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**Sylvia Maier on Human Rights in the World Community. Issues and Action (Third Edition) edited by Richard Pierre Claude and Burns H. Weston. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006. 543 pp.**

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**Abstract**

A review of:

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**Keywords**

Human rights, Global justice, Universal human rights, Human rights enforcement

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The stated objectives of Human Rights in the World Community are to “facilitate human rights education...in support of the international resolves voiced in the 2000 ‘Millennium Declaration’” (xi) and to “bring such human rights materials together in one place” that can serve as “plowshares essential for tilling the groundwork of peace through justice” (xii). Regrettably, it only partially succeeds in its laudable and ambitious goals. The selected articles, both in intellectual breadth and substantive depth, hardly do justice to the rich fabric of the contemporary debate on human rights.

Additionally, some essays are too descriptive and heavily edited to make Human Rights in the World Community suitable as a principal textbook, except in the most general introductory undergraduate courses.

Richard Pierre Claude and Burns H. Weston have organized thirty-three articles by leading human rights scholars into two parts, *Issues*—surveying specific human rights, such as freedom from torture, women’s rights and the right to development, and *Action*—broadly concerned with the implementation and enforcement of human rights norms. Each part is subdivided into four thematic chapters, which are preceded by introductions that place the issues in context. They are then followed by extensive lists of thought-provoking questions for reflection and classroom discussion that are particularly useful for teachers.

The four articles in Chapter 1 offer a concise survey of the historical development of the concepts and content of human rights as well as contemporary challenges to the notion of universal human rights. Chapters 2, 3, and 4 roughly follow the traditional typology of the “three generations of rights,” and bring together eighteen abridged essays on key human rights issues, including genocide, torture, women’s rights, the rights of indigenous people, the right to food, health, education and culture, the right to development, a clean environment, and peace. Most essays are short and descriptive, outlining historical developments such as the current state of international law. They highlight key points of debate rather than different scholarly viewpoints, which inevitably makes for some unnecessary overlap.

Part II, with its focus on the implementation and enforcement of human rights norms, is unquestionably the stronger section of the book. In eleven well-chosen (and well-edited) essays, leading scholars and activists including Anne Bayefsky, Deborah Shelton, Harold Koh, Richard Falk, Michael Ratner, Michael Ignatieff, and Mahmood Monshipouri introduce the reader to

international and regional enforcement systems, the challenges to human rights enforcement in domestic courts, the inconsistencies in the United States’ approach to human rights, critical perspectives on humanitarian intervention, and two key actors that often find themselves at cross purposes in the struggle over human rights (especially worker and environmental rights): non-governmental organizations and multinational corporations. The section concludes with a particularly intriguing essay by Jordan Paust on whether there exists a human right to revolution (a question he answers affirmatively).

The strength of *Human Rights in the World Community* lies in its comprehensiveness and user-friendliness, both for students and for instructors. It covers much of thematic ground, and the essays have been selected, edited, and abridged to make them easily accessible to even the most uninitiated student. The discussion questions are sure to stimulate lively class discussions, and some would even make superb exam questions or paper topics. Definite strong points of the volume are the bibliography, which encourages further study, the superb appendix constituting a human rights filmography, and an appendix that contains the texts of key human rights instruments, such as the UN Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Despite its unquestionable strengths, *Human Rights in the World Community* has three significant weaknesses. Predictably in edited collections, some essays are more fortunate choices than others. For instance, Lisa Hajjar's essay is a brilliant analysis of the contradiction between the global discourse on the evils of torture and its widespread practice, cynically justified as a necessary tool in the "war on terror." On the other hand, Lillich's article on civil rights is dated (1984) and uninspired, reading like an encyclopedia entry. Also, there are infinitely more insightful discussions of cultural rights (see Will Kymlicka or Bhikhu Parekh), indigenous rights (see James Anaya, Patrick Thornberry), or women's rights (see Rebecca Cook, Hilary Charlesworth or Chandra Mohanty) than those included in this collection.

More serious is the (almost) complete exclusion of alternative voices, such as Abdullahi An-Na'im, Makau wa Mutua, Saskia Sassen, or Alison Dundes Renteln, who challenge or offer correctives to the prevailing Western discourse on universal human rights. For instance, Renteln rejects basing universal human rights on natural law and proposes instead to create a canon of human rights based on empirically ascertained "cross-cultural universals." An-Na'im argues that Islam and many universal human rights norms are quite compatible and proposes a "reform methodology" that stresses the promotion of progressive interpretations of Qur'anic texts and a renaissance of *ijtihad*, the individual interpretation of the Qur'an and Sunna, to increase the legitimacy of universal human rights in Muslim countries. Makau wa Mutua, on the other hand, suggests that the "ideology of human rights" promotes Western ideas of democracy and liberalism, whose promotion he rejects as incompatible with indigenous African traditions of the state and society. It is peculiar that a textbook on "human rights in the world community" exposes students almost exclusively to the views of Western (largely American) scholars.

Finally, the book would definitely benefit from the inclusion of some of the most contentious and interesting contemporary topics in the field of human rights. For instance, the compatibility of human rights and Islam, women's rights in the Middle East, human rights in the "war on terror," and spectacular developments in international criminal law to punish gross violations of human rights would seem to be natural topical choices for a textbook on global human rights.

In conclusion, *Human Rights in the World Community* is both broad in its approach and accessible. It is a useful primary text for introductory undergraduate courses in political science and international relations but cannot be recommended for advanced or specialized courses on human rights, sociology, or law.

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