women’s rights but rather service as generic Third World foot soldiers for the NIEO.

International, Individual Rights, or Interstate “Solidarity”: The Battle of Mexico City

In the history of UN conferences in the human rights field, the one held in Mexico City was almost certainly the most fractious, intense, and variegated. Attended by iconic figures from Western feminism, then at the crest of the second wave; political elites from Leah Rabin to Jihan Sadat; global celebrities, notably the cosmonaut Valentina Tereshkova, the actress Jane Fonda, and the New Left icon Angela Davis, and Imelda Marcos, the meeting reverberated with the sheer density and diversity of its participants. Split between the often manufactured chaos of the NGO Tribune and the bizarre pageantry that accompanied the primary conference of state legations, the optics of Mexico City were sufficiently extraordinary to divert journalistic attention from the gravity of much of the debate. A significant portion of the meaningful record was registered instead in the surprisingly blunt and sardonic commentary of the Conference newspaper, Xilonen.
Although numerous rich histories of transnational feminism have restored the significance of the Conference to global mobilization for women’s rights, its status in the wider historiography of human rights has been, for the most part, marginal. Mexico City yoked together the fringes of UN absurdity (complete with a recognized Conference cat, named Nutmeg, that stalked the proceedings, adorned in a sombrero, in the name of peace), serious, if fledgling, transnational network cultivation, and an epochal contest about the future of human rights, with implications beyond women’s rights in the particular. This final dimension—the battle between the advocates of the NIEO and its vision of statist solidarity and those who pursued an individual, universalist rights agenda—has been the least acknowledged, although its significance is arguably equal to the Conference’s impact on the trajectory of international feminism.

The first great clash between individual human rights and the “New International” solidarity agenda was often diminished by an atmosphere of trivialization. Numerous legations were carefully dressed and manicured and often included neophyte members, reportedly chosen on the basis of aesthetic criteria. This was offset by the presence of many highly capable representatives, but the overall effect was pernicious. As the delegations assembled at the Gimnasio Juan De La Berrera, they were met by immaculately uniformed young women in Pantone-calibrated UN blue, mini-skirted and in full makeup. This photogenic constabulary valiantly held the line against working-class Mexican women who sought entrance to the meeting.

As at the first World Conference on Human Rights, held in Tehran seven years earlier in April 1968, where distance, expense, and combined Soviet and American pressure ensured the marginality of human rights NGOs, the logistical arrangements at Mexico City were a studied design for impracticality and ineffectual participation from those without state accreditation. In her vivid portrait of the texture of the Conference, Greer described the physical enervation that beset the NGO representatives, who were located across town at the Medical Center. Food poisoning, she recorded, “laid low some of every delegation all of the time.” Physical distance, altitude, traffic congestion, and illness were just as efficacious as a rescinded visa or refused consultative status. Ideas that could not be defeated were attenuated by ensuring that those who bore them were either exhausted, ill, or stuck in traffic. Despite over 6,000 participants, the NGO Tribune’s impact on the state Conference was limited. Even its much mythologized message, a joint statement to the closing meeting of the official plenary, was marginal. All of the copies for circulation were “mislaid” behind a vase by the Secretariat.

The opening of the Conference, at 10:30 a.m. on June 19, revealed little by way of moderation from the hosts, or much by way of interest from the secretary-general. Kurt Waldheim’s address, which was punctuated by calls for order as Mexican women sought admission to the conference hall, consisted of lightly revised “world systems” prose from his speech to the Sixth Special Session. Women were appended to the list of immense global “problems” that demanded totally fundamental, and utterly unspecified, systemic reform.

The problems of the role of women in society, food, population, environment, human settlements, health and education are not single problems . . . Each is a component part of the complex system.
Waldheim repeated the anodyne verbiage that had become the hallmark of his response to the new “global” age, where everything was a problem connected to something else.26 One of the practical advantages of this observation, for Waldheim’s staff, was that the same Delphic phrases were perfectly functional across multiple discrete forums.

