

## Review – Rights as Weapons: Instruments of Conflict, Tools of Power

Written by Daniel Braaten

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# Review – Rights as Weapons: Instruments of Conflict, Tools of Power

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DANIEL BRAATEN, FEB 21 2021

***Rights as Weapons: Instruments of Conflict, Tools of Power***  
**By Clifford Bob**  
**Princeton University Press, 2019**

Human rights are generally thought of as defensive in nature. That is, they are held up by certain individuals and groups as a means to protect their dignity from the state or other malevolent actors. Moreover, rights are often viewed as either philosophically grounded in principles of human dignity and/or religiously endowed by a creator. Even absent a philosophical or religious grounding, rights are often regarded as legal concepts and taken as inviolate. These views of human rights treat them as generally positive and used by oppressed groups for liberal ends. In *Rights as Weapons: Instruments of Conflict, Tools of Power*, Clifford Bob cuts against the hagiography of human rights, and rights in general, to focus on the fundamental political nature of rights and how they are often used strategically, aggressively, and even for “illiberal ends”. In previous books such as *The Marketing of Rebellion* (2005) and *The Global Right Wing and the Clash of World Politics* (2012) Bob has shown a knack for viewing common topics in international relations and comparative politics (e.g., rebellions, international norm diffusion) from different perspectives enabling a nuanced view of political phenomenon that one does not always find in academic studies. For these reasons Bob’s view of how rights work in international and domestic politics are worth grappling with.

At the outset of this review, it is important to note that Bob does not portray rights as inherently illiberal but rather the focus of his book is on how multiple actors can use rights to advance agendas that are both liberal and illiberal. In other words, his focus is on examining rights as political phenomenon, and as the subtitle of the book states, how they can be used as tools and instruments to advance political agendas. Furthermore, he takes an expansive view of rights beyond those listed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to include property rights, group rights, and even majority rights. The book is organized into three sections. This first section shows how rights can be used as preparation for organized interests. In this case rights are used instrumentally as mobilization tools for groups to motivate action. Section two shows how rights can be used as weapons against one’s foes. Finally, section three describes how rights can be used against third parties, either to get them on one’s side or to create a fracture in an opposition coalition. Bob concludes that there are three primary ways in which rights can be used as weapons – to *mobilize*, to *deploy* against one’s enemies, and to *counter* attacks made against one’s own claims.

*Rights as mobilizers.* As Bob notes rights are particularly potent motivators of political action. He lists five reasons for this: 1) because rights are perceived as natural in that they have deep roots, 2) rights are also perceived as universal applying across space and time, 3) rights are perceived as absolute in that they are inviolate and can trump other political issues, 4) rights are perceived as apolitical putting them above other petty political squabbles, and finally, 5) rights are violated by one’s foes. For political activists rights are a good way to mobilize one’s side as the five reasons Bob outlines above indicate. The strategic value of rights as mobilizers stems from their ethical side. Because rights are generally conceived by most people as unalloyed goods that cannot be violated when they are violated that can serve as a strong motivator for political action to rectify those wrongs. Of course, with every action there is a reaction and mobilizing behind rights claims can create a counter reaction with its own rights claims. Bob shows that not only

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can rights be used as mobilizers but those targeted as denying rights can also use rights claims for their own purposes. He terms this using rights as shields and parries. According to Bob rights can be used by the targeted group to claim they are defending traditional rights or majority rights and shielding the majority group. They can also mimic their opponents and claim that it is their rights that are being violated by giving into demands from their opponents. This depicts rights claims as zero-sum where one side enjoying their rights is by definition taking away rights from others. One is reminded of Christian nationalists in the U.S. and other countries claiming that allowing rights to LGBTQ individuals (e.g., right to marry) is actually a violation of their rights. Bob's assertion that rights claims can create a counter-movement with their own rights claims is an example of how rights can be used for illiberal and even repressive ends.

