



## Synthesis v. Purity and Large-N Studies: How Might we Assess the Gap between Promise and Performance?

By Will H. Moore

**Protecting Human Rights: A Comparative Study by Todd Landman. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2005, 231 pp.**

In a recent essay, Nicholas Kristoff (2006) bemoaned the fact that the type of U.S. inaction that Samantha Power (2001) documented with respect to Rwanda in the mid-1990s is again evident in Darfur. *Ne plus jamais?* No: we have *déjà vu*. The standard explanation that one finds among commentators and pundits is that “a lack of political will” prevents countries from acting on their international legal and moral obligations to respond to crimes against humanity with action to stop the killing, torture, etc. Yet as the reader knows only too well, Darfur is but the most acute case of violations of the international human rights regime. Despite the relative success of the regime, there remains a considerable gap between the ideals of the international human rights regime and the practice of states and their agents.

A handful of scholars have recently turned to large-N statistics to evaluate this gap, the most substantial of which is Todd Landman’s book Protecting Human Rights.<sup>1</sup> The realist schools of international relations provide a well known argument to explain why treaties are “meaningless scraps of paper,” and the Keith (1999), Hathaway (2002); and Hafner-Burton and Tsutsui (2005) studies support this claim as they find that, once one controls for variables such as democracy and national income, human rights treaties do not influence the behavior of the countries that sign them. The constructivist school, on the other hand, offers an alternative view advancing the claim that as norms become diffuse and entrenched, state behavior will change as well.<sup>2</sup> Cardenas suggests that the constructivist school suffers from a tendency to focus attention on cases of compliance and thereby has “tended to overlook an important puzzle: why human rights violations sometimes persist despite ongoing pressures for compliance” (2004: 227). She points to the body of large-N studies of personal integrity rights violations and state coercion/repression (e.g., Poe and Tate 1994; and Davenport 1995, 1999) as a source of concepts and findings that could be profitably exploited to correct this misplaced focus, but does not comment on the recent studies that are pursuing her suggestion.

Four published studies and a review article calling for such work suggest that something is afoot and that we ought to pay attention. Yet there is more here than a need for sound empirical research.

<sup>1</sup> See also Keith (1999); Hathaway (2002); and Hafner-Burton and Tsutsui (2005).

<sup>2</sup> See especially Risse, Ropp and Sikink (1999).

As is always the case, theoretical choices are consequential. Cardenas and Landman recognize this and advocate a synthesis of theoretical approaches. I wish to dissent and offer an alternative.

Both Cardenas and Landman observe a synthetic trend in human rights literature that abandons realist versus constructivist (and other) dichotomies in favor of drawing from multiple schools of thought to produce new theories. And both scholars contend that this emergent theoretical perspective makes a compelling case for why the international human rights regime influences the behavior of states, though far less than the states, persons and activists who champion it would like. While neither work is aware of the other, Landman partially puts into practice that for which Cardenas calls.

I submit that while well-intentioned calls for theoretical synthesis and cross fertilization are commonplace, efforts to do so are *generally* sufficiently vague that they are little more than pabulum. By contrast, opposing claims that advocate theoretical purity (e.g., Eckstein 1980) are relatively rare. This essay uses Landman's book as a lens through which to explore the trade-offs between theoretical purity and synthesis. It also examines the strengths and weaknesses of large-N statistical analyses of human rights violations. It then concludes with a brief consideration of the intersection of these two issues.

### **Synthesis or Purity?**

Cardenas distinguishes rationalist from constructivist schools of international relations, noting two types of rationalist approaches: power-centric and self-interest centered. She observes that each approach identifies causal processes at the international (systemic/dyadic), domestic (monadic), and domestic-international levels of analysis.<sup>3</sup> Landman sketches a more complex typology of the literature,<sup>4</sup> and suggests that a double convergence, "centered on the idea of *constrained agency*" offers an opportunity to develop an empirical theory that can account for cross-national and cross-temporal variation in the human rights behavior of states (13). The agent-structure debate occupies center-stage in Landman's argument, and the "double convergence" that he identifies is the common effort in international relations and comparative politics to resolve this debate by recognizing that the behavior of actors is neither dictated by, nor independent of, structure. Because it involves structure (anarchy and the norms of the human rights regime) and agency at both the domestic and international levels of analysis (and their intersection), the human rights behavior of states, argues Landman, is at the center of such debates. Cardenas would presumably concur.