Echeverría’s speech opened with the required phrases addressing the complex challenges of women’s rights but then slipped inexorably into the logic of the NIEO. While less forthright than Ojeda Paullada’s speech, his address to the Conference plenary nevertheless came perilously close to a total dismissal of the notional purpose of the Conference. Transposed in its place was the NIEO. The president urged women to identify “the true origin of the problems.” His argument unfolded predictably, and when Echeverría uttered the words “If we really wish to improve the conditions of life of women . . .” the conclusion was so obviously heralded as to be self-evident. It was, he said, “not possible to postulate in realistic terms the universal triumph of human beings as long as we do not give form to a New International Economic Order.”27

The speeches that followed in the next sessions of the Plenary, from Sirimavo Bandaranaike, Imelda Marcos, and Ashraf were less strident—and in the case of Marcos, more farce than content.28 Counseled by the United States, and eager for a visually successful summit, Ashraf pursued a pragmatic middle course, without the full-scale NIEO-exclusivism of Echeverría.29 Jihan Sadat’s speech refought the battles of 1967 and 1973, with rather more success than had been found in the field.30 Rounding out the catalog of elite governmental representatives, Jamaica’s Beverley Manley amplified Echeverría’s prioritization of the NIEO.31

Listening to the NIEO advocates, principally Echeverría, Greer, who was highly sympathetic to revolutionary Third Worldism, recognized the NIEO’s lethality to women’s rights. She observed that “his argument made perfect sense,” insofar as societies without economic and social rights could not deliver them to any of their citizens, “but the corollary of his argument was that discussion of the specific phenomenon of sexism would have to wait on economic redistribution.” The consequences for individuals were obvious, as all evils were assigned to the West.32 All hopes were repartitioned to the nebulous promise of a structural revolution, concentrated in state hands.

Arvonne Fraser observed the same: discussion of the NIEO often worked to foreclose the discussion of women’s rights.33 It reallocated the question of justice back to the international plane and resized the constituent granules of debate as states and peoples, not individuals. Advocacy of the NIEO was running internationalism in reverse: abstracting the problems of the individual person back through dozens of mediating layers, which were all mere sequels to a foundational fault in the “international order” at the interstate level. As the solution to everything, the NIEO was the solvent that effaced any injustice in the particular. Australia’s Elizabeth Reid and France’s Françoise Giroud savaged the NIEO line propounded by Echeverría.34 Reid cited human rights violations, notably of the integrity of the person, as evidence of the immediacy of ensuring civil and political freedom for women. She spoke of “universally known goals” and insisted that women citizens “cannot and must not await the outcome of deliberations on [the] NIEO.”35
Women’s rights advocates—Western, and especially non-Western—tended to resist the forces of overabstraction. One of the virtues of the diversity and incoherence of the NGO Tribune was its collective incredulity about a single-point NIEO-esque structural transition that would address all problems. The often myopic particularism of the various groups and causes spoke to forms of oppression that operated locally and nationally. This diversity undoubtedly strained the sinews of international “sisterhood,” yet it was also a measure of prophylaxis against the magical thinking that would have the NIEO solve the issue of maladministered bride price, salary inequality, or sexism in a village setting.

The miracle panacea of redistribution championed in the NIEO sounded less than convincing to ears with a lifetime experience of abusive conditions and thorough knowledge of their most immediate sources. Among much of the Asian and African cohort at the NGO Tribune, there appeared an insufficiently cultivated enthusiasm for the grandiosely “international,” which characterized both the NIEO and the human rights movement. Nevertheless, engagement with localism was less problematic for rights advocacy. Human rights discourse had long commuted from the specific abuse to the abstract universal and back again; it was a language that readily worked “up” and “down” and was scalable to “translocal” discussion.

Despite the dynamism and discontent of the Tribune, official documentary outcomes of the Conference, the Declaration of Mexico, and the World Plan of Action reflected much of the statist G-77 argument. The NIEO, which had so dominated the official sessions, was firmly inscribed into both texts. In the second committee alone, almost two-thirds of the speeches invoked CERDS and/or the NIEO. Millie Miller, who led the British delegation, reported that the closing plenary session witnessed the two declarations adopted, “in a mood of hysteria and even hooliganism” from the G-77. She rummaged around to find some positive elements to soften the account, none of which seemed convincing.