*Rights as Weapons.* Bob identifies three broad ways rights can be used as weapons against one's foes. Those are – rights as camouflage, rights as spears, and rights as dynamite. Rights as camouflage is a tactic of using a rights claim to mask or camouflage another, perhaps less popular, political aim. The idea is to use the apolitical neutral language of rights to advance a cause that is much more controversial than the rights language would suggest. The example Bob provides in the book is the Catalonia region in Spain banning Bullfighting on grounds of animal cruelty (hence an animal rights frame) but this was camouflage for the Catalonia region pushing its autonomous status against the majority population of Spain. The next example of using rights as a weapon that Bob identifies is using rights as spears. These are very direct and finely targeted attack at undermining or overturning a specific policy or law. The example provided in chapter 5 is of a small atheist organization in Italy trying to overturn a policy of displaying crucifixes in Italian schools on the grounds of religious freedom. Finally, in terms of using rights as a weapon, Bob identifies the last tactic which is – rights as dynamite. This tactic is when a dominant group deploys its sovereign rights or majority rights to destroy, or dynamite, a weaker minority group. This is often done through legislative or executive action and examples provided in the book are the veil ban in France, the suppression of LGBTQ rights in some African countries and the suppression of women's rights in Afghanistan. The idea behind using rights as dynamite is that the dominant majority group claims *its* rights are violated by allowing certain minority groups from exercising their rights.

*Rights and Third Parties.* Rights cannot only be used as weapons against one's foes, they can also be used to gain the support of third parties or to fracture an opposing coalition. Bob again identifies two main ways for rights tactics to be used against third parties: rights as blockades, rights as wedges. The basics of rights as a blockade is one group using rights to block another subordinate group from enjoying rights. The idea of using rights as a blockade is group A claiming there are the true rights holder and group B is not deserving. This is a way to placate the majority or dominate group. In other words, the tactic of "rights for me but not for thee" as an appeasement to the dominant group. As an example of this tactic in practice Bob describes the abolitionist movement in the United States in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the subordination of women's rights in favor of emancipation of slaves and voting rights for African Americans. Rights as wedges are a tactic that uses a rights claim to either weaken an opposing group and/or prevent its growth preemptively. In these instances, rights are often not the primary political goal but somewhat used as subterfuge in service of a deeper political goal. One example Bob provides as evidence of rights as wedges is some supporters of Israel condemning Palestinians for their poor treatment of the LGBTQI community.

Overall, Bob's analysis highlights the very political nature of rights, human and otherwise. Rights can be used as tools of liberation or tools of suppression. Their Janus nature – containing both strategic and ethical dimensions – makes them all the more useful in 21<sup>st</sup> century global politics. Bob's focus in the book is primarily on the strategic nature of rights as is befitting since that is an aspect of rights that perhaps gets less attention from scholars and certainly of activists. However, by de-emphasizing the ethical side of rights Bob is somewhat guilty of overstating the case. Bob is right to note that one reason rights work so well as mobilizers is because of their ethical side. It is easier to mobilize people around fighting for what they think is just and universal. Where a focus on the ethical side of rights would help round out the analysis on what might be termed the more "cynical" deployments of rights Bob describes in his book. For example, the strategies of rights as camouflage and rights as wedges Bob describes in the book are using rights as cover to pursue other, perhaps less popular political agendas. This cynical deployment of rights may be seen by audiences as just that – cynical, thereby weakening the use of these political tactics. Despite these small shortcomings Bob has provided scholars and activists who seek greater protection and promotion of rights a lot to think about with his book and that is never a bad thing.

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Daniel Braaten is an Assistant Professor of Political Science at Texas Lutheran University in Seguin, TX. His research interests are in the areas of Human Rights, International Organizations, International Political Economy, and Environmental Politics. His research has been published in Review of International Studies, Journal of Peace Research, Journal of Human Rights, and Human Rights Review. You can follow him on twitter @UnbridledEnthus.