I am less sanguine about the prospects of such a synthetic effort, largely because I believe that a solution to the agent-structure problem is the "great white whale" of social science. Let us consider two views. The first suggests that theories that take structures or the preferences of agents as given are necessarily deficient since none of us really believes that either is fixed and immutable (i.e., we all believe that *in reality* preferences and structures are both malleable and mutually constitutive). The second suggests that models of human behavior must make simplifying assumptions and that to make theories tractable scholars must fix either structures or preferences because constructing

---

<sup>3</sup> See her Table 1 (215).

<sup>4</sup> See his Figure 2.1 (25).

“mutually constitutive” theories is simply too difficult. The former position is advanced by those who prefer models that “closely reflect reality” while the latter is advanced by those who prefer abstract models where the connection between assumptions and implications is prized over the theory’s “correspondence to reality.” Debate between these two approaches is well worn and this essay will not contribute to it. Instead, I wish to briefly consider a less well worn discussion concerning synthesis versus purity.

In a discussion of what he labeled “inherent v. contingent theories of civil strife,” Eckstein (1980) makes a case for eschewing synthesis. He implicitly embraces a Lakatosian perspective to the progression of knowledge that prizes the competition between theories. That neither of two given theories “corresponds with reality” is beside the point, according to this view. The temptation to increase that correspondence via synthesis is a siren: the proper way to evaluate the usefulness of a theory is to contrast it with another theory with respect to 1) the scope of its explanatory power (e.g., how many hypotheses does it produce?) and 2) its ability to withstand falsification. By this account accumulation of knowledge occurs in a field when two (or more) rival theories press one another to explore their logic in an effort to produce more implications. Efforts at synthesis are likely to undermine that effort because they tend to obfuscate the logic (or causal mechanisms) of the rival theories.

As an example, one might consider Taylor’s (1989) effort to establish the hegemony of agent-centered theory relative to structure-centered theory in comparative politics. In international relations, Wendt (1987, 1992, 1999) makes the case for a mutually-constitutive synthesis of the agent-structure problem as superior to structural realism. Is the path advocated by Eckstein and illustrated by Taylor more effective, or should we pursue a synthetic path *à la* Wendt? Cardenas and Landman advocate the latter, and while Cardenas is a call for such an effort, Landman claims to have forged one. Has he?

One of the strengths of Landman’s effort is the feedback process that he specifies between human rights law and human rights protection. Other studies of the gap between the obligations of treaties and the behavior of states study the impact of the former on the latter while excluding the possibility that behavior also influences international law (Keith 1999; Hathaway 2002; and Hafner-Burton and Tsutsui 2005). The “double convergence” of constrained agency in comparative politics and international relations motivates Landman to specify such a feedback loop. Further, the empirical analyses support the specification: Landman finds that the processes of democratization, economic development, and interdependence have an impact on both the extent to which states endorse the human rights regime and observe those rights, and that signing international treaties has a weak effect on observation of the obligations contained within those documents (147). The latter finding is at odds with previous studies, but the former findings are quite consistent with the large-N literature to which Cardenas pointed as a foundation on which to build a synthetic model of human rights behavior. Empirically Landman’s findings appear to be on stronger ground than those of Keith (1999), Hathaway (2002), or Hafner-Burton & Tsutsui (2005): those studies impose a zero-restriction on any feedback and if such a feedback process exists (and Landman’s results suggest that it does), it is well known that a model with such a restriction will produce biased estimates. Landman’s results place the burden squarely on others to show that their results still hold when the feedback is included (or that the feedback relationship is spurious).

Leaving empirics aside, what of the success of Landman's theoretical synthesis? Unfortunately, the causal mechanisms are unclear. His exposition of the theory that drives his specification is a combination of a broad-gauge discussion of schools of theory in comparative politics and international relations and a review of the extent findings in the quantitative literature on human rights violations and state coercion/repression. By contrast, Cardenas (2004) identifies three important actors: the state, elites, and groups that support the international human rights regime. She centers her discussion on perceived threats to state rule and the almost reflexive response of states to such threats with violations of rights. What explains the variation in that near-reflexive response to repress, asks Cardenas? The answer, she submits, will be found in synthetic theories that focus on the preferences of those three actors. As she is writing a review piece, she leaves the creation of such a theory to the future, yet it is precisely the absence of such a theory that weakens the contribution of Landman's book. He fails to identify the actors and discuss their preferences and how they are formed. In essence, his "double convergence" of constrained agency is not a theory, but instead an insight that he used to suggest that it is important to specify a feedback between state's treaty signing behavior and their human rights behavior.