Although Miller struggled to remain upbeat, there were a handful of features that suggested the NIEO agenda had not completely obliterated liberal democratic initiatives. A very modest resolution on fostering popular participation and civil society groups to secure respect for the equal rights of citizens, drafted by the veteran civil rights activist Dorothy Height (National Council of Negro Women) and Joan Goodin (Coalition of Labor Union Women), was one of the few significant nonstatist proposals that survived, albeit barely. Unfamiliar with the UN, Fraser was astonished at the reaction, which was led by the Soviet Union and Cuba. “I was,” she wrote, “astounded to learn, in promoting the resolution, that many governments would not allow any new organizations to be formed without government approval.” It was, she wrote, “a real shock for an American.” In a group letter reflecting on Mexico, Fraser reported to friends and colleagues that independent rights activism was “vehemently opposed by non-democratic governments,” which did not “want their citizens organizing to do things for themselves” because “they might get ideas about doing something about the government.” Repressive governments at Mexico had evidently deduced that women’s rights NGOs were human rights NGOs, or a close enough sibling to be a problem. For totalitarian states, the “non-governmental” dimension, prefixed with any term, was sufficient provocation.
Appreciation of the existence of direct state repression, and the obstacles to civil society organization, left a practical mark on Western “sisterhood” initiatives in the wake of Mexico. Transnational network cultivation, however inspiring, was potentially fatal to those in the most desperate situations. Two of the emergent federations devoted to advocacy, Women’s International News (WIN) and Isis, soon grasped the need for the sort of safety measures already understood by Amnesty and the International Commission of Jurists. Sources were anonymized, and the choice between the redaction of names and the possible protective value of public pressure entered into calculations when newsletters and appeals were circulated.

Human Rights in the Age of the NIEO: The Solidarity of Authoritarianism, and the “New” Internationalism of Sovereignty

In the aftermath of Mexico City, the gulf between human rights activism and modernization widened, as both sides departed on very different trajectories. Friedan’s transformation was among the most dramatic. In her reflections on the events of the mid-1970s, Friedan wrote that after Mexico, she “realized that maybe you couldn’t have women’s liberation in a country where women weren’t free to organize on their own behalf.” It had been a clarifying moment about the nature of the struggle—when faced with the co-opted women of the authoritarian Third World and the Soviet bloc, the apparent achievements of Ashraf’s Women’s Organization of Iran seemed more of a fortuitous anomaly than a transportable model.

In Mexico I suddenly had the insight that the women’s movement itself was based on the values of American democracy—the belief in individual dignity and freedom, equality and self-fulfilment, and self-determination, as well as the freedom to dissent and organize.

This was now, more emphatically, a campaign in the boundaries of the human rights tradition, not a battle that could be sequestered from other freedoms or won with the canalized patronage of an enlightened autocrat. Having once occupied the balance point between modernization and liberal rights advocacy, Friedan had been pushed into the orbit of the latter by the extremity of the former.

Among the coalescing group of human rights democrats and neoconservatives, Mexico City was a prime exhibit in the corruption of rights language and internationalism. Daniel Patrick Moynihan cited it as one of the flagship disasters of American human rights diplomacy at the UN. Given that the American delegation, including the formidable Goldwater Republican Patricia Hutar, and American feminists fought hard against the NIEO in trying conditions, the judgment was unreasonably severe. One of the diplomats Moynihan did have time for, the outstanding New York lawyer Rita Hauser, who advised him on human rights politics, was sufficiently appalled that she left Mexico City almost immediately. Already exhausted from a tour of duty on the Commission on Human Rights (CHR), she seemed exceptionally jaded by experience of the UN. Soon after Mexico, she penned a grim letter on the fate of human rights for Foreign Affairs.

Across the Atlantic, Baroness Dora Gaitskell complained to Parliament in the months after Mexico City. Long disillusioned with the human rights debates she had
encountered as UK representative to the General Assembly, she felt that Mexico City had signaled that the UN forum, and perhaps the language itself, was now terminal. Human rights discussion had become “so unfair” that she put it to the House of Lords that “the Western countries should get together” to mount a challenge to “the Afro-Asian majority in the United Nations.” The rising Tory MP Margaret Thatcher wrote to the Foreign Office, at the behest of a constituent who sought explanation of what had happened at Mexico, in particular the adoption of a paragraph on “Zionism as Racism.” On their return, the UK representatives, government and NGO alike, were largely despondent in their assessments. The British feminists Janet Cockcroft, Shirley Summerskill, Kay Carmichael, and Millie Miller had encountered the 1970s UN, and the gradient was steep. Ivor Richard, UK permanent representative and veteran of the festival of polemic that defined the Sixth Special Session, was perversely bemused at their despondency.

