

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

SALLY ENGLE MERRY, *Human Rights and Gender Violence: Translating International Law into Local Justice*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 2006, ix + 269p. Index.

Anthropologist Sally Merry has chosen the international human rights movement committed to ending violence against women as a site for understanding how new categories of meaning emerge from transnational practices. In seven chapters, Merry explores how global law is translated into the vernacular by NGO activists whose task is to mediate meanings emerging at different levels from the global to the local. This detailed examination of the interface between local and global activism examines how local people reframe human rights issues to fit local circumstances. Using case studies from Fiji, Hong Kong, India, China, Hawaii and elsewhere in the US, Merry demonstrates how human rights law becomes embedded in everyday social practices. Following a detailed introduction of her argument, Merry takes us through the process of how human rights law is translated into the vernacular.

The second chapter explores the characteristics of UN culture, a “social space where people come together as locally embedded people and as participants in a transnational setting” (37). Of note is how she deals with the formal equality of nations within the UN system but the economic and political inequality that needs to be negotiated through transnational consensus building that produces human rights law. Chapter 3 places gender violence within the CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women) process, and shows how critically important NGOs are in translating between UN language and local conditions. This chapter shows how “The human rights approach resists seeing claims to cultural differences as a valid justification for practices harmful to women, children, or other vulnerable populations” (91).

The disjuncture between global laws such as CEDAW, with limited power to compel states to comply, and local justice systems are explored in chapter 4. In spite of the limitations of human rights law, it does important cultural work: “This is a cultural system whose coin is admission into the international community of human-rights compliant states” (73). Chapter 5 demonstrates how and why human rights frameworks have been appropriated locally, and translated across boundaries of class, ethnicity, mobility and education with the help of intermediaries who frame, adapt and redefine local issues to fit global categories. In chapter 6 we learn how

human rights frameworks can be applied without displacing other frameworks; rather they add another way of thinking. For example, a rights framework may be layered over kinship obligations, rather than merged or blended with it.

Merry's conclusions leave some room for optimism. Throughout the book she addresses criticisms levelled against the human rights system by anthropologists and others who recognize the problems of moving from global rights to local advocacy, including the danger of reinstating a form of neocolonial imperialism. Nevertheless, she concludes that the UN human rights system, for all its flaws, is the only global vision of social justice available to us. She calls for adopting an anthropological definition of culture and viewing human rights as cultural practice; in so doing, she reaffirms the importance of the anthropologist in human rights work – both as critic and ethnographer.

The book raises many theoretical questions of general interest to anthropologists beyond the scope of human rights law or violence against women. “Is globalization responsible for women’s poverty in the world”? (46). How can respect for cultural diversity be reconciled with the argument that religion and culture are barriers to women’s equality? (47). The book struggles with the contradiction between respecting cultural differences and protecting vulnerable groups. As Merry notes, “just as the concept of culture needs to be interrogated and destabilized, so do assumptions about who speaks for culture” (19).

Merry provides an excellent model of how to conduct multi-sited fieldwork in a deterritorialized world, demonstrating how ethnography permits engagement with the fragments of a larger global system. With her wonderfully clear and engaging writing, the book is suitable for both undergraduate and graduate students.

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