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Review of *The Cultural Lives of Capital Punishment: Comparative Perspectives* edited by Austin Sarat and Christian Boulanger

Ryan Spohn
University of Nebraska - Lincoln, rspohn@unomaha.edu

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The Cultural Lives of Capital Punishment: Comparative Perspectives edited by Austin Sarat and Christian Boulanger. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005. (pp. 342)

Reviewed by: Ryan E. Spohn
Kansas State University

This volume examines the interconnectivity of culture and punishment across an impressive variety of states and nations. The authors convincingly argue that research is strengthened by developing an understanding of the "cultural life" of capital punishment, defined as the embeddedness of this punishment in the discourse and symbolic practices of specific locales and times. This book is abolitionist in nature, representing the praxis of social research.

The editors argue that independent variables like crime rates, economics, religion, and public opinion fail to explain international variation in the use of the death penalty. Eschewing variables, they argue for analysis of individual cases, examining the richness of historical, social, political, and cultural context. They argue that Americans appear exceptional in their use of capital punishment only when compared to other western developed nations, and that adopting a broad comparative approach can increase our understanding of capital punishment in the U.S.

This book's strength is the richness of detail of the research. Most chapters are historical and descriptive, including comprehensive analyses of culture and capital punishment in Germany, Mexico, Poland, Kyrgyzstan, India, Israel, Japan, South Korea, Singapore, and Palestine. A central focus of many of

the studies is "state killing," addressing the interdependence of culture, capital punishment, and other state actions that threaten the lives of citizens.

An interesting exception is Ho's chapter, which uses primary data on attitudes toward capital punishment collected through interviews of ordinary citizens in China. More interesting, and perhaps more telling, than the responses to the interviews is the description of the difficulties of studying a topic that is politically sensitive and culturally taboo in a nation with limited tolerance for anti-state sentiment. The lack of civic discussion of the use capital punishment in China is consistent with a general theme of the importance of civil society for nations that adopt an abolitionist stance.

It is a bit of a stretch to call this collection a "comparative" approach, as the vast majority of the comparing is left to the reader and subsequent researchers. With the exception of Tyler's chapter comparing the cultural life of crime and punishment in European and American film, and to a lesser extent the chapter by Girling addressing the European mission against capital punishment in the U.S., the comparative aspects of the book are actually quite minor. Although an impressive number of cultures are investigated, rarely is one compared to another.

One must therefore question the usefulness of the book for capital punishment researchers and abolitionists. If interested, for example, in researching the possibility of the abolition of capital punishment in Singapore, need one read more than just the introductory chapter and the chapter on capital punishment and development in Singapore? My answer is "perhaps," but the volume would have benefited significantly from a concluding chapter pulling together the commonalities in the threads of research in the various chapters. Although several conclusions are initially introduced, absent is a true effort at integrating contributions that would increase our understanding of capital punishment and the possibilities of progress for abolitionist movements globally. The impressive amount of knowledge produced by this collection of research will, however, provide data for future researchers to help address unanswered questions. A search of necessary and/or sufficient causes is a logical next step in this research agenda. Although no single variable adequately predicts the abolition of capital punishment, a relatively small number of combinations of social, political, cultural, and historical factors are likely predictive of retention or abolition. Future research focusing on the economic, political, and state-based aspects of power from a comparably diverse set of states and nations would aid this task.