On the other side of the ideological chasm, NIEO forces fully reframed human rights as a subordinate element of the statist development project. Responding in part to rising pressure from the revivified human rights movement, Ashraf led the counter-offensive. Whatever subtlety obtained in the late 1960s and early 1970s was abandoned. In February 1977, the princess delivered the first in a sequence of speeches that paired the NIEO to a more strident human rights exceptionalism. It was a deeply asymmetrical union: modernization was a cornerstone to all freedom. Pro forma gestures at interdependence, long frayed, were cast aside wholesale.

It was unrealistic to expect civil and political rights and individual freedoms to be respected without the prior implementation of economic and social rights, whose attainment entailed the focusing of national efforts on the achievement of a rapid improvement in the standard of living and, consequently, rapid national economic development.

From supremacy of economic and social rights, and the modernization that would enable them, Ashraf transitioned to the international dimension. The NIEO had “pinpointed the conditions which needed to be fulfilled before the developing countries could hope to assure many of the economic, social and cultural rights proclaimed in the Universal Declaration.”

There was nothing necessarily conceptually new in this; such ideas had been aired in the CHR, the General Assembly’s Social and Humanitarian Committee (III), and at various UN Advisory Services seminars at Kabul, Dakar, and Lusaka years earlier. Yet they had never been advanced with such force and had previously placed most of the emphasis on individual state modernization, as opposed to renovation of the global “system.” If Western states genuinely wished to promote human rights, then redistribution was the answer, by “creating the necessary conditions for rapid economic development by the disadvantaged countries, and thus assist those countries to ensure the realization of economic, social and cultural rights as well as civil and political rights.”

With the weakness of the defenders of individual human rights in the early 1970s, and Western timorousness at the General Assembly, the propositions of the NIEO were rampant by the close of the decade. Most of the Western democracies had simply
avoided or evaded the symbolic contest, willing to sit quiescently while its bold exhortatory resolutions were cantillated across the chamber by cynical dictatorships and the desperately poor. Western representatives nodded assent or politely explained their reservations, safe in the knowledge that the financial substance of the NIEO would never be implemented by their national treasuries. Such indifference had differential consequences—most profoundly felt in the realm of the language of justice, morality, and international solidarity. Securing actual material redistribution was beyond the power of the NIEO’s champions. However, major revision to the concept of human rights was well within reach. Western inaction and hard realism were sufficient for the material aims of the NIEO to fail, and sufficient to allow its symbolic project to succeed.

By the early 1980s, NIEO precepts had neovascularized their way through the body of social, cultural, and humanitarian debate, evident not only in General Assembly politics but also in the “structural” turn in the academic study of human rights.56 “Structural” writing on human rights surveyed the total architecture of “the world system” and its influence on respect for human rights. Part of this was engaged through the scholarly refinement of the NIEO’s close analogue, “right to development”; the remainder was in the proliferation of an auxiliary series of “new international orders”: the “New International Humanitarian Order,” the “New International Information Order” (NIO, later NWICO), the “New International Health Order,” and the most vague of all, the “New International Human Order,” a 1983 initiative of the Marcos government. This armamentarium of revisionist “orders” placed human rights everywhere.

The structural approach drew the web of contingent and causal conditions for respecting human rights so wide, and dispersed responsibility so thin, that meaning and moral clarity were often diminished. The intellectual and linguistic parsimony that was such a powerful asset to human rights as a language of protest was lost. As a taxonomic and descriptive exercise, the structural line pursued new insights into the circumstances that restricted rights. As a practical program, it was virtually impossible to mount an appeal against the assembled sum of abstracted forces that defined the entire world system. Such maximal utopian aspiration did not lend itself to the kind of pragmatic incrementalism that was envisaged in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Without an individuated victim, or a specific authoritarian regime, or a particular economic injustice, its propositions tended to obscure rather than enlighten, let alone inspire.

