

Book Review: Rights as Weapons: Instruments of Conflict, Tools of Power by Clifford Bob

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Bob, Clifford. *Rights as Weapons: Instruments of Conflict, Tools of Power*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019. 261 pages. Hardcover, \$29.95.

Clifford Bob, chair of political science at Duquesne University, has given readers a provocative—and at times frustrating—realist analysis of the current human rights world in his new work, *Rights as Weapons*. Through a careful series of case studies that range from Ugandan debates about LGBTQ rights to fights surrounding bullfighting in Catalonia, Bob clearly lays out how rights are often, if not always, brandished as political weapons. Not only this, Bob notes, these battles surrounding rights can also evolve in ways that activists do not always expect. To a certain degree, this argument is nothing new for those engaged in the maintenance and expansion of human rights. After all, political and cultural fights over the expansion of rights have long been framed as assaults on tradition. What is unique about Bob's work, though, is the systematic way in which he builds his argument, leaving the reader with a valuable set of evaluative tools by which they might interrogate any given conflict around human rights.

Bob's classification system begins by establishing three major ways in which groups fighting for rights see their objective as weapons. Arguing that actors see rights as first rallying cries to gather allies, then as deployable against enemies, and finally as a defense against attackers, Bob further breaks down these categories to illustrate for the reader how they function in contemporary life. In particular, Bob focuses on how rights function not just as the *ends* of struggle, but also—and for him, perhaps more importantly—as the *means* of the struggle. In making such a claim, despite his argument that he is supplementing rather than supplanting the traditional historiography on global rights, Bob forces scholars to address how battles to expand rights are not always a positive thing for human existence. In a way, then, Bob's work gives teeth to Michael Ignatieff's old warning to not let human rights become blinding idols. Despite any

imperfections in—or criticisms of—his work, it must be noted that this book is rare in that it is useful, and not just in academic circles.

While Bob’s framework will undoubtedly prove valuable for rights advocates in the years to come, his work also presents a problem for the future of human rights work. While he attempts to dissuade readers from being overly critical of what he calls his “realism about rights,” it must be acknowledged that the starting point from which he developed his matrix is problematic. Throughout the work, Bob appears overly critical of the notion of rights themselves, despite his constant effort to convince the reader of the opposite. This is easiest seen in his title, *Rights as Weapons*, where Bob immediately sets rights up as a negative—after all, weapons are rarely discussed or conceptualized as a good thing. By rooting his understanding of rights within such a model, he unintentionally sets his work up to potentially be dismissed by potential users of his evaluation system (though it should not be). Throughout the book, it seems as Bob has lost the love of utopia that those of us who have spent time in the trenches had (and have); nor does it seem that he understands the motivating power of utopian dreams even in profoundly anti-utopian situations.

It is indeed fair to argue that often human rights activists have too much of the dreamer within them—and Bob’s work helps to bring them down out of the clouds. The danger to the world of activists, though, in work like this is that it has the potential to remove any of the emotive power of human rights, seeing them simply as ways by which groups squabble over the crumbs of power. By focusing on situations where the utopian goal was co-opted by antiutopian actors—the war in Afghanistan in chapter 6, for example—Bob ignores the many successes where naked power was not the objective and the establishment of a more perfect access to human rights was achieved—say the impact that microfinance has had on women’s rights in

South Asia. Imperfect, yes—but not held back by the potential problems of power. In the end, while Bob’s work uses the language of tools and weapons, it seems that he has forgotten that tools are neutral while weapons are for domination.

All criticisms aside, this is a valuable addition to the historiography on global rights. Any scholar, policy maker, and commentator should read this book, wrestle through its foundations, and apply its matrix to their own work. Clifford Bob has given the community an excellent resource—we should use it.

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