



Democratization and Human Rights: Affinity or Tension?

By Sharon Healey

A review of Democratization and the Protection of Human Rights: Challenges and Contradictions, edited by Patricia J. Campbell and Kathleen Mahoney-Norris. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers. 140pp.

Historically, studies on democracy and human rights have considered the two as unrelated issues, and where treated as related, many scholars have assumed a positive relationship between democracy, human rights and development. The contributors to Democratization and the Protection of Human Rights, Challenges and Contradictions examine and critique some of the popular conceptions about the relationship between democracy and human rights. For example, the authors question whether democratization enhances “second” generation economic, social and developmental rights, the existence of a positive relationship between neo-liberal market economies and democracy, and whether current notions of democracy are flawed for their failure to consider a gender component.

The contributors assert that insufficient research has been undertaken to test the assumption that democratization increases protection of second and third generation (i.e., group) rights. They also challenge the idea that the adoption of neo-liberal economic policies results in increased protection of human rights, arguing instead that structural adjustment policies limit the power of the state, increase economic inequality, and weaken democratic institutions. The authors cite various studies that point to the critical role of a strong state in preserving democracy, and argue that liberalization of trade must take into account both the role of the state and the need to protect the most vulnerable segments of society.

The authors take a fluid approach to defining democracy, rejecting procedural understandings of the term that define democracy in terms of elections. Instead, they adopt Dahl’s definition of democracy as “extensive competition for power through regular free and fair elections; highly inclusive citizenship conferring rights of participation on virtually all adults and extensive political liberties to allow for pluralism of information and organization” as the minimum criteria for democracy. (Dahl, 1971) The contributors also recognize that democracy must include a civil society where “social movements and non-governmental organizations have the opportunity to influence public policy.” (5)

The volume is divided into two sections: “Theoretical Foundations” and “Case Studies.” In her chapter exploring the conceptual challenges of human rights, development and democracy, Eileen McCarthy-Arnolds traces the divergent development of democracy and human rights studies, and asserts that a true understanding of these processes can only be accomplished by considering them together in light of evolving global norms and the work done by international organizations. She particularly focuses on how the United Nations has taken steps to move away from its original Western bias (favoring civil and political rights) to also include studies and consultations on the right to development, which must be seen as integrally related to human rights as well as democracy. McCarthy-Arnolds illustrates the evolution in development theory from early emphases on rapid modernization, toward a realization that economic growth had not reduced poverty, resulting in a shift in development theory toward the satisfaction of basic human needs at the national level. She argues international theorists must shift their focus away from the role of states in the international system toward the role of international organizations as the “initiators and promulgators” of norms rather than mere implementers of the interests of states. McCarthy-Arnolds maintains that development, democratization and human rights should be thought of as goals of a global society.

Patricia Campbell’s chapter on the role of gender in democratization challenges the assumption that democratization leads to increased political participation for women (as well as men) and asserts that the pursuit of a market economy as a strategy for development may actually harm the economic and social rights of women. She criticizes the current dichotomy between public and private spheres in the areas of both human rights and democracy, noting that while the public sphere of human rights has become regulated and crimes such as torture are considered to be in violation of the democratic process (and can be prosecuted under a number of treaties if state sponsored), domestic abuse is still widely condoned in many countries. She also rebuts the theory that the 3rd wave of democratization has led to increased political participation by women, pointing out that the number of women in politics in countries that were formerly part of the Soviet Union plummeted after those countries began the process of democratization. She also notes that increased time demands as well as pressure from men has resulted in a decrease in women’s political participation countries such as South Africa, where quota systems have been implemented to ensure women’s participation. Lamentably, however, Campbell does not offer any significant insight as to the reason these phenomena have occurred, nor suggestions for increasing women’s political participation.

Campbell further criticizes the lack of a gender component in projects sponsored by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF), arguing that the neo-liberal economic policies that developing and democratizing countries are required to adopt have further harmed women by reducing the role of the state in the economic sphere. For example, Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) that mandate reductions in public and social sector spending have eliminated many government jobs in which women were disproportionately represented. Furthermore, the effects of cuts in social sector spending, such as on education and health, have been disproportionately borne by women, who have traditionally faced significant barriers in accessing those public goods. Campbell argues that any conclusions about the interlinked processes of democratization, development, and human rights can only be made after women are taken into account.