New rights, purportedly “latent” in the Universal Declaration, were deduced and found. These were invariably “discovered” by diligent prospectors from the G-77 and the Soviet bloc and typically took the form of rights against the existence of conditions that prevented the fulfillment of other rights.57 The reasoning fell into a recursive loop that found rights in the conditions that enabled the conditions. Beyond simple confusion, the long, concatenated chain of requirements for the realization of rights opened new vulnerabilities in the language, which were duly exploited. Structuralist scholarship sought to study the failure of human rights realization; inadvertently, it may have contributed to another decade of well-studied unsuccess.

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Conclusions: Human Rights and State Rights in the “New International” Decade

The subversion of women’s rights in the name of a “global”- and “system”-oriented vision of interstate solidarity was the prodromal expression of what was soon to befall human rights in the general case. Mexico City was among the clearest portents for 1977 and the passage of Resolution 32/130, a text that inscribed the logic of the NIEO into the human rights program. The era of the human rights “breakthrough,” which situates one of its major milestones at July and August 1975 with the conclusion of the Helsinki Accords, had its shadow moment in Mexico at precisely the same time. While the then unrecognized triumphs of Basket III and Principle VII were being signed off at Finlandia Hall, at the Gimnasio Juan De La Berrera, gastrically distressed Western legations and NGOs were confronting another globalism, inimical to the revival, and ascendant. Helsinki cultivated civil society groups; Mexico City sought their containment. As Amnesty’s antitorture campaign gathered momentum, its proposals on preventing the torture of women were shunned at Mexico, pushed aside not by conventionally framed lines on sovereignty but by the priority of revolutionizing the global distribution of wealth between states. All sides were now using the new language of globalism, of interdependence, of solidarity, and of justice. The framing had been transformed, yet the fundamental configuration of the contest, between the strong, modernizing state, and the activist, rights-bearing citizen, had not appreciably shifted.

Above all, the great efflorescence of the NIEO, which spanned approximately 1974 to 1982, demonstrated that the amplification of concern in matters “global” and “transnational” did not intrinsically favor the human over the state. Renewed concern for interdependence and intensified pretensions of solidarity, the substrates on which the human rights “breakthrough” was constructed, were precisely the same foundations for the gravely different philosophy encapsulated in the NIEO. Primordial notions of collective sovereignty and state economic development remained the core, to be pursued through much more internationalized means. The Rights of Man became more clearly “human rights” at some point in the 1970s. The Rights of States became “Global Solidarity,” “Economic Rights and Duties,” “democratization of international relations,” and “an equitable international order” in the same milieu of overwrought globalism.

Globalist rhetoric was sharply intensified, but without any decisive preference or selection for the vision carried by the human rights movement. Instead, the program of universal, individual human rights faced a competitor that had been resynthesized and revivified in the language of the grandiously pan-planetary “world.” While anticolonialism in its previous guises was mostly spent, the NIEO agenda demonstrated that a strong strand of state-centric thought persisted, fissioned into a constellation of new discourses about development, global solidarity, structural justice, and new forms of economically inflected national liberation. Segments of Western civil society had perhaps found their last utopia in the new mass mobilizations of Amnesty and its counterparts, but it was not one without serious and persistent rivals, reborn at the moment of its apparent renascence.
NOTES


7. For the broad philosophical orientation of the “White Revolution,” see Pahlavi’s book-length exposition, The White Revolution (Tehran: Kayhan Press, 1961). There were subtle and less than subtle revisions to this work in its various editions, though the recognition of modernization as the means for enhancing the status of women remained constant. For a highly sympathetic survey of Pahlavi state feminism and its antecedents, see also Badr al-Mulu¯kB a¯mda¯d and F. R. C. Bagley, From Darkness into Light (Hicksville, NY: Exposition, 1977); see also Lois Beck and Guity Nashat, Women in Iran from 1800 to the Islamic Republic (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004).


11. Ibid.

12. Ibid. The themes of the WCIWY were equal rights, development, and peace, a tripartite
division that supposedly represented the respective competing interests of the West, the Third World, and the Soviet bloc.


