

Introductory steps to a sociology of human rights

Mark Frezzo:

The Sociology of Human Rights: An Introduction.

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Mark Frezzo, a sociologist from the United States, has written an easy to read and well-structured textbook on the “sociology of human rights” or “human rights sociology” for teachers, students, and civil society actors. In Finnish, this area could be named as “*ihmisoikeussosiologia*” or “*ihmisoikeuksien sosiologia*”. According to a quick search on the web, both terms are very new to debates in Finnish. This does not mean that such conceptualizations do not exist, but judging by their scant appearance on the web, this could be a new area of sociological study to be opened

up in contemporary Finnish-language sociological research. Together with other titles that have appeared mainly in the US market, this book sets out to articulate how human rights may be studied with the help of sociological concepts and methods.

There has been prior research and theoretical work in the area, but it seems that in recent years there has emerged a specific need to map and demarcate “sociology of human rights” as a sub-discipline of its own to be both studied and taught. Frezzo gives some suggestions for such titles in the Further Reading section at the end of the book. Earlier, sociological thinking about human rights has been developed, for example, by Bryan S. Turner in 1993 in his article “Outline of a Theory of Human Rights”. Indeed, Frezzo builds partly on the work done by Turner. Human rights studies, as such, is not by definition the property of any particular academic discipline. Nevertheless, law, especially international law, political science, and philosophy have been among the more visible disciplines that human rights studies are connected to.

The book is structured and proceeds in a very logical and clear manner. First, it offers a rather detailed prologue on the exist-

ence of the book (“Background to the book”). Then, it proceeds to how human rights may be set as the object of sociological thought. The Introduction, Chapter 1, and Chapter 2 focus on how to conceptualize, define, and classify human rights within sociological thought. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 describe different thematic areas of human rights following the “three generations” of human rights as seen by Karel Vasak in his rather short and practical account in 1977 called “Human Rights: A Thirty-Year Struggle”.

The first generation of human rights consists of negative civil and political rights meaning the freedom to participate, for example, in political decision-making and to remain in peace and privacy from one’s State. The second generation of human rights consists of positive economic, social, and cultural rights meaning rights to develop and sustain human beings redistributing resources. The third and also historically most recent generation of human rights is characterized by collective rights to group identities, environmental protection, and development. These characterizations derive from the content of intergovernmental human rights treaties within the United Nations and their historical succession.

Even though Frezzo does problematize this well-known division of human rights into three

generations, he does not really venture very far from the familiar and expected foundations of Vasak’s three generations of rights in building his own account of human rights thinking and the sociology of human rights. On the other hand, he develops his own conceptualizations of human rights and offers the reader new perspectives when proceeding through what human rights may be viewed to be through the lens of sociological research. When at his best, he is developing the schema of three generations forward in a critical manner.

The contribution of the book is that it offers a framework that is based on four concepts: rights conditions, rights claims, rights effects, and rights bundles. According to Frezzo, these form the basis for a sociological perspective into the study of human rights. Apparently, compared to studies in other neighbouring disciplines such as philosophy, political science, anthropology, and geography, it is possible to analyse the norms, practices, and structures of human rights in a manner that is particular to sociology.

The fourth category, rights bundles, which could also be characterized with the metaphor of nests or baskets of rights, is way of drawing together previously articulated rights under new

thematic umbrellas. The notion of a “bundle of rights” has been taken from the field of property law, where the acquisition, for example, of a certain object such as real estate brings with it several rights over it. In Chapter 6, Frezzo offers his own three bundles of rights that are pertinent to human rights struggles today: longevity, full development of the person and peace. He also invites the readers, both learned and novices, to develop and name their own bundles of rights.

This book acts as a handy and reader-friendly introduction to human rights from the perspective of social science. Each chapter comes with a summary and questions at the end, useful for teaching purposes. The focus of the book is on issues such as globalization and environmental change. The treatment of the essence of human rights, the relationship between individuals, and states or groups and states, is slightly lacking. This could have been more in the forefront of the text. After all, states are the entities that agree on the formal and legal content of human rights with other states, and it is this that forms the basis for individuals, groups and civil society actors on how they approach human rights as a tool for social change.

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