

Reviews

Understanding Human Rights Violations: New Systematic Studies,
Sabine C Carey and Steven C Poe (eds) (2004) , Ashgate, Aldershot,
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This edited volume seeks to remedy the lack of attention paid by empirical social science researchers to the area of human rights. In particular, it looks to respond to the charge made by Roy Preiswerk (1981) that scholars have regularly failed to do research as if people and their suffering mattered.

This collection also attempts to advance debates by including issues that have received little attention in previous empirical studies. To this end, the book draws together a range of topics including decision-making regarding development aid, the impact of arms sales on recipient countries, the lending practices of the World Bank and the IMF, the sentencing practices of the Ad Hoc Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, and the organisational structures of violating states, among others. There is much here to interest criminologists and the editors have worked hard to develop connections between diverse areas. Of positive note is the approach taken by many contributors to examine human rights in a way that departs from the mainstream civil and political focus. Thus, there are studies that investigate subsistence rights as well as workers rights' in the volume.

The empirical nature of this text will appeal to many academics and practitioners. For this reader, however, the inherent difficulties of positivist work to provide explanations for diverse social practices remain. The problem with this approach, as raised by critical scholars with regards to positivist criminological studies, is that we lose understanding of complex historical, social, political and ideological relations. This issue is troublesome within national debates however it is extended further here as the majority of contributors build substantial data sets that cut across continents to develop a global analysis. In doing so, the diverse detail between and within countries is inevitably overlooked and the book, as a whole, does not readily add to our understanding of personal or social circumstances. In this sense, individual suffering is overlooked.

Under the empirical frame, authors base their analyses on the grounds that violations may be readily defined, classified and counted. In their work on subsistence rights, for example, Milner et al note that rights relating to torture and imprisonment may be straightforwardly defined. Yet, as seen in recent debates, the actual question of which activities can constitute torture is subject to some contestation, certainly it remains ill-defined in law. Moreover, how such violations might be counted remains an almost impossible challenge.

For most of the contributors, human rights violations are measured through pre-collated data, such as from the US State Department's annual country reports as well as from Amnesty International and the Physical Quality of Life Index. Other variables (including trade activities, perceived stability, population, militarisation) are variously taken from UN documents, CIA Reports and official statistics. With such measures, the question of

validity looms large. Many violations, like torture, are hidden from view and pass under the radar of state agencies and trans-national human rights organisations. While monitoring reports might have a role in exposing that violations have occurred, they tend to be politically partial documents that rarely detail the reality of suffering on the ground (it is for precisely this reason that truth commissions are so often established when a society moves into a transition from repression). Thus, the issue of validity might be viewed as an irrecoverable problem to many of these small studies. Still, there are exceptions, and the chapters by Smeulers, Policzer, Meernik and King, and Abouharb and Cingranelli present deeper analyses of more focused studies.

In sum, while the collection provides a number of interesting areas of study, the near all-encompassing global, empirical approach tended to leave this reviewer none the wiser about the difficult, unique circumstances in which violations emerge and are dealt with.

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References

Preiswerk, R (1981) 'Could We Study International Relations as if People Mattered?' in *Peace and World Order Studies: A Curriculum Guide*, Institute for World Order, New York.