



**Los derechos humanos  
en las ciencias sociales:  
una perspectiva multidisciplinaria**

(Human Rights in the Social Sciences:  
A Multidisciplinary Perspective)

*Ariadna Estévez and Daniel Vázquez, comps.*

CISAN and Flacso-Mexico  
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This book offers everyone interested in human rights a view different from the predominantly legal outlook, a view centered on the social sciences with a multidisciplinary perspective. Compiled by Ariadna Estévez (CISAN-UNAM) and Daniel Vázquez (Flacso-Mexico), it emerges from a space fostered by the authors' two academic institutions: the multidisciplinary seminar for the analysis of human rights. As the

compilers explain in their introduction, despite the fact that the academic study of human rights has been situated in the social sciences for at least 30 years, in Mexico "it continues to be confined to the legal field." For this reason, the seminar was founded to begin to "take research on human rights out of the legal sphere and deepen it, taking into account its complexities, by situating it in the social sciences."

The nine essays in this work are written from the point of view of everything from legal and political sociology, international relations, democracy studies, political science, to public policies, historical memory, gender, feminism, and anthropology. This book allows the reader to see how the social sciences currently understand their role in the study of human rights, and to recognize the extremely important role they are playing in comprehending the impact of human rights in today's world.

While all the essays can be read separately, it is really necessary to read the introduction first since it situates the reader perfectly in the context in which the work was developed. It underlines the debates about the borders between disciplines that emerged during the seminar, the inevitable bias produced by each essayist's training, and his/her "access to only a fraction of the literature produced in the field." It also emphasizes the agreements in the production of social knowledge about human rights.

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The book boasts the splendid quality of being profoundly didactic and easy to read. It does not matter if the reader has had prior contact with the discipline or sub-discipline in question, since the different essays manage to lay out a general panorama of the various existing currents of thought and perspectives. They then look more deeply at how human rights are dealt with by each discipline, particularly in Mexico, to show what the state of the art is for academic production on the topic. This is particularly noteworthy in the chapters about legal sociology, political sociology, international relations, democracy studies, and anthropology. In addition, the reader will be grateful for the synoptic tables summarizing the different positions, debates, methodologies, etc., and helping him/her to gain an overall view of what he/she just read. The lengthy footnotes also make understanding easier for those unfamiliar with the field.

The book's being a compilation of essays mandates a brief mention of what can be found in each of them. As the introduction explains, the chapters are structured in two ways: a sociological bibliographical review about human rights and the historical review of the incorporation of the concept itself. In my opinion, this is how they should be ordered in the book, and not in alphabetical order by authors' last names.

Among the authors who do a sociological bibliographical review about human rights, we have Karina Anolabehere, whose chapter focuses on socio-legal studies, characterized by an eminently empirical examination of the law in action. This essay touches on the main discussions about human rights based on two processes, their institutionalization and their experience, framed in three conceptions about law and legal institutions: juridical realism, critical law studies, and constructivist perspectives of law and society.

Ariadna Estévez, for her part, presents from the viewpoint of contemporary political sociology and its constructivist vein how human rights have been situated as a political discourse constructed by the collective action that articulates them, and that in turn, constructs empowered and disempowered subjects. She clearly and concisely develops

the agenda of study along three axes: the articulation of social movements and the role of human rights; social subjects as the object and subject of the construction of the human rights discourse; and human rights as a means to reformulate the concept of citizenship, laying out the different existing proposals. Finally, she underlines that, despite the immense social laboratory still existing in Mexico, little socio-political work has been done on human rights.

Alejandro Anaya looks at the main debates on international human rights regimes among the most influential schools of international relations theory: realism, institutionalism, and the liberal theory of preferences and constructivism. He emphasizes the latter a little more; its hypotheses about the establishment of international human rights regimes are oriented toward achieving objectives linked to "ideas based on principles," and not the generation of material goods.

The last article that reviews the sociological bibliography is Daniel Vázquez's. He bases himself on four models of democratic theory to lay out the two controversies that emerge from the different concepts of freedom and equality: representative or elitist democracy versus participatory democracy, and procedural versus substantial democracy. He presents deliberative democracy as a separate model. He also explains the development of empirical studies along three lines: studies of the transition to democracy, the process of construction of a democratic regimen with a liberal tinge, and the role human rights would play in the design and construction of a global democracy. He criticizes the fact that in these exercises up until now, only civil and political rights have been used.

Among the essayists who base their articles on a historic review of the incorporation of the concept of human rights is Rachel Sieder, who analyzes the relationship between legal anthropology and human rights, as well as the changes in the discipline's perspectives on them, emphasizing the implications for indigenous peoples, particularly in Mexico. She sketches the main theoretical-methodological trends in relation to human rights' universality and cultural relativism, and looks over the role of indigenism in Mexico all the way up to the new indigenous feminisms.

For his part, Richard Miskolci presents a brief history of the relationship between feminism and the emergence of human rights. He underlines the emergence of the concept of gender, which led to the reformulation of feminism's basic assumptions, to then look at the proposals of queer theory and question the heterosexual matrix of feminism itself. He puts forward a new politics of gender, which incorporates the

demands of gender or sexual dissidents, and in which queer theory positions itself importantly in the discussions on human rights, challenging their discourse.

José Luis Velasco conceptualizes international human rights instruments as a set of political norms from the viewpoint of political theory or political philosophy. He emphasizes the historicity of human rights, pointing out that they are norms intended to be universal. He also identifies the political doctrines that came together and against which the current *corpus* of human rights was formulated, becoming a doctrine in itself. He ends with a sketch of the institutionalization of human rights nationally and internationally, emphasizing the need for strong states as a condition for upholding them.

Silvia Dutrénit puts forward how the history of the present is a discipline that has dealt with human rights because of the need to investigate the truth and obtain justice in the face of their violation, particularly in the international context. She explains that the history of the present emphasizes events more than structures and the figure of the victim, which tend to obscure the figure of the social fighter, and that the historian has also become a witness, particularly in truth commissions and international tribunals.

Manuel Canto presents an outline of the rise and development of the public policy focus in different political contexts, and how human rights emerge as criteria for public policies, appealing to the discussion about human rights indicators, international standards, and components, as well as the possibility of making rights into law and demanding they be respected. He also points out the gaps in the academic work

of systematization and criticism about the scope and restrictions in designing public policy with a human rights perspective, and the stagnation of the ideological debate about public policies in Latin America.

In general, this work more than fulfills its aim of “elucidating the specific focus of each of the social disciplines when studying human rights, and establishing a general state of the question,” as a contribution to anyone who wants to take the study of human rights beyond “the useful but restricted frontiers of the law.” And for those of us who work in human rights, it is refreshing to read about the topic separate from the law. While it has some limitations, these are clearly recognized in the introduction and are owed to the nature and aspirations of the multidisciplinary human rights seminar itself.

For those of us who take an interest in the topic, whether as academics or as social activists, this book is indispensable and an invaluable opportunity for getting a broad panorama of the main discussions and debates in the social sciences regarding human rights. At the same time, it motivates the reader to contribute to this discussion, from the academy, but also from the committed work in the fight for human rights. **MM**

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**Human rights defender**

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# REVIEWS