

**Book Review: *Human Rights in Our Own Backyard***

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*Human Rights in Our Own Backyard* focuses on the human rights issues that occurring in the United States. It not only clearly addresses those issues, but also reflects on and documents American society's responses to human rights violations. This volume (edited by William Armaline, Davita Silfen Glasberg, and Bandana Purkayastha) draws on the expertise of human rights experts to identify human rights issues within U.S. borders. Author Judith Blau writes that Americans have become obsessed with human rights violations in far-away places, yet they fail to recognize the human rights violations happening at home.

One of the main points that this book emphasizes is that no one human rights category is more important than another. The book is divided into seven sections: Economic rights, social rights, cultural rights, political and civil rights, racial discrimination, discrimination against women, and human rights and resistance in the United States. In each section, authors examine the ethical issues inherent to each category as they relate to the United States. With racial discrimination, for example, authors consider various cultural rights, as well as the impacts of discrimination on the political and social rights of minorities. The sections also consider how powerful corporations are harming the welfare of the poor in their communities.

The philosophical questions raised in *Human Rights in Our Own Backyard* force the reader to consider the underlying assumptions of human rights. For instance, there are questions about why human rights concerns have made such a recent and dramatic appearance in America, why universal human rights have become a global movement, and why we make human rights-related issues more complicated than they need to be (or really are). This book also expands the scope of human rights responsibility by analyzing and interpreting how major corporations have so much power over small communities.

This book, in my opinion, can do more service to the average person than most other human rights books. Unlike many other books that focus on far away countries (with names that, let's face it, some of us can't even pronounce), this book highlights the human rights issues that exist in the United States. It brings the issues close to home for American readers and gives examples that readers in the developed world can relate to. Not all Americans can relate to or comprehend the reality of those who have been forced into slave labor in other countries, for instance, but they can perhaps begin to care more about slave labor when a well-known American university is involved in a labor scandal. (For instance, in December of 2004 it was discovered that the University of Connecticut got their athletic apparel from a sweatshop across the U.S border. That event alone caused a snowball effect in human rights movements across the country, leading to sweatshop-free clothing being sold in university bookstores.) In each section, the authors state the issues clearly and then document actions such as public and political reactions, social movement activities, and resulting legislation.

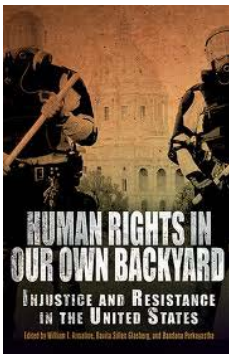
The above incident at the University of Connecticut directly relates to economic issues, which represents a section written by Julie Elkins and Shereen Hertel. After sweatshops were exposed, UConn and other universities nationwide collaborated to raise the living and working conditions of the people who manufactured logo-bearing apparel and other products in factories around the world. They did

more to make sure that workers were being treated fairly, and were being given reliable wages. As Elkins and Hertel explain, UConn is required to uphold worker rights and labor standards like working hours, wages, health and safety, etc. This is when the book can be tricky to read; many scholars would contend that it is the state that is responsible for upholding workers' rights laws, and not businesses. Corporations may try to argue that providing workers' rights would be too costly, that the workers at least have a job so they shouldn't complain, and that we shouldn't start telling major corporations what they can and can't do. Luckily, Elkins and Hertel address these issues head-on in a clear and forward way that advances this debate.

The book ends with "Human Rights and Resistance in the United States," a description of the effort to make the United States take a bigger stance against human rights violations. Authors Chivy Sok and Kenneth J. Neubeck describe all the different tools we have at our disposal to help make change happen (such as free speech), and also discuss the general "it'll fix itself" attitude that many members of American society seems to have when it comes to human rights issues at home. The United States has been a leader in creating human rights organizations and forming human right protecting treaties, but unfortunately it doesn't always follow its own "superior" moral code. While people in the developed world can chastise and guilt other countries that commit human rights violations, it's important to remember that the U.S. government has bent the rules of human rights to serve its own agenda.

For example, due process was suspended under the George W. Bush administration in the name of fighting terrorism, and prisoners were left for years without access to a lawyer as a result. The U.S. government has legalized certain forms of torture when it has found "justification" for it (like waterboarding suspected "terrorists" to gain information). Human rights violations happen in America every day, and the first step readers can take in hopes of fixing this problem is spreading awareness. Human rights issues do not only exist in other countries; because of the U.S. "golden standard" for

human rights (since America has the most pro-human rights treaties and laws and declarations, even though the government isn't always very good at following them), some are led to believe that human rights violations and major ethical problems only happen "over there". In order for more people to act for change, more people need to know the truth. And before people can know what is going on in their own backyard, someone has to teach them. *Human Rights in Our Own Backyard: Injustice and Resistance in the United States* does a great job of taking that important first step.



**Book Information**

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