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## BOOK REVIEW

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**Thomas Risse, Stephen C. Ropp, and Kathryn Sikkink (eds.), *The Persistent Power of Human Rights: From Commitment to Compliance* (Cambridge University Press, 2013) 350 pp. ISBN 9781139237161 (online)**

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As the successor to ‘The Power of Human Rights’ (1999), ‘The Persistent Power of Human Rights’ (2013) has become a seminal book on human rights in international relations. Published in 2013, it remains the perennial framework through which state compliance with international human rights norms and law is understood. As a result, it frequently informs human rights and foreign policy directives, reflecting its continued significance in the quest to protect human rights universally.

From an International Relations theoretical perspective, the book adopts a traditional constructivist stance that views compliance to international human rights norms as a function of state socialization. The premise is that commitment (i.e. ratification of international human rights treaties) is less of an indicator of the support of human rights than compliance – (i.e. norm abiding behaviour). This distinction holds that while a state may have ratified a given human rights treaty, internalisation or the acceptance of that particular right is not a given. The authors argue that this gap explains the continued abuse of human rights despite their recognition through treaty ratification. In particular, the ‘Persistent Power of Human Rights’ focuses on how human rights norms are internalised by international actors through a process of socialisation. Socialisation is said to occur through a variety of mechanisms such as pressure, persuasion (dialogue), and capacity building. The book details how both state and non-state actors participate in the process of human rights protection from ‘commitment to compliance’ through socialisation. In so doing, it contributes to understanding how human rights ‘work’ in practice.

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On a state level the authors identify the degree of statehood, regime type, and capacity building notable variables in achieving compliant behaviour. States – such as China – are argued to provide a particular challenge to compliance, however, are amenable to behavioural change through dialogue. The United States is also covered to reflect how ‘punishment’ mechanisms are limited in bringing about desired change. States with limited institutional capacity on the other hand, or those struggling with conflict, are argued to possess limited capacity to protect and enforce human rights. While the cases covered reflect the importance of context in devising compliance strategies, the book stops at statehood, regime type, and capacity as variables for consideration. The book also gives due regard to the influence of non-state actors in effectuating human rights protection. In these cases, domestic (i.e. sub-state) mechanisms are noted as particularly important to engendering both positive and negative change (p. 94). Furthermore, non-state actors such as businesses are highlighted as frequent spoilers to achieving compliance.

In covering a wide range of cases, the book addresses the complexities of actors and factors that have a bearing on compliance. The vast coverage of the book reflects the variety of variables and outcomes that are at play in bringing about compliance. This is summed up in the concluding remark that ‘there is no simple recipe for generic human rights change’ (p. 294). Despite this acknowledgement, the book is not an evident plea for context-specific approaches to compliance. Thus, while the ‘big’ trends of pressure, persuasion, and capacity building are investigated, the success of these mechanisms as contingent on context is not explicitly underscored. For example, an aspect that little mention is made of is culture in relation to compliance. One mention is made of cultural values (p. 36), and cultural rights also receive a single mention (p. 92). While the chapter on social mechanisms covers a range of variables - culture does not feature. Given the variables of statehood, regime type, and capacity, it would have been valuable to also understand the case for the ‘cultural’. Considering the continued contestation of culture and human rights, particularly in an increasingly interconnected yet diverse world, a more thorough consideration of the ‘cultural variable’ would have been enriching.

While the book does not have a dedicated chapter to the issue of culture, the idea of private wrongs is arguably connected to it. Chapter 14 by Alison Brysk discusses the ability of human rights to change ‘private wrongs’ (p. 259). These wrongs are identified as occurring at the sub-state level – as a result of insufficient state commitment to a particular right. Issues discussed relate to gender, with a focus on female genital mutilation or cutting, however, an

explicit reference to culture is not made despite its obvious relevance. With regard to compliance, while Brysk recognises that 'compliance is not equivalent to legal enforcement,' she notes 'external formal standard(s)' as a potential way to address or redress, in this case, 'sharia law' (p. 262). It would seem that Brysk locates compliance outside of cultural forces, making the discussion of culture even more pertinent. Whether or not Brysk regards culture as an impediment to human rights compliance and/or a vehicle for human rights protection is unclear. In this regard, a cross-cultural perspective would have been valuable in articulating how compliance can or cannot be brought about within the confines of cultural institutions themselves.

The use of a cross-cultural perspective would additionally enrich the book's analysis of compliance indicators. Dai's chapter briefly touches on the issue of indicators, however, it remains more focused on the issue of the 'compliance gap' i.e. the rate of ratification vs change in practice, as opposed to the reliability and validity of current indicators. It would be interesting to investigate how and whether current indicators for compliance are adept at capturing the nuances of cultural variance i.e. either how culture can be a vehicle for compliance or not. This criticism does not go to the book itself but rather to the broader conceptual issue of how compliance is measured, namely that they are a-cultural.

The result is that of all the intervening variables to affect compliance, Risse *et al* - like most of compliance literature - do not consider the 'translatability' or 'different faces' of rights across cultures as a factor for consideration. In particular, while culture is often thought of as a barrier to human rights compliance, the inverse, namely, culture as a vehicle for human rights protection is ignored. Consequently, within the 'persistent power of human rights', compliance looks a particular way that reproduces a largely decontextualised or a-cultural assessment of how rights are being (or can be) protected the world over. A cross-cultural perspective would therefore shed light on how compliance can and inevitably will (some would argue should) look different across diverse societies for human rights to enjoy universality.

Considering the rapidly changing international environment, the issue of compliance remains as relevant as ever. Despite these changes the book of Risse *et al* remains a fundamental contribution to the issue of compliance in international human rights. For anyone interested in how human rights are understood to operate on an international level, the Persistent Power of Human Rights provides exemplary insights. Considering the cultural variance in the cases that the book deals with, insights from cross-cultural scholarship on the

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issue of international compliance would be a particularly enriching contribution.