



The Gatekeepers of International Human Rights

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“Lost” Causes: Agenda Vetting in Global Issue Networks and the Shaping of Human Security. By Charli Carpenter. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014. 234 pp., \$24.95 paperback (ISBN-13 978-0-8014-7604-4), \$79.95 hardcover (ISBN-13 978-0-8014-4885-0).

In a book that deserves widespread attention from many academic and practitioner quarters, Charli Carpenter reviews attempts to raise new issues onto the agenda of the international human rights community. Rather than looking at triumphs, however, she focuses on failures. Consider “killer robots.” We are familiar with drones, but what about “fully autonomous” war robots which would make targeting decision with no human “in the loop?” She writes (p. 88) that the US military has been seeking proposals for such weapons since at least 2005, that Israel and South Korea have deployed robots with the capacity to make autonomous targeting decisions in border areas, and that several other countries are developing such systems.

Ethicists and robotics experts have noted that there is virtually no way a robot could be programmed to distinguish a true belligerent from an innocent bystander, and therefore, a case could be made that naturally the deployment of such machines should be banned by international treaty. On the other hand, and this is Carpenter’s point, it takes much more than a good idea to get a consensus in the international human rights community. Noel Sharkey, a roboticist at the University of Sheffield, agitated successfully for attention to this issue within the communities of ethics and robotics, but could not personally turn this into an international human rights campaign. In his words:

All I am is an academic with some access to the media and some technical expertise, but I don’t see myself talking to the UN or something. I’m talking to Landmine Action, and I’d be happy to take a backseat and leave it with them. They know what they’re doing. They understand access to political things that I don’t. I’ll help them write the reports and things, but I’m quite happy for them to do the negotiations (pp. 99–100).

But when the earnest professor attempted to build a coalition, if not a consensus, he ran into a wall of reticence. Reticence, of course, is very different from opposition or hostility. But the end result here was summarized by a focus group member:

My reaction is it’s a very interesting set of issues, but it’s not ripe: it’s almost ahead of its time. You would really need to see these weapons in use, and the actual collateral damage, in order for this issue to begin to get leverage and momentum. You can’t really create a norm around something that you don’t fully understand. People will say it’s science fiction: we don’t need a norm for science fiction (p. 103).

Carpenter’s point is not whether war robots are good, bad, currently available, or science fiction. Rather, it is that with comments like that it is clear that the international community is not convinced of the need to ban them. And the reason has nothing to do with whether banning killer robots is a good idea. Rather,

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the issue is not “ripe” for action. Experts know about it, and most in the human rights community are worried about it, but they have bigger fish to fry.

Carpenter focuses on the role of key network players in the promotion of new ideas in the international human rights community. Her idea of “key network players” draws from the formal analysis of networks, noting that “centrality” in a network can be assessed through formal means. But her most powerful insights and contributions come from her interviews and case studies.

The book begins with three theoretical chapters focusing on identifying actors in key network locations and noting the important gatekeeping roles that they play: They are the “agenda setters” in the international system. The next three chapters focus on particular cases: compensation for civilian victims of war; war robots; and victims of infant male circumcision. I have already described some of the insights relating to Chapter 5 on war robots. Chapter 4 begins with these interesting, if depressing, comments:

In times of war, civilians are dismembered, burned to death, crushed, asphyxiated, eviscerated, buried alive, and shot. They witness the deaths or mutilation of close family members and friends. Their homes are destroyed; they become refugees, and in their displacement they become vulnerable to attack, robbery, rape, and death from exposure and malnutrition. And much of this is perfectly legal. ... Today, nothing in the voluminous international law of armed conflict holds warring parties accountable for such harms (p. 55).

Should there be an international norm of compensation when a farmer's crops are burned as an act of war, or a hospital or a road is destroyed, or millions of refugees must flee their homes, either as “collateral damage” or as part of a war-fighting strategy? There has never been such a tradition; warring parties can destroy personal property with impunity. Why did this issue not take off? There are many reasons why this issue fizzled, but note that in the case of war robots it was not “ripe” because there had not yet been a catastrophe, whereas in this latter case the lack of “ripeness” stemmed perhaps from the opposite reasons: We are accustomed to civilians going uncompensated for the often horrific tragedies they experience in times of war.

Chapter 6 focuses on the efforts by an American nurse to change widespread practices of male circumcision, currently practiced for cultural reasons on about 30% of male babies worldwide. Is the procedure painful? Check. Is it medically necessary? No. Can the affected person give consent to the practice? Not as a newborn. Do adults have the right to remove body parts from children without their consent? Not according to the “intactivist” manifesto. Do all these reasons seem to have the hallmarks of a sure-fire human rights issue? It would seem so. But when the campaign began, several developments occurred. Advocates focusing on female genital mutilation shied away from it for fear of diverting attention away from their own very important issue. Perhaps most tellingly, in a section entitled “Social Proximity to Alleged Perpetrators” Carpenter notes that, following in their own cultural traditions, many human rights campaigners had themselves had their children circumcised and did not think that this was a human rights violation.

Unlike many other practices that human rights professionals condemn but do not participate in, the practice of circumcision was widespread in the human rights elite community itself. Confronting it evoked defensiveness from those who had circumcised their own children and were loath to think of themselves as human rights abusers. ... “Is staying in the playpen a human rights violation? When you're a baby, your mother gets to tell you what to do. ... I had to make lots of decisions about my child, to vaccinate, to breastfeed, to send to daycare— all kinds of parental decisions are human rights violations. So this doesn't seem as important to me as a lot of the other stuff out there” (p. 139).

Whether it is because the issue has not yet become widely known, because it is already so widely known, or because the issue is widely familiar within the families of international human rights campaigners, there are many reasons why a policy entrepreneur may fail in their efforts to put a new issue on the international agenda. Charli Carpenter's detailed case studies and carefully developed theory about the key roles of strategically placed network gatekeepers constitute a very important development in the literatures on agenda setting, issue denial, policy framing, the development of norms, and international human rights. Readers in many different intellectual communities will benefit from reading the book, which is well written, full of interesting details about the three cases, and can easily be used in courses. A key contribution is to note that having a good idea is just not enough. There are many good ideas out there. International agencies, NGOs, and human rights activists (as with other advocates in any area of politics) face very difficult questions of agenda vetting. The human rights agenda is overcrowded with many more good issues than can simultaneously be considered. Carpenter pushes us forward with a real contribution about why good ideas sometimes fall flat.