Lest this be read as denigrating the importance of that insight, let me note that Landman's study is a landmark. The statistical work is of the highest quality and sets a new standard in an area where high quality statistical work is *de rigueur*.<sup>5</sup> More importantly, it is difficult to imagine that many scholars will dispute the conjecture that there is feedback, yet Landman is the first to specify and examine it. I anticipate that future studies that fail to include a feedback specification will find it difficult to find their way into print. Further, his findings that states' human rights obligations and observance of those obligations are both largely a function of democratization, economic productivity, and interdependence, but that the "scraps of paper" do have a limited effect, not only have substantial face validity, but will become the new starting point for debate in the field. So, Landman is to be congratulated for making an important contribution to the advancement of our understanding of the development of the human rights regime and the practice of states within it.

His failure to specify the actors involved in the process, their preferences, the structures that constrain them, and the interaction among preferences, behavior, and structure is an opportunity that future scholarship can exploit. I wish to suggest, however, that we are more likely to produce useful theory if we abandon the search for a solution to the agent-structure problem in favor of taking either preferences or structures as given and exploring the implications of doing so. As long as there is a distribution among scholars such that some explore the implications of fixing preferences and exploring how structures affect behavior while other scholars fix structures and focus on how preferences affect behavior we should produce a healthy debate that will spur advances in our understanding.

### **What do Large-N Studies Illuminate?**

A second issue that Landman's book illustrates is the value of pooled cross-sectional time-series research designs that employ statistical inference. Cardenas suggests that constructivist scholarship

---

<sup>5</sup> In addition to work cited above, see McCormick and Mitchell (1997); Blanton (2000); Richards, Gelleny and Sacko (2001); and Hafner-Burton (2005).

on human rights suffers from biased case selection—something that is difficult to do when one employs a global sample.<sup>6</sup> Cardenas contends that this biased sampling has led the constructivist literature to ignore the puzzling gap between state signatory behavior and observance behavior. One virtue of using global samples, then, is that they are considerably less likely to suffer from sample selection bias. That is not to say that sample selection bias is a non-issue in large-N statistical studies. Indeed, the literature on treaty compliance is presently debating the issue (e.g., Von Stein 2005). Nonetheless, global samples are considerably less likely to suffer from selection of the dependent variable than small-N studies.

Were such samples based on random sampling then one could extol the virtue of the external validity of such studies, but since they are census populations of the cases that are not missing data, one does not have access to such an appeal (Ward, Siverson and Cao 2005). Nevertheless, the coefficient estimates from such an analysis represent the average effect of each variable on the dependent variable. Further, the standard error of the estimate gives us a measure of our confidence in the estimate. Knowing the average effect and its dispersion can be very useful and, importantly, is something we cannot ascertain via alternative methods.

### **What do Large-N Studies Obscure?**

Landman is unusually self-conscious about the limitations of statistical inference based on a global sample of cases. He singles out the influences of political, sociological, and personal relationships among the actors involved; the lobbying involved; the impact of different mobilization strategies; and the effect of different cultural understandings as processes that cannot be explored when using global pooled cross-sectional time-series samples (54, 58).

In addition, while one can conduct analysis of outliers, the virtue of identifying general patterns has a downside: by definition such studies explain outlying cases poorly. This is especially problematic if one's theory is about necessary and/or sufficient conditions. Such strong theories are relatively rare in international relations, but there is no *a priori* reason they should be. Put differently, the usefulness of large-N studies hinges wholly on whether one adopts a probabilistic account of causation when constructing theory. Strong theories that eschew probabilistic causation can be falsified by a single case, and global pooled cross-sectional time-series samples are useless for testing such theories.

Finally, measurement is necessarily gross (i.e., imprecise) in global pooled cross-sectional time-series data structures. Researchers compromise and use both proxy indicators and data that are considerably more noisy than they would like. Small-N analyses need not make either compromise. Patrick Ball's work at the American Academy for the Advancement of Science demonstrates the value of what can be done to develop quantitative measures in individual cases.<sup>7</sup> One implication of the superior validity and reliability of data collected over time in individual countries is that we ought to conduct more single-case, time-series studies (e.g., Pion-Berlin 1983).

