

## LAW &amp; CULTURE



### HUMAN RIGHTS FROM BELOW: ACHIEVING RIGHTS THROUGH COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Jim Ife; Cambridge University Press, 2009; 264 pp; \$56.95 (paperback)

While somewhat dry in delivery, *Human Rights from Below* provides a useful grounding in the issues that make the field of human rights so challenging and fascinating. Ife carefully and respectfully confronts some of the most important principles of human rights, including notions of universality, inalienability and indivisibility, highlighting both the value and the limitations in traditional approaches. Human rights dialogue is important, argues Ife, because, in the wake of socialism's decline, it is one of the few legitimate ways to challenge dominant economic and political ideologies. He argues, however, that if human rights are not themselves to become a form of colonialism, a nuanced understanding of their purpose and impact is necessary.

The tensions between Western concepts of 'universal' individual rights and thorny issues of cultural diversity are carefully teased out, as are the tensions between individual and collective rights. Ife argues that global human rights instruments, as important as they are, must be understood critically in light of the political climates that gave rise to them if they are to be useful. Ife also examines the contested territory of rights versus responsibilities, and the way such notions are manipulated in both conservative and liberal politics.

The central tenet of Ife's argument is that natural and statutory human rights can only go so far when it comes to the guarantee of human rights as lived experience. The law, he argues, is a blunt instrument against the 'subtle, complex and ambiguous' (p 90) abuses that people may suffer in the workplace or the home. Instead, he argues that a culture of human rights should be fostered and that while law has an important role to play, the core of human rights education should come from the humanities, such as anthropology, sociology and philosophy. Ife also argues that human rights at a community level

should be a product of active discussion and participation within the community.

Ife's analyses draws strongly on post-modern theory, which he argues sits awkwardly with the modernist trajectory of Western law, seeking as it does to define and impose a unified set of rules. This is not to say that he considers human right instruments to be irrelevant, only that they should be regarded as aspirational and incomplete documents that reflect particular understandings at particular points of time. For example, he suggests that rather than regard the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as a solemn and sacred document, a community could use it as a basis for discussion, by analysing its language, what was included, what was left out, the political and historical context in which it was written, and possibly rewrite their own version.

Ife is similarly critical of the concept of 'community' itself, declaring that while strong communities are central to the achievement of human health and happiness, at its worst, community development can become the very antithesis of human rights, especially if it fosters exclusion along racial or religious lines. Much community development is based in a community-as-commonality, rather than a community-in-diversity approach where even those who are radically different are afforded a place by virtue of their geographical presence in an area. Ife holds that this is central to ensuring human rights are obtainable as a lived reality. At their worst, he states, communities based in commonality can be brutally exclusive, even ostracising, of difference. Human rights guidelines therefore become very important when it comes to providing reference points for development of community and in this regard legal regimes are relevant and necessary.

Ife also makes some interesting observations about the nature of community in the internet age, and sounds a warning that many advocates of online community may find unsettling. While not disparaging to the usefulness of the internet as a communications tool, he argues that 'virtual' community which is not based in locality is highly likely to ignore or overlook the importance of local issues, particularly environmental ones,

by creating an abstract alternative to an unpleasant reality. This effectively removes the most educated and technologically savvy individuals from an area, as well as fostering community-as-commonality along narrow lines and excluding those without access to technology.

Ife repeatedly emphasises that some of the most important human rights — and ones that are likely to loom large in the 21st century — are yet to be adequately articulated. He is referring to environmental rights and the recognition that rights do not exist merely in the present, but are inter-generational. We may, he argues, be in the process of committing one of the gravest human rights abuses in history by denying a viable environment to our descendants. In this he posits that human rights dialogue could be central in coming to grips with such issues as climate change and, given the nature of our political and economic structures, such impetus must necessarily come from community.

*Human Rights from Below* offers good analysis on the above issues, but is seemingly deliberately vague when it comes to how such a synthesis of universal human rights traditions and grass-roots community context is to be achieved. Ife states that there can be no 'how-to' manual to foster human rights from below and that every situation will be dependent on its context, going on to encourage human rights workers to develop their own approaches. However true this may be, it is somewhat frustrating for the reader, as most of his ideas are stated in fairly abstract terms which may leave one struggling to imagine a context in which to fully appreciate them. Overall the book would benefit from a wider range of examples than is given, and the lack of case studies tends to undermine the authoritativeness of the author's thesis. That said, however, the logical layout of the book would lend itself well to educators seeking discrete, chapter-long readings for their students covering some important issues in the human rights debate.

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