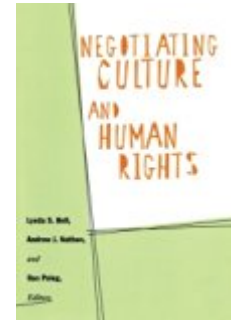


Lynda S. Bell, Andrew J. Nathan, Ilan Peleg, eds. *Negotiating Culture and Human Rights*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2000. xiii + 428 pp. \$20.50, paper, ISBN 978-0-231-12081-4.



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Approaching Human Rights

When broaching the subject of human rights in my U.S. history survey classes, I often goad students with examples of economic exploitation by multinational corporations and then suggest the students' possible complicity in the exploitation through their purchasing of specific products. Students often respond that they are powerless to change the "system," that the employees of whatever corporation under discussion are better off with their wages than having no income at all, or that corporations should adhere to a universal set of business standards wherever they set up shop. Reading *Negotiating Culture and Human Rights*, these classroom exchanges immediately came to mind because college students often find the issue of human rights a point of no contention--that a certain set of rights applies to us all. Yet getting to that point of universally accepted (and practiced) human rights has proven to be untenable thus far and *Negotiating Culture and Human Rights* explores some of the basic issues of why.

This collection of fourteen interdisciplinary essays on human rights, which stem from a 1997

seminar, centers around the debate between a conception of human rights as universal versus a culturally relativist view. The essays focus on this division in Asia, where the culturally relativist view of human rights is often referred to as "Asian values," since governments, such as Singapore, China, Malaysia, and Indonesia, have adopted the relativist stance as a way of defraying criticism. As the editors explain, officials from these nations, such as Singapore's UN ambassador Bilahari Kausikan, have asserted that Asian cultures value "family over the individual, harmony over conflict, discipline and deference to authority over self-assertion, and welfare over freedom," which puts Asian cultures in conflict with Western conceptions of human rights (p.8). Furthermore, numerous Asian nations argue that the crucial issues of economic development and political stability often conflict with human rights.[1] Given the divisive and complex nature of the debate, the book attempts to get past the "universalist/relativist" divide.

The volume's editors, Lynda S. Bell (UC-Riverside), Andrew J. Nathan (Columbia University),

and Ilan Peleg (Lafayette College), in their introduction, spell out the main issues of the human rights debate and the universal/relativist dichotomy. Briefly put, the universalist stance asserts that rights are sacred, God-given, self-evident, absolute, and cannot be rescinded. For the universalists, humanity (despite acknowledged cultural differences) shares similarities that make human rights applicable to everyone. Contrasting this position is the relativist perspective, which claims that all rights are contextual and that current conceptions of human rights (e.g., free speech) are the products of Western society and are cultural and historical constructions.

According to relativists, then, the idea of universal human rights is ahistorical and the attempt to advance universal human rights at best is naïve and at worst is tantamount to cultural imperialism. Thus Chinese officials in embracing "Asian values" can accuse Westerners of arrogance and ignorance when they criticize China for human rights violations.

The editors and a number of contributors attempt to reconcile the universal/relativist divide by applying a post-structural conception of culture to the human rights issue in Asia. A structural view of culture—one that advances culture as a stable set of core values and behavior shared by individuals in a society—supports the notion that a particular society's culture can be identified in order to predict behavior. Borrowing from cultural studies theorists, the editors subscribe to a post-structural stance—one that does not assume that cultures are stable. Rather, culture is a "congress of way of thinking, behaving, and acting that are constantly in the state of being produced; it is contingent and always unstable" (p. 11). Viewed from this perspective cultural differences are no longer fixed, insurmountable obstacles that preclude progress in the human rights debate. Instead, culture is negotiated, allowing individuals and groups to find common ground. The editors label this mode of inquiry "chastened universalism."

Many of the book's contributors employ this theoretical standpoint in order to overcome the universal/relativist divide. Specifically, they advocate a deep interrogation of cultures within a specific time and place so that cultural differences are fully realized and therefore subject to "negotiation." With this heuristic model the advancement of human rights is possible because it maintains a cultural sensitivity. For example, Lucinda Joy Peach's essay on human rights and women's rights concentrates on the sex trade in contemporary Thailand as a case study for how an intense understanding of local conditions, values, and politics is the best way to advance human rights within a specific context. The contributions by Xiaogun Xu and Farhat Haq, who analyze human rights in China and the Middle East respectively, perform similar functions. For these three authors, a post-structural view of culture prevents adherents of Asian values from eluding criticism and forces universalists to more fully appreciate the mindset of the targets of their criticism.

Overall, most of the book's contributors, whose disciplines include international law, international politics, history English, sociology, and philosophy adhere to the "chastened universalism" approach to human rights. The philosophical article by Stephen J. Hood in part 2 of the book, however, leans more towards universalism than the remainder of the essays in parts 2, 3, 4, and 5. Yet, as the articles by Haq, Sharon K. Hom, Bell, and Peach remind us, even with the sophisticated approach of "chastened universalism" the advancement of human rights remains a challenging task.

Each of the volume's five parts is devoted to a particular theme, such as the philosophical underpinnings of human rights or examining human rights discourse. While analyses of the inherent limitations international laws possess in advancing human rights and the role of women's rights within human rights debates receive particular attention. Readers interested in these topics

will find the book useful while those unfamiliar with the breadth of the human rights debate will find the text a helpful introduction. Also, the volume's appendix provides reproductions of key human rights declarations, such as the 1948 U.N. Declaration on Human Rights, and excerpts from the 1979 U.N. Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women. Conversely, the wide-ranging nature of the book may put off some readers who desire an extended study of only one particular subject. For those seeking such a study this volume may not be the place to look. Instructors who want to incorporate human rights into their classes will find the book useful for upper-division courses or graduate courses.

The greatest strength of *Negotiating Culture* is its demonstration of the uses of culture as a category of analysis. The "deep interrogation" model demonstrated in chapters one, six, eight, and nine offers scholars a theoretical model for explaining cultural interaction in general, not just in conjunction with human rights issues. Thus the volume is valuable beyond its specific subject matter. For historians of American foreign relations who wish to adopt cultural analysis to their studies the essays in this volume provide concise examples of how to successfully use cultural studies methodologies, particularly for those scholars reaching beyond an American-centered perspective.[2]

Notes

[1]. The 1993 Bangkok Declaration on Human Rights, a joint declaration by mainly East and Southeast Asian nations, explicitly stated the tenets of the Asian values stance. Excerpts from the declaration are reproduced in the book's appendix.

[2]. For examples of American foreign relations scholars who have applied a post-structural understanding of culture to their studies see William O. Walker, ed., *Drugs in the Western Hemisphere: An Odyssey of Cultures in Conflict* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, Inc., 1996);

and the essays in Gilbert M. Joseph, Catherine C. LeGrand, and Richard D. Salvatore, eds., *Close Encounters of Empire: Writing the Cultural History of U.S.-Latin American Relations* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1998).

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