



Book Reviews

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Perspectives on Human Rights

Human Rights and Human Security by Bertrand G. Ramcharan. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 2002. Pp.246 .index. \$143.00 (hbk). ISBN 90-411-1818-7.

Asia Pacific and Human Rights: A Global Political Economy Perspective by Paul Close and David Askew. Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2004. Pp.230 + notes + bibliography + index. £56.99 (hbk). ISBN 0-7546-3629-1.

How do international human rights norms define the content of human security? How does the protection of human rights in the contemporary world contribute to human security? The first book under review provides a theoretical framework as well as practical cases in order to answer these questions.

Several chapters focus on the relationship between human rights and human security, and the relationship between global poverty and equality. As a theoretical guide, Bertrand Ramcharan also includes the 'Declaration on Human Rights as an Essential Component of Human Security', adopted by the Commission on Human Security on 1 December 2001. Although many views expressed in the book are self-evident, they are nonetheless interesting in that they come from a former high United Nations (UN) official: Ramcharan has been a Commissioner of the International Commission of Jurists and a Member of the Permanent International Court of Arbitration, and he was Assistant Secretary-General and Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights when he wrote this book. For example: 'September 11th has taught the world one fundamental lesson: the security of nations, even the mightiest, requires genuine partnership and cooperation at the United Nations' (p.2) and 'international human rights norms define the meaning of human security' (p.3). Rather than an academic research work, this is a well organized commentary of UN functions on human rights and human security for policy practitioners. Most chapters in the book explore the mechanism of the Security Council (Chapter II), the Commission on Human Rights (Chapters V, VI and XII), the High Commissioner for Human Rights (Chapters VII, IX and X), and the Secretary-General (Chapter VIII). Each of the chapters analyses UN agencies beyond their narrow administrative role defined by the UN Charter. The author especially highlights that the former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan was: 'by far the most dynamic Secretary-General as far as human rights are concerned the Organization has ever seen' (p.165), and the second High Commissioner Mary Robinson: 'the international community owes a debt of gratitude for the public visibility she has brought to the Office and for the higher profile she has given to human rights' (p.165). The author persuasively explains that protecting human rights by these UN agencies greatly enhances human security.

As Ramcharan's book was written during 2001, too much space is devoted to cases such as the former Yugoslavia - thus some readers may feel the book a little outdated. It would be worth a new edition to cover issues of human rights and human security in places such as Iraq and North Korea. At the same time, the book does not mention some long-lasting and mass human rights violations (such as in post-Tiananmen China) at all.

Unfortunately, the second book under review does not help to fill out Ramcharan's oversights. Nominally, the book focuses on human rights and human security issues in Asia. However, the title is vague and the subtitle misleading: the book actually discusses only the East Asia region (and then mainly Japan, where the authors live), even though the authors themselves define the Asia Pacific region as 'encompassing East Asia, the South Pacific and the Americas' (p.11). Although the authors invoke 'A Global Political Economy Perspective' in the subtitle, this seems to be more to merely fit in with the publisher's 'International Political Economy of New Regionalism' series, as the book has little to do with global political economy. What this book makes apparent is that the authors approach human rights debates in East Asia from Western eyes. But the authors' aims and purposes remain obscure and narrowly focused. For example, in chapter seven, titled 'The meaning of human rights and the uncertainty of death', the authors discuss how in Japan human rights are interpreted differently from in Europe and America. But how does this bring a 'global political economy perspective' to 'Asia Pacific and Human Rights'? Similarly, chapter eight, titled 'Political rights of non-nationals: the constitutional debate in Japan', does not actually cover human rights violations in Japan, but rather discusses the extent to which the rights of non-national residents can and should be guaranteed in Japan's voting system.

The authors' treatment of human rights issues in China is galling for its cursory nature: many pages are absorbed in discussing one article. Unsurprisingly, they conclude that the Chinese government's attitude toward human rights under Jiang Zemin has developed positively: 'This is the first time that human rights were written ...into the formal document of the Party's national congress' (p.72); 'The Chinese style of human rights may be on its way to assuming a more Marxian character' (p.74). In fact, human rights protection has long been a slogan of the Chinese Communist Party since its founding 80 years ago. Yet nothing is said about China's democratic and human rights movement. When the reader comes across lengthy citations introducing basic political words from very basic sources (such as 'politburo' taken from Wikipedia at p.33, and 'supranational' from the Oxford dictionary at p.135), or as introductions to some well-known international organizations (such as Amnesty International and the Central Intelligence Agency), the reader cannot help but wonder what kind of audience the book is written for. Confusingly, other acronyms (such as 'GHRR' for global human rights regime, 'GPE' for global political economy) are used as if they are important specialist terms generally used to discuss human rights. As the economic development of East Asia continues, issues of human rights and human security in the region will only continue to grow in importance. But any discussion of human rights in the region cannot avoid the issue of China, given that both the region's and the world's largest population remains under dictatorship. The omission of such a discussion is a grave failing of a book that claims to be about the region as a whole.

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