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Book and media reviews

# Multidisciplinary critique on, and solutions to, the human (rights) causes and consequences of global poverty

Egan, S. and Chadwick, A. (Eds.) (2021). *Poverty and Human Rights: Multidisciplinary Perspectives*. Cheltenham (UK), Northampton, Massachusetts (USA): Edward Elgar Publishing. 224pp., £85.00 (hardcover) ISBN: 978-1-83910-210-3; also available as eBook, ISBN: 978-1-83910-211-0.

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‘Do we have no worth?’ (p. 179). This is the question an anganwadi worker from the Kantapada block in India asked during an interview. The Kantapada block is one of 14 blocks in the Cuttack district, located at the coastal part of the Odisha state in India. The nearest town to Kantapada village is Cuttack, which is known as the commercial capital of Odisha. Anganwadi workers are women who provide government-subsidised services to the poor while trying to combat their own poverty (Chapter 11). This question, for me, embodies the human rights consequences of poverty.

Poverty has featured prominently in human rights discourse over the last decades. In this multidisciplinary book the rhetoric of poverty and human rights and the link between poverty and human rights are questioned, critiqued, unpacked, and analysed. The introductory chapter gives the reader a taste of some of the questions asked: is poverty a human rights violation, is poverty a symptom or the cause of human rights violations, could and should the human rights framework address poverty?

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The book is divided into two parts: part one highlights critical debates and in parts two and three case studies are presented. The first part includes an outline of how poverty came to be associated with human rights and an analysis of various theoretical stances defining poverty as a human rights issue. Critiques and challenges to integrating human rights into action on poverty are also discussed. Part two presents case studies from the UK, Ireland, Spain, and India.

The book opens with an interesting dialectic between the authors of chapters 2 and 3. In chapter 2, the rhetoric of poverty as a human rights violation is challenged and critiqued. Linking poverty to human rights (violations) in an absolutist fashion, the author argues, is both superfluous and counterproductive. Such rhetoric muddies the water in differentiating between poverty as an ethical issue and demand, and poverty as a domestic and international issue of law. In chapter three, the author argues that poverty is a human rights violation because it is an injustice 'that has the particular features characteristic of human rights violations' (p. 35). The author argues that the effects of poverty can be so devastating that people are willing to trade other rights, such as freedom, for means of subsistence. Such a trade-off is discussed in Chapter 3, where the author unpacks the Chinese development model.

Chapters 4 and 5 deal with some of the causes of poverty. Chapter 4 tracks the historic tension between property rights and subsistence rights in the development of law. Chapter 5 explores the role of capitalism in both poverty and human rights. Both these chapters deal with the consequences of colonialism in constituting and maintaining poverty and inequality through capitalism and property rights. In Chapter 5, the author argues that the full realisation of human rights is not possible in a capitalist system, while in Chapter 4 the author states that 'law's longstanding commitment to property rights is structurally linked to its inability to act on behalf of the poor' (p. 58).

While chapters 4 and 5 unpack causes of poverty and inequality, chapters 6, 7 and 8 unpack possibilities to re-think global political and economic systems to combat poverty, address inequality and to act on poverty through subsistence wars. In chapter 6 the posthuman implications for human rights, poverty and inequality are discussed. Three problems for human rights in dealing with poverty and inequality are raised: *algocracy*, *pharmocracy* and *chemocracy*. In chapter 7, the author questions the assumed link between economic growth and the full realisation of socio-economic rights. The author makes an argument for sustainable development and distributive economic options that privilege people and the environment over profit.

The case studies presented show the value ordinary people place on socio-economic rights. These chapters speak to the need to educate everyone, everywhere on their rights, and the

need for training and inclusion and not just charity to alleviate poverty and exclusion. It also shows how the indignities of poverty and inequality cause a lack of self-worth and the agency needed to claim rights. The authors in chapter 9 (UK) present what survey data indicate that people at the grassroots level regard as the most important rights: education, health and social care, housing, an adequate standard of living, non-discrimination, and equality. They argue that policy change enabling the realisation of these rights can be possible through grassroots, bottom-up approaches, and human rights initiatives.

The editors and authors raise some crucial points as to the link between human rights and poverty, the causes of poverty and possibilities to alleviate poverty and inequality. Firstly, tackling poverty and inequality should be a multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary effort. Secondly, arguing a link between poverty and human rights violations demands clear conceptualisations of both poverty and human rights violations. Thirdly, the role of property rights, legal structures and systems, capitalism, and wealth accumulation in producing and maintaining poverty and inequality should be critiqued. There are multiple economic options to balance people, environment and profit that could lead to sustainable and distributive development. In the fourth place, the alleviation of poverty and inequality can only be achieved through grassroots involvement and input from ordinary people with everyday socio-economic problems.

The historic and complex nature of poverty and inequality, as unpacked by authors, demands widening the scope of engagement on poverty, inequality, and human rights to include posthumanism and decoloniality. Chapter 6, dealing with the posthuman consequences for human rights, is a step in the right direction. I am surprised that there is no chapter(s) on the role that human rights education can play in addressing poverty and inequality as the need to educate everyone, everywhere on their rights is expressed by authors.

Reading this book is an investment every scholar interested in global poverty, inequality, social justice, human rights, human rights education, international human rights law, policy and political studies should make. Every chapter is theoretically and conceptually sound and the scope and depth of the contributions are thought-provoking. The multidisciplinary links between chapters flow effortlessly. Congratulations to the editors and the authors.

In the afterword the author reflects on the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic on global poverty and suggests that if poverty had been sufficiently addressed pre-pandemic, it would have led to more resilient communities during the pandemic. Rising post-pandemic poverty and inequality coupled with the inevitable consequences of the war in Ukraine paint a bleak picture for poverty-stricken people and populations globally. There is work to be done before we, as scholars and fellow humans, can confront and answer the question: 'Do we have no worth?' (p. 179). This book makes a sizeable contribution in this regard.