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Elsa Hernandez

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HUMAN RIGHTS A VERY SHORT INTRODUCTION BY ANDREW CLAPHAM¹

Elsa Hernandez[†]

“Human Rights a Very Short Introduction” (“Human Rights”) is a concise reference guide to human rights and it covers the inception of the human rights concept to the human rights movement and the role and obligations it sets forth in the world today. This book is also an introduction to the human rights discourse and Clapham

In the first three chapters, Clapham covers specific topics in the implementation of human rights law and its enforcement such as: the historical development of international human rights in Chapter 2 and human rights foreign policy and the role of the UN in Chapter 3. “Human Rights” begins with the concept of general rights that were in the Magna Carta and he defines where the modern concept of human rights came from in declarations such as the American Declaration of Independence of 1776 and the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen in 1789. Clapham also covers important events of the human rights movement from World War II to the creation of the International Criminal Court and how each event shaped human rights in the world today. He references key historical agreements such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as well as declarations and treaties between states that subsequently followed. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is also included in its entirety as a reference tool for the reader.

The remaining chapters cover specific topics in human rights law such as: The international crime of torture in Chapter 4; Restrictions on freedom for prisoners in Chapter 5; Privacy in Chapter 6; Food, education, health, housing and work in Chapter 7; Discrimination and equality in Chapter 8; and the Death penalty in Chapter 9. In each of these chapters, Clapham compares the definition of these rights in different countries and whether the rights are enforced in different countries.

Each chapter contains excerpts from agreements, laws, periodicals and literature from around the world in shaded boxes throughout the book. The excerpts written by journalists and renowned scholars contain different views and applications of human rights law in several countries. Excerpts also include reactions from the public, scholars and politicians on laws and treaties providing insight on the effects of the human rights movement as it was evolving.

[†] J.D., 2008, State University of New York at Buffalo Law School

¹ Andrew Clapham, HUMAN RIGHTS A VERY SHORT INTRODUCTION (2007)

Clapham contends that “human rights mean different things to different people” and he objectively examines differing perspectives of human rights concepts and the tensions that are created from these differences. He compares the theory that universal human rights protects fundamental rights of all global citizens to the theory that universal human rights is a farce and that states create their own standard of human rights and enforce them in their own way. He describes the tension between the interpretation in Eastern Asian countries and Western countries; politicians and the people they serve; and, between states themselves. He also illustrates the actions of politicians, states and UN organizations and their impact on balancing human rights with competing interests.

In his final remarks, Clapham ends the book on where the human rights movement is now. Clapham brings forth the notion that even though the organizations and laws have been created to ensure that human rights are protected, many states are not enforcing these laws. The book leaves the reader with the notion that even though laws and treaties are in place to protect the human rights of all citizens it is not enforced enough and solidarity of individuals and groups is needed in addition to state involvement.

This book is recommended for students as it provides an introduction to the human rights discourse and key events that have occurred throughout the human rights movement. The book contains a detailed index as well as references to several valuable sources in the human rights arena. The further reading section of the book contains information about other books that cover various topics in human rights. All of these sources are valuable to students that are studying human rights.