16. Ibid.

17. U.S. Department of State, Mexico, Monthly Political Highlights, April 1975 (Confidential), Item 4, AAD.


20. Greer, “Mexico City,” passim.

21. Ibid., 198.

22. This observation was shared by Millie Miller, Report on Mexico City, July 30, 1975, FCO61/1427, United Kingdom National Archives, Kew.


24. “‘Tribune’s Voice to Be Heard in Tlatelolco?’” Xilonen, June 26, 1975; on the vase subterfuge, see Waller, Report on Mexico City.


26. Waldheim, address in Meeting in Mexico, “‘Tough Task to Close the Rhetoric Gap,’” Xilonen, June 20, 1975.

28. The functional leader of the Philippines legation was Leticia Shahani, a career diplomat who had already demonstrated exceptional diplomatic skill at the CSW, and something of a rising star within the UN. American assessments noted her disposition as a Marcos loyalist who had “rigidly supported martial law.” U.S. Mission, Manila, to Secretary of State, World Conference International Women’s Year—Biographies, June 1975, AAD.


33. Arvonne Fraser, UN Decade for Women (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1987), 13, 17, 24.


36. For the nature of international, local, and regional linkages, and the character of how participants understood and presented their relationships on these various scales, see Challen Nicklen, “Rhetorics of Connection in the United Nations Conferences on Women,” (Ph.D. diss., Pennsylvania State University, 2008); see also Judith P. Zinsser, From Mexico to Copenhagen to Nairobi: The United Nations Decade for Women, 1975–1985, Journal of World History 13, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 139–68.


40. Political and Popular Participation, E/CONF.66/C.2/L. 69; amended to include a preambular reference to the NIEO. Like Fraser, Height was another example of extent to which the same personnel pursued civil rights, feminist, and “human rights” struggles, a reservoir of activism that stemmed from a similar moral catchment. Shortly after Mexico, Height, and a group of visiting African women sponsored by the NCNW met with Patricia Derian, the future Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights. See Height, Open Wide the Freedom Gates: A Memoir (New York: Public Affairs, 2003), 236, 247.

41. Arvonne Fraser, She’s No Lady (Minneapolis: Nodin, 2007), 169.


43. This issue of independent organizations continued to plague the World Conferences, for instance, when the issue came up in the context of the 1995 Beijing Conference on Women, the
Chinese representative assumed that this was simply a lie; it was unthinkable that there was no officially curated list. See Fraser, *She’s No Lady*, 268–69.

44. Friedan, “Scary Doings in Mexico City,” 445.

45. Ibid., 446.


47. In a meeting shortly after another disastrous session of the General Assembly, Moynihan asked Morris Abram, who had served on the Human Rights Commission under the Johnson administration, to organize a caucus group of associates and colleagues, including a dispirited Hauser, with a view to seeking the rising authoritarian challenge in the General Assembly, and the dominance of the Third World. See Meeting record, December 20, 1974, box 334, Papers of Daniel Moynihan, Manuscript Reading Room, Library of Congress. My thanks to Ryan Irwin, who discovered this item.


49. Dora Gaitskell, Hansard (Lords), July 22, 1975, 156.

50. Susan Shields, Secretary to Rt. Hon. MP. Margaret Thatcher, Correspondence: Edward Rowlands, FCO, July 28, 1975, FCO61/1427.

51. P. M. Maxey, UN Department (FCO), *IWy Conference*, July 17, 1975, FCO61/1247.

Miller’s report expressed sufficient disappointment that it was given a secret commentary annex, where Callan, the Foreign Office professional, glossed and moderated the key paragraphs, guided by expectations that had been pre-lowered by years of experience at the UN.

52. Handwritten note from Ivor Richard, UN Department (FCO), ca. July 1975, FCO61/1426.


54. Ibid.


58. *Amnesty International Annual Report*, 1974–5 (London: AI Publications, 1975), 19. Although there was seemingly no traction in the conference, AI did hold a session at the NGO Tribune: *Xilonen* listed in its announcements section on June 25: “Amnesty International and Women Concerned about Political Prisoners throughout the World, Wednesday 6pm, Room 4.” There was also some intersection with the Chilean campaign, emerging as a site of human rights mobilization from AI, with the appearance of Hortensia Allende at the NGO Tribune. See “Allende Asks for Investigation of Junta,” *Xilonen*, July 1, 1975.

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