---

<sup>6</sup> See Geddes (1990) for a discussion.

<sup>7</sup> See Ball (1996); Ball, Spirer and Spirer (2000); Asher, Ball, Betts, Dudukovich and Scheuren (2002); and Davenport and Ball (2002).

Another strength of Landman's study is that he is careful to distinguish between cross-sectional and temporal variation in his data, and employs histograms and plots to useful effect. A future direction for work that employs statistical inference is to employ the single-country design and conduct time-series analysis. These types of studies would add a useful complement to the qualitative cases studies and large-N statistical analyses that presently dominate the literature.

### **To What Effect?**

I began by observing that states' observance of the human rights regime leaves a great deal to be desired and that commentators and pundits blame a lack of political will within Western democracies to back their proclamations with action. Realist theorists of international relations submit that national security interests prevent states from concerning themselves with moral obligations such as those enshrined in the treaties that comprise the international human rights regime. Constructivist theorists of international relations, on the other hand, contend that norms influence behavior and observe that proclamations in favor of human rights are far more common than they used to be, but also that the practices of specific states are closer to those norms than they used to be.

With that as context I would like to conclude by examining the value of large-N studies like Landman's. As Cardenas observes, large-N studies are less likely than small-N studies to be victims of biases resulting from the selection of dependent variables. Even when they are not based on random sampling they are capable of determining the average effects of independent variables on a dependent variable. To the extent that we are interested in determining the average impact of a state accepting the obligations of an international treaty on its subsequent behavior (and vice versa) large-N studies are useful. They help us establish baseline information about general (or typical) relationships.

They are also useful for testing hypotheses. Statistical inference provides one with an explicit technique and criteria for evaluating the probability that a given hypothesis is consistent with relevant evidence. While a single study is of limited import, a body of studies is able to establish both the baseline expectations we can have about a given relationship as well as the strength or weakness of specific hypotheses and the theories that produce them.

What of the charge that large-N statistics are inherently conservative—that because their reliance on data restricts them to the study of a given *status quo*, they are unable to comment on how to change the *status quo*? This is an important issue in the study of human rights as the vast majority of scholars working in the area (presumably) have a normative motivation that is at least as strong as their positive motives. Does the charge of a conservative bias stick?

I submit that it does not. However, it may appear to be a problem. Many statistical analyses focus attention on structural characteristics of states that are, by definition, slow to change. The policy implications of such a study are, by design, limited. Yet there is nothing inherent in large-N studies that requires they focus on structural characteristics. One might observe that it is easier to measure structural characteristics than behavior and relational characteristics. But if this is true, then it is a failure of conceptualization and measurement, not a weakness of large-N studies.

We might thus level one last charge at Landman's book: by failing to carefully specify the actors, their preferences, and the structures that constrained their behavior, Landman limits the policy implications that he might have drawn. I argued above that the book is empirically strong, but delivers less theoretically. Thus it should not be surprising that its ability to provide policy implications is limited. We learn that to improve the status of human rights on the planet, we should promote democratic governance, economic productivity, and interdependence, and that the more that the states of the world share these characteristics, the more they will observe human rights, the more they will endorse the international human rights regime, and that such endorsement will have a small additional impact on observance. These are important broad-based conclusions, but we will have to await future work that specifies actors, their preferences, and the structures that constrain their behavior before we can draw more fine-grained implications from what appears to be a convergence on the usefulness of agent-structure approaches to the study of human rights.

