

2011

Book Review of The Leading Rogue State: The U.S. and Human Rights

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Recommended Citation

Shaukat, Omar. 2011. "Book Review of The Leading Rogue State: The U.S. and Human Rights." *Societies Without Borders* 6 (1): 116-119.

Available at: <http://scholarlycommons.law.case.edu/swb/vol6/iss1/5>

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Book Review
**The Leading Rogue State:
The U. S. and Human Rights**

Edited by
Judith Blau, David L. Brunsmma,
Alberto Moncada, and Catherine Zimmer
(Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2008), 264 pages.

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The Leading Rogue State: The U.S. and Human Rights, edited by Judith Blau, David L. Brunsmma, Alberto Moncada and Catherine Zimmer is a collection of nineteen short essays on the human rights practices in the United States. The book also features an introduction by Frances Fox Piven, along with a postscript by Jack Donnelly.

The chief purpose of *The Leading Rogue State: The U.S. and Human Rights* appears to be to inform its readers that the United States has consistently declined to ratify widely accepted treaties on basic human rights issues and concerns. Given this (assumed) purpose, the volume accomplishes the task satisfactorily. The wide-ranging essays, arranged topically according to the rights and the relevant international agreements they discuss, are exhaustive in their mention of the treaties and conventions that the United States has failed to ratify. The essays help the reader to identify the pertinent agreements, cover their brief history, and provide evidence regarding the failure of the United States to either ratify and/or abide by the terms of the agreements. Additionally, each essay furnishes a reference list that can serve as a quick guide for those who want to study the topics in more detail. Thus, the volume sufficiently documents the failure of the United States to stand together with other nations on a host of human rights issues.

The Leading Rogue State serves as a good introductory text for readers who are not already familiar with the history of the United States lack of adherence to international human rights conventions and treaties. However, it is also apparent that the volume aims to do

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more than just serve as an introductory text. To begin with the title of the book, it is misleading insofar as it suggests that the essays will collectively establish the United States' status as the *leading* violator of human rights. In fact, out of a total of nineteen essays, there is only one essay by John Hagan and Wenona Rymond-Richmond's, titled 'Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law,' that explicitly engages in a comparative analysis of the United States human rights policies vis-a-vis another country. In addition, many essays seem to assume that the status of the United States as the leading 'rogue state' can be demonstrated through the incompatibility of domestic laws in the United States and norms established in UN conventions on human rights. One such example is in the essay by Brian K. Gran, 'Rights of the Child,' wherein it is stated that the 'United States is the leading rogue state because, to the extent U.S. laws conflict with the Convention [on the Rights of the Child], these laws raise questions of their [author's emphasis] on legitimacy, not the legitimacy of the Convention' (p. 48). It is not entirely clear what standards lead to this specific understanding of the 'leading' role played by the U.S.

The book also suffers from the lack of a clear and uniformly used understanding of the term 'rogue.' This seems to be a more serious issue even than its inability to adequately set the United States apart from other countries. While some essays employ more than one understanding of 'rogue,' there are some that do not invoke the term at all. The chapter on 'Rights of Prisoners,' by Angela Hattery and Earl Smith lists three separate reasons for calling the United States a rogue state; namely: (1) the failure of the U.S. to ratify the UN Convention on Torture, (2) the rendition and torture practices sanctioned by the U.S., and (3) the tendency of the U.S. to exempt itself from the UN established standards that it hypocritically enforces on other countries. The problem in intending all of these meanings with the use of the word 'rogue' is not that they are mutually exclusive or causally independent of each other. Rather, it is that they do not have any *necessary* connections with each other. One does not know whether the three reasons collectively render a country 'rogue' or that the presence of any one of them is sufficient alone. This difficulty in determining the analytical purchase of employing the term 'rogue' is further compounded when one comes across other essays that do not use the term at all (in the case of 'Human Vulnerabilities' by Bryan S. Turner)

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or seem to arbitrarily insert it in the concluding sentence (in the case of 'Cultural Rights' by Rodney D. Coates). Thus, one is forced to infer that the editors and/or authors are only being provocative in their use of the word 'rogue.'

Given these shortcomings, the reader is left wondering whether the book, as a unit, makes any serious social scientific contribution to the topic of human rights practices in the U.S. This is not to undermine the significance of the essays as independent pieces, especially in their capacity as introductory texts for a sociologically inclined readership that might not be familiar with the full spectrum of American abusive practices. In fact, it should be noted that a few of the essays (especially 'Labor Rights' by Vincent J. Roscigno and Andrew W. Martin, 'Women's Rights' by Tola Olu Pearce, and 'Rights of People with Disabilities' by Jean M. Lynch) manage to provide a description of the social and institutional logic driving some of these violations. Yet, the volume might have significantly benefited from an additional introduction, written by the editors, bringing more unity and coherence to the collection. In their present shape, the essays stand united only in their attempt to find fault with the human rights policies of the United States. While this is desirable to some extent, such literature is already produced in abundance by legal scholars and human rights activists. As Jack Donnelly in the postscript and Tonya Putnam in a previous review have already noted, this volume whets the appetite but leaves one unsatisfied with its lack of sufficient sociological analysis. The most useful lesson that, I think, we might take from this volume and for future endeavors of this kind, is to avoid structuring analyses of U.S. human rights policies as a litany of complaints. Instead, we might try to reflect on the underlying institutional and social causes for the systemic failure of the U.S. in the human rights domain. One such engagement is found in *The Leading Rogue State*. As Bryan S. Turner suggests in 'Human Vulnerabilities,' the inability to see human rights discourse as protecting against basic human vulnerabilities might reside in the failure of the American imagination to transcend a cold war mentality, according to which individual rights of liberalism are always pitted against the social rights of the Universal Declaration.

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tion of the Ego, he maintains active academic and teaching interests in topics such as Liberation Theology, Ethics of War and Torture, Human Rights, South Asian Islam and Film Studies. In 2010-2011, he also served as a Visiting Assistant Professor of Religious Studies at James Madison University. Born and raised in a Hobbesian Pakistan, living in an Orwellian U.S., he finds himself engaged in a Sisyphean struggle to strangle the subaltern.

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