

## BOOK REVIEW/ COMPTE RENDU

**Frezzo, Mark.** *The Sociology of Human Rights*. Cambridge and Malden: Polity Press, 2015. 192 pp., \$26.95 paper (9780745660110)

**T**he *Sociology of Human Rights* is an introductory text for students and non-specialists. The author has two objectives. First, he examines theoretical perspectives and the historical evolution of human rights. Secondly, the author advances a new framework for understanding human rights by focussing on four concepts: rights conditions, rights claims, rights effects and rights bundles. In this way, Frezzo seeks to demonstrate how sociology offers new insights on the nature of human rights.

Frezzo draws primarily from three sociological fields: political economy, social movements and political sociology. As the author notes, there is a long tradition dating back to Durkheim, Marx and Weber of scepticism towards universal principles that exist outside society. And yet sociology is ideally situated to contribute to this field of study given the discipline's long-standing concern with issues such as poverty and inequality. The book is divided into chapters based on traditional categories of human rights: civil and political (first generation or negative rights); economic and social (second generation or positive rights); and culture, environment and sustainable development (third generation). There are, as Frezzo notes, some benefits to categorizing rights in this way: civil and political rights have been useful in the past for securing other rights, and these distinctions help explain the differing functions of human rights. At the same time, however, the author explores the inter-relationship of rights or "rights bundles". Frezzo concludes by arguing for the recognition of three rights bundles, which presumably are the inevitable result of a sociological approach to human rights: the rights to longevity, full development of the person, and peace.

Frezzo defines the sociology of human rights as applying sociological theories and methods to understanding the social practice of human rights. As he explains, sociology emphasizes those social conditions that facilitate the emergence and implementation of human rights norms. Although the state is the primary enforcer of rights, rights claims emerge from society. This is how, as Frezzo demonstrates, sociology contributes to the study of human rights. Sociologists search for the basis of human rights claims within society rather than, for instance, international law.

And yet the author overlooks something even more fundamental about the sociology of human rights. When legal scholars and political scientists debate human rights, they often appeal to abstract principles. Human rights, from this perspective, derive from an abstract pre-social individual who has rights by virtue of their humanity. In theory, there would be no limit to how we define human rights. A sociological approach to human rights understands that rights derive from society and the state rather than an abstract principle. Our understanding of human rights must recognize that each society has its own rights culture that is socially constructed. Claims to universality confuse the way human rights are realized as a distinct social practice. In effect, a sociology of human rights puts aside the idealistic musings of political scientists and legal scholars, and roots our understanding of rights in social practice. This is one reason why the author's aspirational call to recognize the rights to longevity, full development of the person and peace are problematic. These new rights claims are only made possible by defining human rights as abstract ideals. It is precisely this type of appeal to universal principles that has informed sociologists' hesitation in the past to frame social problems as rights violations.

The book also fails to fully explain how a sociological approach is distinct from other disciplines, as well as the limits of framing social problems as rights violations. The author too easily accepts the long-standing presumption that human rights are primarily realized through law and governments. If sociology can contribute anything to the study of human rights, it should be to reveal how human rights norms are manifest outside the law. In fact, the author never explains how a sociology of human rights differs methodologically from other disciplines. The author's focus on the United States is also awkward because American rights activism has historically been focussed on civil rights rather than the more expansive idea of human rights. Frezzo argues that human rights innovations flowed from the Global South to the Global North, and ignores the tradition of human rights activism that originated in countries such as Canada or France. Of greater concern, however, is the author's failure to acknowledge the limits of framing social problems as human rights. One of the implications is that the social problem becomes an issue of public concern and, most often, a human rights frame envisions a legal solution. There is good reason to question whether the law is an effective framework for addressing war, poverty or environmental degradation. For example, men have successfully framed some issues in the gender-neutral language of rights in order to undermine policies designed to address inequality on the basis that men and women should be treated the same. Rather than explore these implications, the author

encourages readers to frame any social or political problem as a human rights violation.

Nonetheless, Frezzo provides a useful introduction to the idea of human rights and offers a platform for debating how sociology can contribute to this field of study. In particular, the author demonstrates how sociology can help explain those conditions under which people formulate rights claims; how governments implement human rights norms; and how human rights transform power relations among social actors. Sociology can help us understand how and why human rights have emerged as a powerful social force, as well as those social conditions that made rights significant in a particular historical moment. In order to have social meaning, human rights must become embedded in routine practices of societal institutions. In other words, a sociological approach helps us understand the societal preconditions for the emergence of human rights.

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