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## The Political Sociology of Human Rights

The language of human rights is the most prominent 'people-centred' language of global justice today. This book looks at how human rights are constructed at local, national, international and transnational levels and considers commonalities and differences around the world. Through discussions of key debates in the interdisciplinary study of human rights, the book develops its themes by considering examples of human rights advocacy in international organisations, national states and local grassroots movements. Case studies relating to specific organisations and institutions illustrate how human rights are being used to address structural injustices: imperialist geo-politics, authoritarianism and corruption, inequalities created by 'freeing' markets, dangers faced by transnational migrants as a result of the securitisation of borders, and violence against women.

**Kate Nash** is a professor in the Department of Sociology at Goldsmiths, University of London.

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Equality, in contrast to all that is involved in mere existence, is not given to us, but is the result of human organization insofar as it is guided by the principle of justice. We are not born equal; we become equal as members of a group on the strength of our decision to guarantee ourselves mutually equal rights.

(Arendt 1979: 301)

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[More information](#)

---



## Contents

Preface and acknowledgements	ix
<b>1. The social construction of human rights</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>2. (A) human rights movement(s) and other organisations</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>3. States of human rights</b>	<b>41</b>
<b>4. The United Nations: not a world state</b>	<b>67</b>
<b>5. Humanising capitalism</b>	<b>89</b>
<b>6. Women's rights are human rights</b>	<b>115</b>
<b>7. Do migrants have rights?</b>	<b>135</b>
<b>8. What works? Paradoxes in the human rights field</b>	<b>156</b>
Notes	173
Further reading	189
Bibliography	193
Index	215

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Kate Nash  
Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

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## Preface and acknowledgements

This book has been more challenging to write than I expected. The first big challenge was how to avoid Eurocentrism. By Eurocentrism I mean the assumption that what happens in what I call the ‘Northwest’ – in the European settler states of the United States, Western Europe and Australasia – is the norm, and that other parts of the world will or should follow their example. Eurocentrism is quite evident in some human rights advocacy. However, critics of human rights who see governments and corporations from the Northwest as facilitating or legitimating ‘Western neo-liberal imperialism’ do not necessarily escape it either: when their analyses are limited to discourses that originate and circulate in the United States, for example, they seem to assume that it is only what happens there that is really important. In this book I have tried to develop theory and methodology to understand how contexts, actors and claims for human rights *differ* around the world as well as what they share in common. The task is complicated because one of the most important contexts for the realisations of respect for human rights is the dominance of the owners of financial and industrial capital, state officials, and also international non-governmental organisations that are based in the Northwest. To get a good understanding of the range of possibilities represented by human rights today we must take seriously both the variety of local constructions of human rights people are creating to deal with specific injustices and also the effects of global geo-politics on what they are able to achieve using a language of human rights.

This brings me to the second challenge of studying human rights. I develop a version of sociology that enables us to study structures as well as meanings; what is ‘social’ as well as what is ‘cultural’ about constructions of human rights. Broadly speaking sociologists and anthropologists have tended to focus on the small-scale and local: on meanings that are created and sustained in communities and movements. Most international relations (IR) scholars and political scientists studying human rights focus instead on large-scale structures, networks and international organisations. In this book I argue that we

must do both. Studying structures (of capitalism, post-colonialism, gender) and organisations (corporations, non-governmental organisations, inter-governmental organisations, and above all states – which are not all the same) is crucial to understanding both the possibilities *and* the limitations of human rights today. Sociology is a relatively open discipline: there is very little disciplining out of fundamental questions in social theory. We must keep the big picture in sight: the whole range of conditions that must be transformed if respect for human rights – civil, political, social and cultural – is to be realised. At the same time we can be inspired to try not to lose sight of the smallest details: how what seems possible may be shifted as a result of framing injustices as matters of human rights. Of course, this makes for a huge task. As far as human rights are concerned it is one which sociologists are only just beginning to address.

You, the reader of the book, will judge how successful I have been in meeting these challenges – and of course I hope you find the efforts I have made worthwhile! Regardless of the outcome, however, I am very grateful for help and encouragement from a number of people to write this book. I want to thank especially the people who read particular chapters and who gave me their invaluable advice on the basis of expertise in particular areas: Alice Bloch, Kirsten Campbell, David Hansen-Miller, Monika Krause, Fran Tonkiss, Neil Washbourne. Thank you also to Patrick Legalès who disagreed so strongly with my approach to the state when I presented a paper on it at Sciences Po at the beginning of the project that, no doubt inadvertently, he led me to think about it again. For emotional and intellectual support and interest in the project, thank you to Jeff Alexander, Lilie Chouliaraki, Nick Couldry, Marie Dembour, Monica Greco, Clare Hemmings, Caroline Knowles, Daniel Levy, Giovanna Procacci, Roberta Sassatelli, Alan Scott, Damien Short, George Steinmetz, Paul Stenner and Bryan Turner.