

## BOOK REVIEW

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# The Instrumentalization of Human Rights in World Politics

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Clifford Bob. *Rights as Weapons: Instruments of Conflict, Tools of Power*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019. 280 pp. \$29.95 hardcover (ISBN: 978-0691189055).

On the May 31, 2019, United States Secretary of State Mike Pompeo committed to establishing the Commission on Unalienable Rights within his department. This commission aims to “provide fresh thinking about human rights discourse where such discourse has departed from our nation’s founding principles of natural law and natural rights” (Finnegan 2019, 5). This pronouncement alarmed women’s rights advocates and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) rights movements, who suspect that the emphasis on natural law would mean a departure from the strong antidiscrimination policy platform of the Obama administration. In the age of Trump and the rise of far-right politics, how are “human rights” discourses framed, negotiated, and instrumentalized among opposing stakeholders?

Clifford Bob’s *Rights as Weapons* offers a legal realist conception of human rights and provides the first comprehensive account of the various ways in which activists and social movements use rights discourses in political conflicts. In doing so, Bob invokes three key phases of activists’ instrumentalization of rights discourses: *invocation* for mobilization of political movements; *deployment* for undermining adversaries’ claims; and *counter-responses* (or counters) by adversaries. Bob compellingly shows that rights discourses gain traction because of their “great utility in political conflicts” (16). He contends that rights are not the quintessential objectives over which opposing groups fight. Instead, they fight over a wide range of substantive demands and hope that using rights-oriented discourses could reinforce their political interests. The book provides compelling case studies that illustrate how political actors use rights discourses in various distinctive ways, including the mobilization of support, aggressively instrumentalizing rights against one’s opponents, and the concealment of highly controversial policies by using rights as a camouflage.

Accordingly, rights are rhetorical weapons that actors use, customize, and reinforce in order to empower themselves and to undermine their adversaries. In determining how and under which conditions a given rights claim wins a political contestation, Bob contends that the “rhetorical and legal force of rights works powerfully, in mutual interaction with material factors” and cautions that “threats to rights can and do spark violence” (23). Bob’s view of rights suggests that they are primarily aggressive weapons in political contestation, and rights-as-discourses are not the ends over which contesting stakeholders fight. Instead, contesting groups demand concrete actions, with rights discourses as an instrumental tool for achieving such objectives. In many emerging democracies, for example, oligarchs assert the

neoliberal rights paradigm, which posits the protection of private property rights as a sacrosanct state obligation (Regilme 2019). Meanwhile, those at the fringes of society advocate for a socioeconomic rights paradigm that demands welfare entitlements from the state. And amid the rise of authoritarianism and reemerging powers such as China, the United States' foreign policy emphasis on a minimalist notion of rights (civil-political rights) and neoliberal rights has undermined demands for prioritizing socioeconomic rights that seek to reduce extreme material inequality. These are just some examples of how rights are reframed, instrumentalized, and renegotiated depending on the context, the positionality of the claimant, and the broader structural conditions through and from which those discourses emanate.

*Rights as Weapons* is a conceptually sophisticated and theoretically rich book that uncovers some promising hypotheses concerning how and under which conditions rights are deployed in order to advance political demands. It inspires us to raise important puzzles that fall beyond its original analytic remit. The first puzzle pertains to how exactly rights-as-discourses differ from other powerful rhetorical concepts such as democracy, peace, and development—which gained traction in various recent periods in international history. If rights are metadiscourses, then what makes them different from other metadiscourses such as democracy, peace, and development? During the US-led war on terror, for example, America's allies sought to justify increased state repression and physical integrity rights violations by the quick and violent elimination of armed nonstate terror groups and, in so doing, undermined rights in the name of democracy and political stability. Yet, it is unclear how rights-as-discourses differ from other metadiscourses in terms of their core substantive content and the tactical strategies associated with them.

Finally, if rights can only be taken as discursive weapons, then it is unclear under which conditions discursive contestations pave the way for a particular rights paradigm to gain traction, to be institutionalized, and to be further internalized amongst the elites and the rest of the society. Hence, how do contestations over competing rights-claims facilitate the emergence of a dominant human rights norm and eventually the decay of that previously dominant norm (see also Risse, Ropp, and Sikkink 1999, 2013)? Although that topic was not fully explicated in the book, revisiting the theoretical literature on norm contestation in international relations could provide insights on how one discursive view of rights could succeed over another.

## References

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