## References

- Asher, Jana, Patrick Ball, Wendy Betts, Jana Dudukovich and Fritz Scheuren. 2002. *Killings and Refugee Flow in Kosovo March - June 1999*. Washington: AAAS Science and Human Rights Program, Website: [http://hrdata.aaas.org/kosovo/icty\\_report.pdf](http://hrdata.aaas.org/kosovo/icty_report.pdf)
- Ball, Patrick, Herbert F. Spierer and Louise Spierer. 2000. *Making the Case: Investigating Large-Scale Human Rights Violations Using Information Systems and Data Analysis*. Washington: AAAS Science and Human Rights Program.
- Ball, Patrick. 1996. *Who Did What to Whom? Planning and Implementing a Large Scale Human Rights Data Project*. Washington: AAAS Science and Human Rights Program.
- Blanton, Shannon Lindsey. 2000. "Promoting Human Rights and Democracy in the Developing World: U.S. Rhetoric versus U.S. Arms Control." *American Journal of Political Science* 44:123-131.
- Cardenas, Sonia. 2004. "Norm Collision: Explaining the Effects of International Human Rights Pressure on State Behavior." *International Studies Review* 6(2): 213-232.
- Davenport, Christian. 1995. "Multi-Dimensional Threat Perception and State Repression: An Inquiry into Why States Apply Negative Sanctions." *American Journal of Political Science* 39:683-713.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1999. "Human Rights and the Democratic Proposition." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 43(1):92-116.
- \_\_\_\_\_ and Patrick Ball. 2002. "Views to a Kill: Exploring the Implications of Source Selection in the Case of Guatemalan State Terror." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 46(3): 427-450.
- Eckstein, Harry. 1980. "Theoretical Approaches to Explaining Collective Political Violence." in T.R. Gurr (ed.) *The Handbook of Political Violence*. New York: The Free Press.
- Geddes, Barbara. 1990. "How the Cases You Choose Affect the Answers You Get: Selection Bias in Comparative Politics." *Political Analysis* 2:131-151.

- Hafner-Burton, Emilie M. 2005. "Right of Robust? The Sensitive Nature of Repression to Globalization." *Journal of Peace Research* 42(6):679-698.
- Hafner-Burton, Emilie M. and Kiyoteru Tsutsui. 2005. "Human Rights in a Globalizing World: Paradox of Empty Promises." *American Journal of Sociology* 110(5):1373-1411.
- Hathaway, O. 2002. "Do Treaties Make a Difference? Human Rights Treaties and the Problem of Compliance." *Yale Law Journal* 111:1932-2042.
- Keith, Linda Camp. 1999. "The United Nations Covenant on Civil and Political Rights: Does it Make a Difference in Human Rights Behavior?" *Journal of Peace Research* 36(1):95-118.
- Kristof, Nicholas. 2006. "Genocide in Slow Motion." *The New York Review of Books*, 53(2)  
<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/18674>
- McCormick, James M. & Neil J. Mitchell. 1997. "Human Rights Violations, Umbrella Concepts, and Empirical Analysis." *World Politics* 49:510-525.
- Pion-Berlin, David. 1983. "Political Repression and Economic Doctrines: The Case of Argentina." *Comparative Political Studies* 16(1):37-66.
- Poe, Stephen C. and C. Neal Tate. 1994. "Repression of Human Rights to Personal Integrity in the 1980s: A Global Analysis." *American Political Science Review* 88:853-872.
- Power, Samantha. 2001. "Bystanders to Genocide." *The Atlantic Monthly*, September, 288(2)  
<http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/200109/power-genocide>
- Richards, David, Ronald Gelleny and David Sacko. 2001. "Money with a Mean Streak? Foreign Economic Penetration and Government Respect for Human Rights in Developing Countries." *International Studies Quarterly* 45(2):219-239.
- Risse, Thomas, Stephen Ropp and Kathryn Sikkink (eds.). 1999. The Power of Human Rights: International Norms and Domestic Change, New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Taylor, Michael. 1989. "Structure, Culture and Action in the Explanation of Social Change." *Politics and Society* 17(2): 115-162.
- Von Stein, Jana. 2005. "Do Treaties Constrain or Screen? Selection Bias and Treaty Compliance." *American Political Science Review* 99(4):611-622
- Ward, Michael D., Randolph M. Siverson and Xun Cao. 2006. "Everybody out of the Pool! Reconstructing the Democratic Peace." Unpublished paper available online at:  
<http://faculty.washington.edu/mdw/pdfs/eootp20060131.pdf>
- Wendt, Alexander E. 1987. "The Agent-Structure Problem in International Relations Theory." *International Organization* 41:335-370.



\_\_\_\_\_. 1992. "Anarchy is what States Make of it: The Social Construction of Power Politics." *International Organization* 46:391-425.

\_\_\_\_\_. 1999. *Social Theory of International Politics*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

---

*Will H. Moore is Professor of Political Science at Florida State University. His primary research area is violent political conflict within and between countries, and he has published a number of articles that examine dissent and repression. His more recent work explores patterns of forced migration.*

© 2006, Graduate School of International Studies, University of Denver.