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**Review of *Rights Gone Wrong: How Law Corrupts the Struggle for Equality*. Richard Thompson Ford. Reviewed by Robert Costello.**

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Richard Thompson Ford, *Rights Gone Wrong: How Law Corrupts the Struggle for Equality* (2011). New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux. \$27.00 (hardcover).

Trying to label author Richard Thompson Ford into a political category is fruitless, as readers can trace conservative and liberal elements in his sophisticated ideas about civil rights in America. Ford skillfully transcends the political encampments that generally monopolize the subject of civil rights to make readers think about how law both helps and harms the cause of equality in America.

Ford, the George E. Osborne Professor of Law at Stanford University, specializes in the area of civil rights and multiculturalism and writes for academic and general audiences. The strength of this particular work is its interdisciplinary dissection of modern day civil rights and its shortcomings, to include legal, social, cultural and political analysis, thus providing a broader view necessary to capture the enormous scope of this subject.

The premise of the book is equally simple and powerful, as is shown in the quotation below:

But today, civil rights do too much and not enough at the same time. Extremists on both the left and the right have hijacked civil rights, using them to push radical schemes despite democratic opposition, and in some cases even to reverse and undermine the social justice goals civil rights were supposed to achieve. (p. 11)

After a lengthy introduction that establishes the framework to the subject matter and book, Ford uses five chapters to support his thesis and offer a proposal on how to get our civil rights tradition back on track.

The first chapter examines the increasing number of entitlements that Ford posits bypass the democratic process or the normal course of a market economy. Chapter two discusses how the legal culture of lawyers, judges, and activists have tried to make a host of social problems that are complex and diverse fit into the discrimination mold, which makes it more difficult for us as a society to address them appropriately. The

unintended consequences of civil rights are explored in the third chapter where, for example, equal protection in schooling prevents public school districts from pursuing racial integration. Ford writes about the failure of current day social activism as it is too often “an exercise in nostalgia than a focused social protest” (p. 26) in the fourth chapter. The final chapter provides readers with a prescription on how to re-focus civil rights in order to restore it back to its grandeur days. The author calls for shifting of priorities from the individual and self-entitlements to a collective mentality focused on social justice.

While this is not Ford’s first book on the subject (his other books are titled *The Race Card: How Bluffing About Bias Makes Race Relations Worse* and *Universal Rights: Down to Earth*), this work can stand alone and serve as a succinct and thorough analysis of modern day civil rights in America. Ford writes in an engaging and lively manner accessible by a general audience which does not require a law background or even the use of a legal dictionary. Readers will very quickly feel the author’s passion for this topic and find his opinions insightful and original without being a rehashing or echoing from other scholars.

Like many books about socio-legal issues written by lawyers, there is a lack of any real use of statistics or research methodology to support claims or conclusions central to its arguments. Therefore, one might question if the law cases highlighted represent the mainstream concerns or if they are outliers which are on the periphery of both sides of the political aisle. However, Ford uses extensive citations throughout the book, which utilizes a variety of sources appropriate for this topic. Readers who teach will certainly gain new thoughts and ideas about civil rights which will inform their lectures on the subject.

*Rights Gone Wrong* simultaneously renews and advances the civil rights debate in America, making it worthy of its New York Times Notable Books for 2011 distinction.

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