

Book Review: Human Rights and Democracy: The Precarious Triumph of Ideals

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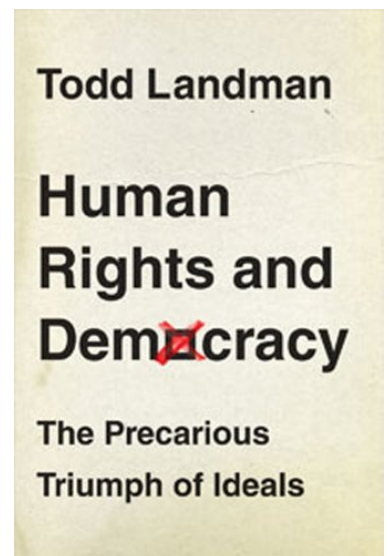
Human Rights and Democracy: the Precarious Triumph of Ideals assesses the progress of human rights in and since the 20th Century, against a backdrop of repressive regimes and mass slaughter in a rigorous yet accessible way, writes **Claire Overman**. Despite some confusing structuring, **Todd Landman** illustrates the complexities of the human rights agenda in a way that non-experts and experts alike will find both convincing and readable.



Human Rights and Democracy: The Precarious Triumph of Ideals. Todd Landman. Bloomsbury Academic. September 2013.

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The twentieth century was marked by a global paradox. Whilst it was the bloodiest in human history, it was also the century in which countries around the world committed themselves to democracy and human rights on an unprecedented scale. It is this paradox which flows through **Todd Landman's** *Human Rights and Democracy: the Precarious Triumph of Ideals*. As the title makes clear, this is not just an examination of these two concepts, but is tempered with the proviso that "the maintenance of democratic institutions and the protection of human rights remain precarious even in the best of times" (p.5). Landman's analysis of human rights and democracy is presented through an examination of "thematic couplets"; a series of binary concepts linked to the central examination of democracy and human rights. Thus, as well as considering the substantive content of these two concepts, he considers, among other things, their waves and setbacks, their evidence and explanations, and their threats and pitfalls. In this way, each chapter allows for a discrete and balanced debate within an easy-to-digest framework.



Chapter 3 deals with the central issue of defining human rights and democracy. As this frames the parameters of the debate, it may have been more useful for this chapter to have been at the very beginning of the book. Nevertheless, it provides a thorough deconstruction of both democracy (separated into its procedural, liberal and social facets at page 27) and human rights (divided into civil and political rights, economic, social and cultural rights, and solidarity rights at page 33). By breaking down these concepts in this way, Landman is able to explore the interrelationship between them, and to expose the deceptively intuitive fallacy that democracy is the best vehicle for protecting human rights.

On page 38, he takes the example of Cuba, which has been praised for its socialised healthcare and yet has been a single-party socialist regime since the 1960s. Thus, while democracy may facilitate the protection of civil and political human rights, it may not be the only type of regime capable of protecting socio-economic human rights. This is borne out starkly in visual form by Landman's use of scatter diagrams throughout the chapter. Further, his refining and categorising of the concepts of human rights and democracy has implications for his later quantitative analysis of the growth in the number of democracies. He notes that any attempt to count the number of democracies must first grapple with the question of whether a country which has a democratic voting system but denies women the right to vote can be considered a true democracy.

After mapping out the advances and setbacks of democracy and human rights, in chapter 8 Landman turns to consider the significant threats to the long-term sustainability of both. As is the case throughout the book, he deconstructs and categorises these threats: they are seen to arise from conflict, economic globalisation and inequality, terrorism and environmental degradation.

This allows him to advance the argument that different threats affect different types of human rights. For instance, threats from terrorism are more likely to have negative implications for liberty rights, as governments respond by increasing detention powers. His use of countries as examples continues here: he notes that liberty rights have been most eroded in countries such as the UK and the US in response to the threat of terrorism, whereas in Scandinavia,

Canada and Switzerland, they have been least affected.

However, whilst his consideration of the threats arising from conflict, economic globalisation and terrorism is well-developed, his discussion of the impact of environmental degradation on human rights in particular appears rather brief. For instance, whilst he explores the links between environmental degradation, poverty and lack of participation in society, he does not consider the increasing recognition, both at domestic and international level, of a “human right” to a clean environment. Such a consideration may alter his conclusions on this particular threat to human rights.

While much of the book focuses on quantitative research, it closes in chapter 10 with some qualitative considerations, and in particular, a focus on individuals who have risen to political prominence within current and former authoritarian regimes: Chile’s Michelle Bachelet, Brazil’s Dilma Rousseff and Burma’s Aung San Suu Kyi. Landman cites these women as being symbolic of the “precarious triumph” of human rights and democracy, which provides an interesting reminder of the human face of these issues.

While this would have been an ideal point at which to bring discussions to an end, Landman goes on finally to recap the summaries of each chapter, but rather confusingly adds new elements to them. For example, when summarising the threat posed by terrorism to human rights and democracy, he introduces the argument that this threat would be reduced if countries were to treat terrorism within a criminal justice rather than a “war on terror” framework. Such discussions would be better placed within the chapters themselves, rather than in the final summary, as space constraints mean that they are introduced but not developed.

Nevertheless, Landman’s commitment to deconstructing and clearly organising the themes of his discussion means that *Human Rights and Democracy: The Precarious Triumph of Ideals* presents complex concepts in an easily-digestible way. His style is almost anecdotal and yet his use of graphs and figures adds flesh to the bones of his arguments. As a result, it is accessible to those who may be unfamiliar with underlying theories of human rights or democracy, as well as to those with a legal or political background.

Claire Overman is a BPTC student at Kaplan Law School, having studied for a BA in Law with European Law and the BCL at Keble College, University of Oxford and the Université de Paris. [Read more reviews by Claire](#)