

**Denise M. Walsh.** *Women's Rights in Democratizing States: Just Debate and Gender Justice in the Public Sphere.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011. xvii + 286 pp. \$85.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-107-00191-6.



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**Published on** H-Human-Rights (March, 2012)

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Denise Walsh is interested in the fact that while the concept of democratization implies greater and greater access to political space, democratization in practice has only sometimes produced more woman-friendly policy, and often temporarily so. Her argument in *Women's Rights in Democratizing States* is that the conditions to create more just gender policy are far more demanding than those that lead to more open electoral contestation in public arenas. Many debate conditions remain highly gendered, preserving a male-dominated space instead of incorporating marginalized voices, even under conditions of democratization. Spaces that create the ability of the women in the group to speak freely about their ideas and interests must be present for just debate to thrive (p. 224). These just-debate conditions consist of access, voice, and capacity for contestation, generally fostered by counterpublics—Nancy Fraser's theorization of alternative spheres for contestation within a marginalized group. Although the claim that women are the most marginalized (p. 11) has been widely regarded as problematic, these analyses can easily be transposed to other counterpublics.

However, counterpublics have their own limits in that they have a great deal of inherent fragility, and are subject to heavy impacts by state actors and others.

Additionally, according to Walsh, the presence of thriving counterpublics does not inherently cause more just-debate conditions to come about. Still, the evidence presented in this book indicates that counterpublics seem to be the best precipitator of just-debate conditions.

Walsh's cases of South Africa, Poland, and Chile are meant to represent three different fronts in the third wave of democratization. The three country-cases are mobilized in paired comparisons, particularly using within-country time-series comparisons, to create more case studies exploring different points of democratization. The coverage of each country-case is uneven, with one chapter devoted to a case study of Poland, one chapter comparing Chilean and South African democratization, and two more chapters further exploring the South African case. The case studies are well developed, but use different kinds of evidence, with the South African case relying on interviews, and the Polish case relying on documentary evidence.

The thread of the argument leads to quite bleak conclusions. A number of variables are at work, none of them seemingly either necessary or sufficient to produce a just-debate environment. Success in accessing public debate space seems to be more accidental than amenable

to planning or agitating by would-be debate participants. The only condition that seems to predictably lead to advances in women's rights is institutional capture, as illustrated in the South African case, although the Polish case defies even that. There are as many explanations as there are cases for why a just-debate situation came about, or failed to do so.

Strong women leaders and a vibrant counterpublic opened political contestation space in South Africa, but when the leaders entered (or were co-opted into) public service in the government, the ability of the counterpublic to foster just debate in a larger political sphere dried up. A well-established institutionalization of women-friendly public policy in Poland was set back on its heels by the powerful institution of the Roman Catholic Church. The church advanced a vision based on preserving women's sanctity as family members, countering the communist woman-as-worker model. Reaction against the communist government also made feminist policy subject to attack, despite strong women's leadership. Other institutions also limited the debate floor for women's issues, including profit-driven media.

In the Chilean case, the ability of women to participate in truly just debate worked in an inverse relationship to the opening of Pinochet-era political space to democratic reforms. Women forced just-debate conditions into the polity during the authoritarian period, opening in significant ways a space for democratization, and then lost ground as political parties revived and claimed public debate space. What is valuable about this particular case is that it shows that just-debate openings are sometimes found under what would seem to be radically inhospitable conditions, like under authoritarian regimes. Particularly in the period immediately before a transition, just-debate conditions may exist without democratic groundwork. In other words, just-debate conditions are rare and fleeting, seemingly the product of happy accident instead of some predictable variable change. Gloomy thought, that.

Walsh is not particularly pleased with this state of affairs, either, and in the last chapter suggests some state interventions that might lay the groundwork for building successful counterpublics and the follow-on opening of just-debate conditions. This might be considered problematic. Walsh provides detailed analysis of how intensely invested actors were sidelined and blocked, often by state actors. The reason just-debate conditions are not more available or sustained is precisely because institutional dynamics make it very difficult to achieve; the book is a blow-by-blow rendering of all those varied institutional constraints at work in the various cases. Turning in the end to relying on the good intentions of those same institutions seems a weak solution. Perhaps a better set of solutions would be found in how minority counterpublics can more successfully build a sphere of contestation for themselves, since it is the causal effect of counterpublics impacting the state that creates openings for progressive solutions. The state impacting counterpublics is shown here to be a decidedly mixed bag, with a few moments of openness countered with many closings of just-debate space.

Readers will be best served to start with the final chapter. Walsh is convincing in her basic argument that just-debate conditions are more relevant to advancing women's rights than simple democratization. Further, the argument that just-debate conditions may or may not have a causal relationship with democratization is useful and sufficiently supported. Finally, just-debate conditions are convincingly shown to be fragile and, often, all too temporary. However, the initial rendering of the argument is theory- and jargon-laden, broken into confusing and nonlinear subtopics. The final chapter does the same job with beautifully clear prose. This book is suitable for scholarly audiences, especially those interested in democratization, but is less suited to non-academic audiences or undergraduate work. This is a loss, as the issues raised here cut to the core of many debates surrounding the project of democracy itself, especially with the well-chosen and widely studied cases of Poland, South Africa, and Chile.

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**Citation:** Helen Delfeld. Review of Walsh, Denise M., *Women's Rights in Democratizing States: Just Debate and Gender Justice in the Public Sphere*. H-Human-Rights, H-Net Reviews. March, 2012.

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