The themes of gender, market economies, human rights and democracy are enlarged upon by the four case studies that comprise the second section of the book. Kathleen Mahoney-Norris

examines democratic reforms in Latin America, and questions whether a culture of democracy has truly been adopted by the elite, or whether it remains hindered by a lingering “security mentality” that prioritizes national security over democracy and respect for human rights. She also contends that neo-liberal market economies have contributed to ongoing human rights violations in the region as the poor protest the widening economic gap caused by these policies. Mahoney-Norris argues that the process of democratization that has begun in Latin America will never reach fruition without the continued activism of transnational networks and domestic civil society organizations.

In her chapter, “Women and the Reconstruction of Chilean Democracy,” Annie Dandavati explores the changing role of the women’s movement in Chile from the 1973 coup by General Augusto Pinochet, through Chile’s eventual return to democracy in 1990. Dandavati asserts that the women’s movement played a significant role in Chile’s return to democracy, as women joined together to oppose the human rights abuses of Pinochet’s military dictatorship and the neo-liberal economic reforms which particularly affected women. However, she claims that once Chile had made the transition to democracy, the women’s movement became fragmented, divided by political party affiliation. Many of the goals of the movement, such as increased democratic measures and broader protection of human rights affecting women, have not been fully realized due in large part to the influence of the Catholic church and the military, which continues to wield significant political power.

Loring Abeyta’s examination of democratization and human rights in Peru challenges the procedural standard of “free and fair elections” used to characterize “Third Wave” democracies as insufficient in the case of Peru. Instead, Abeyta argues that an accurate assessment of Peruvian democracy can only be achieved through a human rights approach that explores Peru’s protection of and commitment to civil, political, economic, social and group rights. Abeyta claims that the increase in human rights abuses (including political violence) and the deterioration of social institutions that have occurred under the Fujimori regime must be taken into consideration in any potential classification of Peru as a “democracy.” She contends that a more accurate measure of democracy would be determined by Peruvians’ ability to exercise their civil and political rights outside the arena of electoral campaigns, and whether their social and economic needs were being met. Using this broader criterion of democracy, Abeyta alleges that it is uncertain as to whether any real democratization is occurring in Peru, and that only an analysis of democracy according to a human rights model can reveal an accurate assessment of whether a true democratization process in Peru is underway.

In his chapter on democratization and pluralism in South Africa, David Penna also refutes the procedural definition of “free and fair elections” as an adequate means of assessing democracies. Penna reviews the process of democratization in South Africa by analyzing the drafting of the Constitution, and the making of social welfare policies and land reform. Penna concludes that South Africa attempted to institute and follow the process of democracy by allowing for the participation of political opponents. However, Penna states that this pluralistic approach may have diminished the South African majorities’ level of satisfaction with the process. He voices concern that failures in areas such as education and land re-allocation, largely due to a lack of financial resources, may result in the majority abandoning democratization, or the fragmentation of South African society altogether.

Democratization and the Protection of Human Rights: Challenges and Contradictions offers a critical examination of some of the currently accepted beliefs and practices concerning the relationship between democracy, human rights and development. While the book does not provide much in the way of procedural recommendations for strengthening the gender component of democratization processes, or offer alternatives to the current trend toward a globalized economy, it does provoke a broader understanding of these concepts, and goes beyond the procedural definition of regular elections that is used as a yardstick for measuring “democracy” by many mainstream theorists. The volume draws attention to the need to view human rights more expansively than the current dichotomies of civil/political and social/economic/group rights, and violations occurring in the public sphere as opposed to the private one. Perhaps most importantly, the book draws attention to the many linkages between the protection of human rights, democracy and development and the need to evaluate the progress towards these various goals in tandem.

Works Cited

Dahl, Robert. Polyarchy, Participation and Opposition. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971.

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