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Perspectives

Book

Human rights parables for a post-pandemic world

Before the COVID-19 pandemic laid bare the structural inequalities across societies, there were diverging parables in human rights. One narrative identified the populist challenge to human rights and juxtaposed it with the cosmopolitan ideal of a multi-lateral order. An alternative narrative viewed populism as the symptom of democratic failure more than the cause and argued that the crisis of legitimacy facing the neoliberal, multi-lateral order was inextricably connected to a world where capitalist democracies have become “mere façade democracies”, as Jürgen Habermas has asserted.

Against this context, *Foundations of Global Health & Human Rights*, edited by Lawrence Gostin and Benjamin Mason Meier, positions itself clearly, making an appeal to human rights as the expression of global justice, and articulating human rights implementation through global governance as an aspirational ideal. The book proceeds through a narrative of “progressive evolution of health-related rights”, which of late have faced populist challenges that threaten to derail progress. The volume is structured into four sections: norms that define the field; tools for implementation; application to specific issues; and rising challenges of populism.

Gostin, a leading figure in global health law who has participated since the inception of the health and human rights field, collaborated previously with Meier on the 2018 *Human Rights in Global Health: Rights-Based Governance for a Globalizing World*. In their new book, Gostin and Meier co-author many chapters as well as a preface and an afterword, which urge self-care for students of global health and human rights. *Foundations of Global Health & Human Rights* is a hybrid between a textbook and a collected volume. Many of the eminent contributors assembled provide overviews of important topics, on which they have written extensively before, including but not limited to: John Tobin on the right to health under international law; Colleen Flood on judicialisation of health rights; Brigit Toebes on non-communicable diseases; Aziza Ahmed on reproductive justice; Joseph Amon on human rights advocacy; and Stephen Marks on the right to development.

“*The question of what global health with justice really means, and how to achieve it, could not be more important in this fraught moment.*” readers familiar with the work of these contributors, and the literature, critical contestations abound. For example, when do frameworks for international assistance and cooperation advance health justice and when do they reify structural inequalities and colonialism in global health? Or how might rights-based indicators that permit governance at a distance from global institutions, in the Sustainable Development Goals, and beyond also conceal more than they reveal about barriers to effective enjoyment of health and other rights on the ground?

As the editors note, however, this volume aims to introduce the field to students. It does so through a consistent narrative, including the carefully curated examples, discussion questions, and references, which form the real foundations of any text. For those who share the perspective regarding the ideal of human rights implementation through global governance, this volume will prove a highly useful resource. Others may seek out additional reading, including from spectacular scholars and practitioners in the Global South, to complicate this understanding would call for: John Tobin on the right to health with justice really means, and how to achieve it, could not be more important in this fraught moment.

**The COVID-19 pandemic presents a profound inflection point on a world already in the throes of radical upheaval. How we go about reconstructing our health systems, our democracies, and our world—and the role human rights should play in doing so—will depend on the parables we embrace.**

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