Book Review


Human Rights in the United States: Beyond Exceptionalism, edited by Shareen Hertel and Kathryn Libal, presents numerous viewpoints by authors knowledgeable on human rights within the United States. The editors selected an excellent cross-section of articles about human rights policies as they are carried out in the United States. These articles cover diverse topics, but the focus clearly reflects social welfare and cultural issues, including children's rights; domestic violence; immigration; persons with disabilities; and lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, and transgendered persons. The purpose of the book is to cover a particular human rights issue within the social and cultural domain as it relates to current U.S. policies. The outcome of this exercise usually shows that the United States has a long way to go before it can truly claim that it follows human rights principles in regard to a host of social and cultural policy issues.

The author of each article addresses a particular human rights issue within the United States, and then focuses primarily on the legal aspects of that issue. In most cases, the author concludes that human rights policies within the United States are woefully lacking in addressing the issue at hand. This legal analysis of a particular human rights issue will undoubtedly suit students of law, but may be off-putting for those readers who prefer a more descriptive summary of human rights issues. Yet, the writing style is not overly legalistic, and even nonlawyers should have little trouble following the authors' analysis of human rights policies within the United States.

The primary strength of this book relates to the focus on U.S. domestic policies and why human rights principles could benefit those policies. All too often, when pundits or other commentators discuss human rights from a U.S. perspective, attention turns to other countries. Rarely do media or U.S. politicians ever discuss human rights violations within or by the United States. This sidestepping of human rights discussion as it relates to the United States clearly detracts from a more profound understanding of what human rights actually mean. Even when the U.S. violates a well-established human right, such as the right not to be tortured, U.S.
politicians and media personalities often contort this violation into something acceptable. Waterboarding becomes an enhanced interrogation procedure, not torture. This type of human rights avoidance does nothing to promote an understanding of human rights and even detracts from that understanding.

The book's extensive discussion of human rights issues, like health care, domestic violence, dignity, shelter, and the environment, within a US context presents a rare, but necessarily fresh, perspective on crucial issues. The discussion of social welfare issues with reference to actual human rights and other legal documents provides the reader with the opportunity to understand human rights and why the United States often fails to fulfill its human rights mission. One selection from the book addresses health care in the United States ("Entrenched inequity; health care in the United States," by Jean Connolly Carmalt, Sarah Zaidi, & Alicia Ely Yamin, pp. 153–174). The authors trace the history of this human right and analyze health care policy in the United States. They conclude that the US health care system has many flaws, particularly as it relates to low-income and minority residents who receive inferior health care in comparison to other segments of US society. The authors make it clear that a human rights approach to health care within the United States could benefit the entire health care system, not simply minorities. The book also states that the failure of the United States to ratify and enact the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) has negatively affected the status of children in the United States, particularly in the areas of health care, education, racial discrimination, and abuse. Children who exist in an environment deprived of social benefits mandated by the CRC often find themselves in situations that lead to criminal or other inappropriate activity.

If there is a weakness to this book, it lies in an overly technical style of writing common to most of the articles. Obviously, the purpose of being technical is to be persuasive and comprehensive in presentation of the human rights issue. Who, then, is going to read this book? A policy wonk? A technocrat? Unfortunately, this book needs to have a much broader audience. The issues presented by the book are critical to the advancement of US domestic policies. Everyone should be discussing these issues, not simply those who already have a role in policymaking. Although the style of writing may be legalistic, this should not prevent social workers from embracing the substance of the book. Social work advocates could enhance their own understanding of human rights by working with other professions, particularly the legal profession. This interprofessional collaboration could be instrumental in developing new social work policies and practices that promote human rights.

Overall, this book makes an important contribution to the human rights literature within the United States. Rarely does a book cover domestic US issues within a comprehensive human rights framework, pointing out why human rights principles have much to offer current policies. The book can
be heavy reading at times, and will most likely remain an academic treatise. Yet, the topics are timely, well presented, and important for all Americans.

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