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**Richard Burchill on Contemporary Human Rights Ideas by
Bertrand G. Ramcharan. New York, NY : Routledge, 2008. 192 pp.**

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Abstract

A review of:

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Contemporary Human Rights Ideas by Bertrand G. Ramcharan. New York, NY : Routledge, 2008. 192 pp.

This book is part of the Routledge series on Global Institutions, which aims to provide readers with definitive guides on a range of organizations and issues related to global governance. The author is a well known figure in international human rights who has spent over thirty years in U.N. service, including time as the Deputy and U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights.

The book is organized around a number of relatively short chapters. It begins with an introductory overview, and then looks at historical issues central to the development of human rights thinking. The second chapter addresses the current situation of human rights in the world community. The author then examines international obligations with regard to human rights (Chapter 3). This discussion is followed by four chapters on issues that are prominent in discussing human rights protection—universality, equality, democracy and development. These are followed by three chapters that deal with a number of practical human rights issues, such as international cooperation for the promotion and protection of human rights, and the various human rights dialogues that exist; mechanisms for human rights protection; and a discussion about justice, remedies, and reparations in the context of international human rights protection. The work comes to a close with a concluding chapter that summarises the key points raised throughout.

The author begins the book with a straightforward and sobering observation—the existence of extensive human rights violations is a symbol of a world in crisis. At the same time, there is an optimistic outlook as the author contends that furthering respect for human rights would go a long way toward alleviating many of the world’s ills. This sets the stage for examining a number of key ideas surrounding the protection of human rights, in order to achieve a goal stated by the author: to start a “chain reaction” in support of human rights protection.

To support this chain reaction, the author emphasizes a couple of prominent themes throughout the work that are crucial to furthering the effective promotion and protection of human rights. The first theme identified is the question of universality—the belief and assertion that human rights are applicable to all cultures and societies. The author puts forth a range of examples to demonstrate the existence of a “shared heritage of humanity.” The idea that human rights apply to all individuals is a simple one but it has consistently proven to be one of the more problematic aspects in furthering the promotion and protection of human rights. The author provides a number of direct observations on this point to make clear the view that no individual would purposely accept to be treated in a cruel and degrading fashion, and further that there is no support in the world’s philosophical traditions for justifying such treatment.

Of course, establishing that human rights are universally applicable does not ensure that the articulated standards and legal principles are observed. This point gives rise to the second main theme of this work, which is concerned with the nature of obligations concerning human rights. The author demonstrates that there are a number of different strategies for ensuring the observance of human rights, both legal and non-legal. The section on human rights dialogues is an important contribution to the strategies for the promotion and protection of human rights. It demonstrates that the power of human rights does not lie solely in legal instruments, but also in

the significant power of the rhetoric of human rights. The discussions about human rights protection demonstrate a number of critical problems in the current international system, as there is considerable divergence on how, and to what extent, we should be concerned about justice, remedies, aspects of domestic protection, etc. Without a doubt, the author's desire to start a chain reaction furthering the promotion and protection of human rights faces numerous challenges, but at the same time the international system for the promotion and protection of human rights has made considerable advances in furthering its effectiveness. The proliferation of international instruments, increasing ratification from a diverse range of states, more assertive monitoring and enforcement activities, all demonstrate the possibility of making the world a better place through the effective promotion and protection of human rights.

It is set out in the foreword that the purpose of the series is to provide accessible information about particular institutions or issues related to global governance, and to attempt to avoid the complex jargon of specialist works. It is further recognized that a comprehensive treatment of human rights would be an enormous and complex task. There is no doubt about the latter point, but it is with regret that the stated purpose of the series has not been achieved. It was with great eagerness that this review was undertaken given the reputation and experience of the author. It appears, however, that the desire for accessible brevity has hindered a number of aspects in the presentation of the work. Overall, the structure has impeded the ability of the author to explore in greater depth the chosen topics and to provide the sort of substantive examination one would expect, even of an introductory text. The author's close connection and experience with the human rights movement is evident throughout the work. However, this does not always translate into coherent discussions and explanations regarding various aspects of the international human rights system. It is unfortunate to conclude that in parts this work provides insightful commentary on the international system of human rights but it also lacks clarity in presentation and analysis, which will hinder its utility for those interested in the development of the international system for the promotion and protection of human rights.

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