

COMPETING NARRATIVES OF INTERNATIONAL LAW: INTERNATIONALIST SENSITIVITY AND THE IDEA OF RESISTANCE

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International law is uniquely dependent on a number of narratives about its evolution, which often focus on some of its more heroic successes, the idea of progress, and the law of nations as a “gentle civilizer”. Many scholars have sought to unmask the brutality which often lies behind these narratives. I want to suggest that the narrative is also very self-serving in that it systematically obfuscates the contribution of forces other than the state in achieving change in the international system. At most “non-state actors” are seen as increasingly contributing to norm creation, but almost never to norm enforcement. Drawing on but also going beyond Balakrishnan Rajagopal’s idea of an *International Law from Below*, I want to suggest that the history of international law more generally can be retold as one of both mass collective action and individual resistance. I argue that it is high time that these narratives were re-energized if one is to get a chance at changing the international system. Against the myth of a centralized “world government”, I suggest a vision of an increasingly decentred or multicentered international law based on the “spirit of resistance” as the ultimate arbiter of international normative ambition.

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