

BOOK REVIEW

Human Rights: A Key Idea for Business and Society by Karin Buhmann (Routledge, London, 2021). ISBN 9780367520540

With *'Human Rights: A Key Idea for Business and Society'*, Karin Buhmann delivered a thorough yet concise introduction to the complex field of business and human rights (BHR). Working at the intersection of law and management, Buhmann pays attention to both legal and managerial aspects of BHR and offers an accessible introduction to the BHR field.

The book is clearly structured, starting with an introductory chapter that discusses the motivation for writing the book. As Buhmann notes, 'this book is written for a wide and interdisciplinary audience with various backgrounds' (p. 3). The structure of the book indeed demonstrates this ambition. Each chapter starts with a few short emblematic cases and examples that provide illustrations of the theme of the chapter and that could also serve to structure classroom discussions. In that case, additional information on the cases, ranging from Rana Plaza to Bhopal, and from Nike to Shell (all 'household names' in the field of BHR), would be needed. Next to many well-known examples, Buhmann also draws on some examples that highlight her other ambition: to present 'a continental European and Scandinavian/Nordic angle' (p. 4), underlining how BHR research should also speak beyond the dominant Anglo-Saxon sphere. In general, she manages to strike a good balance here, although more attention to non-Northern perspectives would have been welcome to complement the perspectives, engaging with discussions on, for instance, land and water rights or notions of commons versus commodities.

After the introduction, the chapters address BHR from different angles, starting with two chapters that focus on the foundations of the field and on different theoretical perspectives on BHR. In chapter 2, the reader is introduced into the mix of legal and managerial terminology that dominates the field, defining human rights ('a form of rights that are particularly important to human dignity'; p. 8), looking at hard, soft and smart law, the institutional regimes for BHR, and the changing attention for BHR overall. As Buhmann notes, 'in the 21st century, the debate on business and human rights (BHR) is no longer focused on *whether* business enterprises have human rights responsibilities, but rather, *what business enterprises should do* to honour those responsibilities and how to understand the human rights impacts of day-to-day organizational decisions and practices' (p. 9, italics in original). This implies translating abstract and perhaps elusive debates into more concrete guidance for action that acknowledges the dynamic nature of human rights.

Before doing this in the remainder of the book, chapter 3 covers different theoretical perspectives on BHR. The interdisciplinary character of human rights is discussed and so is the relationship between BHR and the domain of corporate social responsibility (CSR). As Buhmann convincingly argues, despite its clear links with CSR, BHR is developing into an interdisciplinary field in its own right because of the greater attention to the role of duties and states. Other 'usual suspects' in theory are discussed as well, highlighting how both stakeholder theory and the UN Framework have offered theoretical and practical foundations for BHR thinking, specifically in thinking through the idea of 'affected

stakeholders' such as victims or rights-holders. Yet, attention is also given to critiques of these approaches.

Building on this foundation, in chapters 4–9, Buhmann dives into specific areas of BHR. Chapter 4 focuses on an overview of transnational business governance frameworks that speak to BHR, issued both by public and private organizations and by multi-stakeholder initiatives. Due diligence, summarized as 'a management approach to identify and handle adverse harmful impacts' (p. 107) is discussed in chapter 5, whereas chapter 6 addresses corporate accountability and victims' access to remedy. As in many chapters the interplay between legal and managerial interpretations plays out here when Buhmann points to the procedural and substantive side of remedy: how to assure access to remedy and, if that is settled, ensure reparation. Chapter 7 turns to human rights in operational business contexts, looking at topics such as human relations, working conditions, value chain management and human rights in sustainable finance, and environmental, social and corporate governance (ESG). As Buhmann shows in this chapter, 'human rights issues are relevant for the transition to a low-carbon economy and to sustainable finance' (p. 170). In chapter 8 the scope is broadened as attention is shifted to sustainability contexts, looking at the sustainable development goals (SDGs), climate change and a fair green transition with respect of human rights. This chapter underlines the many complexities in what we commonly refer to as grand challenges, indicating how human rights may be at risk during our search for a transition to low-carbon societies. As Buhmann summarizes, a fair transition 'should occur with respect of human rights and without disproportionately placing burdens on certain groups, such as vulnerable communities, Indigenous Peoples, or people whose employment may be at risk due to the transition' (p. 197). This chapter in particular highlights many challenges, both on the legal and managerial sides of BHR.

Finally, in chapter 9 Buhmann discusses BHR communication and reporting. This chapter seemed less clear than the others, arguably because the author decided to introduce some particular models on strategic communication. In my view, these models are only one take on why and how organizations may communicate on BHR and issues of CSR and on how such messages may be perceived. Whereas most chapters seemed well-balanced, this one seemed less so. This section is supplemented with an overview of the role of non-financial reporting, another important means of communicating on CSR and BHR. The book concludes with a brief reflection and outlook, emphasizing once again how BHR is a field that is here to stay and that can help researchers and practitioners to think about a fair(er) transition.


Overall, Buhmann offers a good overview of the domain of BHR, in line with the objectives of the series in which it was published. Many topics are covered in an accessible manner and the constant interplay between legal and managerial debates was interesting and useful. Yet, I was surprised to see hardly any attention to an upcoming theme that also has clear implications for BHR: the rise of information and communication technology (ICT) in general, and artificial intelligence in particular. In this journal some attention has already been devoted to this theme, looking at artificial intelligence,¹ or at themes such as surveillance, privacy and data capitalism,² or the dark sides of digitalization.³ ICT is definitely impacting the business landscape *and* the way it invades individuals' lives, thereby also impacting fundamental human rights, for better or for worse. Greater transparency may be beneficial but probably not at all costs. Given the dynamic nature of

¹ A Kriebitz and C Lütge, 'Artificial Intelligence and Human Rights: A Business Ethical Assessment' (2020) 5:1 *Business and Human Rights Journal* 84–104.

² SM West, 'Data Capitalism: Redefining the Logics of Surveillance and Privacy' (2019) 58:1 *Business & Society* 20–41.

³ H Trittin-Ulbrich, AG Scherer, I Munro and G Whelan, 'Exploring the Dark and Unexpected Sides of Digitalization: Toward a Critical Agenda' (2021) 28:1 *Organization* 8–25.

BHR, I think that in an updated version of this book, this topic should receive more attention, for instance looking at surveillance, privacy, or the potential discriminatory use of big data. Finding cases to start the chapter with should not be difficult! Nevertheless, I found the current version of the book stimulating and comprehensive. Buhmann offers a concise introduction into a complex topic and makes this available to researchers, practitioners and students from many different backgrounds.

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