



Just Responsibility: A Human Rights Theory of Global Justice

by Brooke Ackerly, New York, Oxford University Press, 2018, 314 pp., \$33.95 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-19-066294-3

Natasha Behl (she/her/hers)

To cite this article: Natasha Behl (she/her/hers) (2021): Just Responsibility: A Human Rights Theory of Global Justice, International Feminist Journal of Politics, DOI: [10.1080/14616742.2021.1882869](https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2021.1882869)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2021.1882869>



Published online: 18 Feb 2021.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

BOOK REVIEW

Just Responsibility: A Human Rights Theory of Global Justice, by Brooke Ackerly, New York, Oxford University Press, 2018, 314 pp., \$33.95 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-19-066294-3

In *Just Responsibility*, Brooke Ackerly tells the political story of Kalpona Akter and the Bangladesh Center for Worker Solidarity (BCWS) to develop a theory, methodology, and praxis called “just responsibility.” In 2010, the BCWS, led by Akter, successfully negotiated between a local factory and a global brand to increase compliance with Bangladeshi national law on workers’ rights and to demand increased wages for the Bangladeshi ready-made garment industry. Informed by the work done by activists such as Akter, Ackerly considers three distinct questions: (1) What is injustice? (2) How do we know what to do about injustice? (3) How should we take responsibility for injustice? The book is divided into three sections corresponding with each question – the first section addresses the problem, the second section develops the methodology, and the third section outlines the solution. Each section of the book is both a call and a response:

The first is a call to political theory to interpret the question *What should we do?* as a political question about how we should take responsibility for injustice itself. The second is a call to feminist theory to provide a methodology ... that challenges even the norms of inquiry. And the third is a call to those who want to take up the challenges of injustice itself to do so in a just way. (16)

In each section of the book (problem, methodology, and solution), Ackerly responds to injustice itself by destabilizing the social epistemologies of justice (134). She draws on feminist methodologies that are attentive to epistemological injustices and actively seek to destabilize these injustices through research findings, analysis, and methodologies. She calls on activists, scholars, and citizens to challenge our epistemologies in order to transform our political communities. The book powerfully weaves together theoretical and empirical analysis with the intention of decentering the very epistemologies that normalize everyday injustices. *Just Responsibility's* dual focus – on injustice in the struggle and in the inquiry – makes it an essential read for anyone who is committed to achieving justice in this political moment.

Just Responsibility asks what we can learn from women human rights activists like Akter and the BCWS. How can their work guide us in creating a human rights theory of political responsibility? To answer these questions, Ackerly turns to empirical data, not to theory. She acknowledges that “for some this may seem like a backwards way of approaching a political theory of responsibility” (190). However, she argues that the backwardness is necessary because traditional

approaches to justice often begin with an epistemology that is the very source of injustice itself. As someone who also weaves empirical data with normative theory to trouble the meanings of essential concepts in political science (Behl 2019), I appreciate this “backwards” method and believe that it is one of the major contributions of the book.

For Ackerly, this backwardness means a “grounded approach to normative theorizing, which enables us to analyze both complex empirics and the structures ... that render these empirics invisible” (143). Grounded normative theory recognizes that research is itself part of a system of power, and therefore scholars are required to reveal and theorize “the arrangements of power and powerlessness in the struggle and in the *inquiry*” (149, emphasis in original). The goal, for Ackerly, is a “theoretically informed practice and practically informed theory” (135).

Ackerly draws on fieldwork on the Rana Plaza collapse in Dhaka, Bangladesh in 2013, the global food crisis of 2008, and strategies from 125 activist organizations working on women’s and labor rights across 26 countries worldwide. (Through a donor–activist–scholar partnership under the auspices of the Global Fund for Women, she gained access to and analyzed qualitative data about women’s human rights organizations’ goals, evaluation, and work.) By centering the lived experience, activism, and knowledge production of women human rights activists across the world, Ackerly develops the five principles-in-practice of just responsibility. She finds that these human rights activists engage in five core practices:

- (1) utilizing intersectional analysis;
- (2) thinking about narrow issues with awareness of their cross-issue dimensions;
- (3) promoting the capacity of self-advocacy ...;
- (4) working against the complex forces that create obstacles to rights enjoyment by building community through connected activism; and
- (5) working in ways that enhance our learning. (192–193)

According to Ackerly, these five principles-in-practice are the political compass that can guide consumers, philanthropists, workers, and activists to take political responsibility in a just way (250).

Some readers of *Just Responsibility* might ask if the individual actions of consumers, philanthropists, workers, and activists can transform power relations in a just way. Other readers might ask if just responsibility – even when guided by the five principles-in-practice – can perpetuate the very injustice that *Just Responsibility* seeks to eradicate. Still others might ask to what extent just responsibility can address the full spectrum of injustices, from the most visible to the invisible, from the spectacular to the mundane. I too share these thoughts and questions. And yet, I am drawn to *Just Responsibility* because of its emancipatory potential. I am compelled by its call to students and scholars, activists and non-governmental organizations, and funding agencies and philanthropic organizations: “If those most marginalized by injustice itself can take just responsibility, those privileged by it might be able to as well. *And shouldn’t they try?*” (249).

Notes on contributor

Natasha Behl is an Associate Professor in the School of Social and Behavioral Sciences at Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ, USA. She specializes in the study of inequalities in liberal democracies and is the author of *Gendered Citizenship: Understanding Gendered Violence in Democratic India*.

Reference

Behl, Natasha. 2019. *Gendered Citizenship: Understanding Gendered Violence in Democratic India*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Natasha Behl (she/her/hers)
Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ, USA
 nbehl@asu.edu

© 2021 Natasha Behl
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2021.1882869>

