



Book Review

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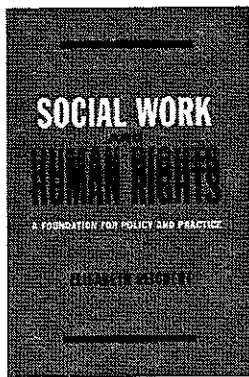
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Appendix

Book Review



Social Work and Human Rights: A Foundation for Policy and Practice

Elisabeth Reichert
Columbia University
Press
New York (2003)

Elisabeth Reichert has carefully and methodically provided social work students, educators and life-

long learners a primer on human rights as a platform for practice and professional ethics. Beginning with a clear exposition of her thesis that social workers should promote the general welfare of society from local to global levels, she proceeds to set forth and explain the historical development of the human rights idea and its incorporation into the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Building on this fundamental United Nations declaration, Dr. Reichert sets forth the (1) International Covenants on Civil and Political Rights and (2) Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. The remainder of this 295-page paperback addresses vulnerable populations, international issues and a concluding chapter on applying human rights to the social work profession.

Each chapter is enhanced by cognizant questions and exercises as well as impressively assembled references that reflect a firm grasp of relevant major contributors in social work and international human relations literature. This book is an excellent reference guide for sources and guided explanations of international human relations and its connections to American social work values, with special emphasis upon the Code of Ethics of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW).

A major premise of this work is that human rights should promote the general welfare of society from local to global levels and, beyond the American constitution's emphasis on non-interference by government of individuals' civic and political behavior, should also emphasize (a) adequate standards of living for all persons and (b) international cooperation among nations to limit exploita-

tion of others' resources or interference in another nation's growth or prosperity.

The author believes that the concept of social justice, heralded by NASW as a first principle of the profession, is both limited and less clearly defined than the more universal and comprehensive concept of human rights.

Dr. Reichert explains at length her views about concepts self-determination, cultural relativism, and social exclusion. She rightly points out that these concepts are related to universal human rights. Arguably, the distinctions she makes describe rhetorical similarities, parallels and heuristic connections. American and international social work forums, continuing education offerings and conference dialogues would benefit greatly from discourse and deliberations which might pose the question: Is social justice a delimited concept in the context of a universal human rights perspective?

American professional social work has built its value foundations on rights, in the sense of self and social worth, dignity, humanity and the quest for respect for every human a member of one or more natural or chosen groups within a locality and nation. The United States Constitution has been the foundation for the evolution of principles whose meanings the courts attempt to clarify over time.

Human rights advocates have difficulties in getting their host nations to pay attention to international human rights declarations and covenants, (including, and perhaps especially, the United States at this historical juncture). The author should, therefore, pay particular attention to historical narratives expounding her position. She states (p. 91), "The creation of Israel in 1948 by the United Nations offended most of the Arab nations, who bitterly fought this decision from the beginning. While the UN also contemplated establishing a Palestinian state alongside that of Israel, this never occurred." Unstated was that the Israel authorities at that time accepted the U.N. offer for a two-state solution. The Arabs did not. The Arab invasion followed. Israel held on, and its state was created. (Subsequent events take on a different light when viewed through different historical lenses.)

I raise this point to show the difficulty that anyone has (i.e., the author or this reviewer) in attempting to use the discourse of human rights to generate humanistic prescriptions in a highly politicized world. The good people, like Dr. Reichert, who argue for serious attention to human rights values are aware of the difficulties in separating

political from humanitarian concerns. These difficulties should not deter continuing explorations.

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