

Book Review: Activating Human Rights and Peace

by Blog Admin

October 22, 2012

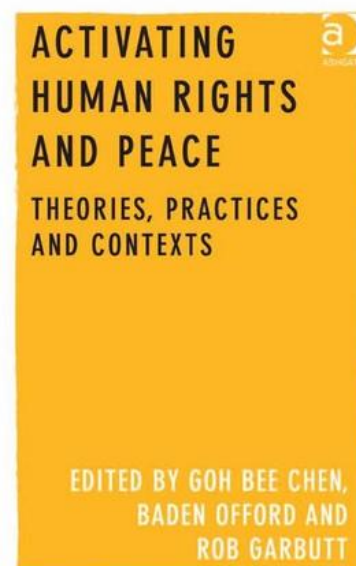
Activating Human Rights and Peace is an enlightening collection of well thought through cases aimed at academics and students of human rights, political science, law and justice, peace and conflict studies and sociology. It argues that we need to appreciate that cultivating a human rights and peace consciousness is choice-less: there is a moral imperative to engender and sustain an ethical praxis that is motivated by a concern and commitment for how we live with each other. **Kristen Perrin** notes that each chapter gives a glimpse into the diverse range of ideas encompassing contemporary human rights issues.



Activating Human Rights and Peace: Theories, Practices and Contexts. Goh Bee Chen, Baden Offord and Rob Garbutt (eds.). Ashgate. June 2012.

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Challenges facing human rights are talked about so often in our current global climate that 'human rights' as a buzz-word manages to be both constant and elusive. The concept is constant in that conflict, poverty, upheaval and justice are rarely mentioned without human rights in tandem, and elusive in that the reality of human rights within these very discussions is never fully explored outside of terminologies that are both vague and obtuse in scope. The common trap of human rights literature is that it is almost impossible not to lean on these vague definitions, leaving the scholar lost in a sea of phrases depicting 'the essence of being human' and 'fundamental moral codes'.



Fortunately, the vastness of the body of human rights literature has forced its own evolution, and overly optimistic language has been met with sharp analysis, the evidence of experience and current applications. The collection of essays found in *Activating Human Rights and Peace* balances itself well in the existing literature, linking human rights with concepts that have been widely discussed – such as law, immigration, and conflict – and adding innovative perspectives from education, tourism and storytelling. The brevity of the essays included allows for creative ideas to be introduced but not overdone, leaving the collection as less of an in-depth study and more of a jumping-off point to further inquiry.

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The title certainly begs deconstructing. The idea of 'activating' human rights evokes certain implications in the mind – the possibility that human rights and activism are inextricably linked, implied urgency, and the notion that human rights is something static that is waiting for 'activation'. This choice of title for a collection of essays on an extraordinary range of issues associated with human rights initially seems puzzling. Editor [Baden Offord](#) has previously edited two other volumes of a similar title (*Activating Human Rights* in 2006 and *Activating Human Rights in Education* in 2008), so this collection does not sit alone on the shelf bearing this title. Although editor [Goh Bee Chen](#) (law professor at Australia's Southern Cross University, specialising in peace law and alternate dispute resolution) attempts to clarify the title in the introductory chapter, defining activating human rights as bringing it 'into both vision and practice as a living praxis' (p. 2), it is not until one fully engages with the content of the book the concept becomes clearer.

The age-old problem of bridging theory and practice is given a small breath of life in this volume, as specific examples of this dichotomy are reflected on in creative ways. The reader begins to feel that the subject of human rights is not tackled specifically as an *outcome*, and to view it as such in practice would open up further failures in its promotion. To activate human rights implies an attention to *process*, and although end goals are certainly present, it is the attention to this process that allows this volume to sit well among the literature.

The book is sectioned into three parts: *Theories*, *Practices*, and *Contexts*. Its contributors are primarily Australian scholars, and as such the evocation of Australia's history of human rights abuses is something that underlies most chapters, tying them together in a subtle way that often seems unintentional.

In the first section, there is a particularly unique contribution from novelist and creative writing professor Janie Conway-Herron in *Voices for Hope: Storytelling and Human Rights*. It bears small similarities to law professor Adrien Katherine Wing's chapter *The War Against Terror: Religion, Clothing, and the Human Right to Peace* in that both are heavily anecdotal, and they lend experience and emotion to debates that are currently seen in headlines as primarily political. In the case of Wing, this is the debate surrounding female Muslim dress and the detriment of socially constructed categories, while Conway-Herron tackles the reception and acceptance of victim accounts of human rights abuses.

In the second section, Michael Kirby's chapter, *Cambodia: The Long Hard Journey to Peace and Human Rights*, is an excellent example of a practitioner's account of the problems inherent in monitoring human rights through international cooperation (or in this case, the lack thereof). Kirby, the former UN Special Representative for Human Rights in Cambodia, gives a compelling account of the challenges facing UN human rights representatives. He asks the all-important question: In instances where countries are not cooperating with UN representatives for human rights, is the mere presence of these representatives a step backward in that they contribute to the illusion of compliance? Kirby pushes for improvements in these situations using evidence from his own experiences in the region, and does so in a logical and effective way.

In the final section, Linda Briskman's chapter *A Clash of Paradigms for Asylum Seekers: Border Security and Human Security* is particularly relevant to current debates on problems between border security and human rights, but goes beyond the common rhetoric of 'us vs. them' to highlight the danger inherent in the use of criminalization of 'other' (in this case, asylum seekers) to lift the protections afforded by human rights agreements. Briskman makes a very persuasive argument using witness accounts from detention camps on Christmas Island, demonstrating that the militarization of border security has, in this case, emphasized the category of asylum seeker as 'invader'.

Due to the scope of issues tackled in this volume and the brevity with which they are tackled, it is likely that the reader will find that some chapters resonate particularly well, while others feel a bit extraneous. The concept of peace is also largely passed-by in most chapters, making its presence in the title somewhat misleading. While the book lacks a clear theoretical consistency, each chapter gives a glimpse into the diverse range of ideas encompassing contemporary human rights issues.

Kristen Perrin is in her final year of PhD study at University College London in the School of Slavonic and East European Studies. Her primary research interests are in theories of conflict, genocide, transitional justice and human rights. Her thesis examines transcripts from the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), applying a mixture of sociolinguistics and social psychology to witness testimony from both victims and accused. [Read more reviews by Kristen.](#)

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