

# Just Violence: Torture and Human Rights in the Eyes of the Police (Rachel Wahl)

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Review of

## *Just Violence: Torture and Human Rights in the Eyes of the Police*

By Rachel Wahl. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017

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Rachel Wahl's *Just Violence* uses the case of police officers in India to examine the tensions inherent in the global human rights regime and practices of police brutality and torture. Through a carefully constructed analysis of 119 in-depth interviews with police officers, civil servants, human rights activists, and educators working in India, Wahl presents the paradox of providing police officers human rights education (HRE). Even when the officers know that torture is illegal, they continue to conduct these practices and use global frameworks to justify their reasoning in terms of security and justice concerns amidst a corrupt and ineffectual state. Wahl argues that the police transform what they are learning about human rights for divergent purposes and, in so doing, draw on global ethical frameworks as part of their justification.

*Just Violence* is an important empirical contribution to the field of human rights, particularly regarding the vernacularization of rights and how global human rights are understood within local contexts. However, contrary to other studies that emphasize the importance of the local cultural and religious customs and norms, Wahl's study reveals the importance of other moral imaginaries, such as those around national security, in informing these officers' worldviews. Wahl's book also contributes to the debates about the value and purpose of HRE and the possible limitations of using HRE in different contexts. Her findings point not simply to a rejection of HRE frameworks as Western, but moreover to the need to better understand the perspective and rationale of officers' failure to abide by international human rights standards regarding torture.

In addition to empirical research on human rights education, policing, and torture, Wahl draws on various philosophical frameworks such as Charles Taylor's (2009) concepts of social and moral imaginaries to deftly present the perspectives and reasoning of police officers and the way that they frame and justify their use of torture through national security and justice frameworks. Her work builds upon existing literature but also questions commonly held assumptions about human rights education as needing to be culturally and locally relevant to be effective. Wahl demonstrates that, while the tenets of HRE are often consistent with the officer's local cultural and religious beliefs, officers also draw on their own moral imaginaries and justify their actions in terms of other global frameworks and examples, such as their knowledge that the U.S. commits torture in the name of national security. She also demonstrates a wider paradox in human rights whereby the police as agents of the state are responsible for upholding human rights but are often the main violators of those rights.

In the first part of the book, Wahl provides the perspective of the police officers and their moral imaginaries of violence. Chapter 1 provides an overview of relevant research on human rights education and torture, both globally and in the Indian context. In Chapter 2, Wahl demonstrates how officers construct their own moral beliefs regarding justice and the utility of torture despite their awareness of a global human rights framework. Chapter 3 provides concrete examples of how the political and legal environment, including lack of resources, corruption, and weak rule of law, plays into the officers' moral and social imaginaries and rationale for using violence.

The second part of the book focuses on human rights. Chapter 4 chronicles the way in which police respond to ideas about human rights, which they learn in their HRE classes. Wahl argues that rather than endorse human rights concepts, officers use human rights language to "contest the very principles on which rights are premised" (p.102). This reveals the way in which these officers use the very moral language that they are being taught in HRE classes to advocate for their own justifications of torture. In chapter 5, the book discusses how these global human rights norms interact with local religious and cultural norms, demonstrating that framing human rights in terms of local cultural and religious values may not be sufficient to shift officers' identities as police. Chapter 6 goes on to show how, rather than draw on local perspectives about human rights to rationalize their positions, officers employ other global norms around security and the protection of the state to justify their actions. In Chapter 7, the book discusses how police respond negatively to human rights activists and how the work of activists, while important for bringing attention to human rights violations and restraining officers' behavior, also has the unintended consequences of alienating police officers. The book concludes with a discussion of the dilemmas inherent to the global human rights framework. Wahl argues for the need to understand how officers rationalize and understand their own behavior and for the importance of "dialogue" to the process of norm socialization around human rights.

While Wahl argues that HRE serves a purpose by creating space for dialogue, more concrete examples of how to engage the police in these discussions would be useful for educators and practitioners employing an HRE model in their work. Also, more analysis of the findings from this study for other contexts (such as the U.S., the Philippines, or other parts of the world where police brutality is an issue) would demonstrate the relevance of findings from India to other places.

Interdisciplinary in nature, *Just Violence* will be of interest to a wide range of scholars including political scientists, sociologists, and international and comparative education researchers interested in how global norms and ideas are implemented in local contexts and in complicating the global-local binary. In addition, educators and human rights education scholars concerned with the efficacy and legitimacy of HRE as a global model to address human rights violations will also find the book provocative and relevant.

Despite the global rise and institutionalization of HRE (Meyer et al. 2010, Russell and Suarez 2017), the continued use of police brutality and torture across different contexts points to the need to continue to interrogate these tensions in HRE and to understand human rights as a "moral vision" rather than an inevitable outcome of the dominance of the global human rights regime. Wahl highlights the importance of HRE for generating discussion and dialogue on these difficult and contested issues: "Such engagement can compel educators to develop responses to the difficulties raised by the police, and in this way strengthen the discourse of human rights" (p. 195).

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## About the Author

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