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Book Review of Vulnerability and Human Rights

Gran

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Vulnerability and Human Rights by Bryan S. Turner (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006, 160 pp., soft cover, \$19.95).

Reviewer: Brian Gran, Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, Ohio, USA

Human rights continue to dominate academic and policy debates all over the world. In some corners, human rights are under siege, with critics attacking their cultural prejudices and biases toward western socio-political and legal traditions. In other corners, human rights are considered impractical because of implementation challenges and missing ingredients, such as economic resources. Yet many advocate that human rights are not only essential to countering despotic governments, human rights are essential tools for prompting NGOs and others to intervene on behalf of people whose national governments are indifferent or worse to their suffering and oppression.

Bryan Turner, a leading intellectual and one of the world's most important sociologists, claims that human rights are needed because everyone is vulnerable. As part of the Essays on Human Rights Series, in his book *Vulnerability and Human Rights*, Turner contends that we must strengthen and advance human rights because of the vulnerabilities we share. Recognition of shared vulnerabilities will bolster the drive to human rights.

It has become abundantly clear that all of us are vulnerable to disasters and calamities, no matter our wealth, what religion we practice, what language we speak, or where we call home. We have become sensitive to risks of hurricanes, tsunamis, heat waves, droughts, and other natural disasters. Genocide, terrorism, and other intentional harms have been exacted across the globe with no boundaries drawn between who is and who is not in danger. Turner reminds us that these calamities have made clear the weaknesses of socio-political institutions that were designed to reduce risks, prevent harms, and mitigate suffering.

Turner contends that recognizing our universal vulnerabilities will lead to awareness of common needs of security and the institutions that can provide it. Because citizenship rights depend on a nation state and its institutions, they may have limited utility for forming new and reforming extant institutions when security is compromised. A framework of human rights can foster the institutions needed to create security. Shared vulnerabilities, according to Turner, can encourage people of different backgrounds

and traditions to see the need and support the call for universal human rights.

One concern with Turner's analysis is it does not seem to acknowledge that some social groups face more difficulties in making their private hardships become public, shared concerns. This concern is critical to a contention Turner makes, which is that education is a starting point to creating widespread change in human rights. Turner contends that shared values and concepts, such as the utility of human rights for overcoming vulnerabilities, can be taught to young people. Yet young people typically rely on parents and caretakers for enforcement of many human rights, including education. To obtain this education, a young person depends on others who can foster (or prevent) leaving the private home to learn and engage others in public schools. We cannot discount obstacles of making private challenges into public, shared vulnerabilities.

With *Vulnerability and Human Rights*, scholars, policy designers, and activists will gain insights into many issues surrounding human rights and, more importantly, ways forward in human rights debates. This book will be a centerpiece to courses on social sciences, law, philosophy and religion, and public policy.

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