



# **The Social Origins of Human Rights: Protesting Political Violence in Colombia's Oil Capital, 1919–2010 (Critical Human Rights)**

*Luis van Isschot*

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Human rights activism is often associated with international organizations that try to affect the behavior of abusive states around the globe. In Barrancabermeja, Colombia, argues Luis van Isschot in *The Social Origin of Human Rights*, the struggle for rights has emerged more organically and locally, out of a long history of civil and social organizing. He offers deep insight into the lives of home-grown activists in a conflict zone, against the backdrop of major historical changes that shaped Latin America in the twentieth century.

Built by Standard Oil in 1919, and home to the largest petroleum refinery in the country, Barrancabermeja has long been a critical battleground in Colombia's armed conflict. One of the most militarized urban areas on earth, the city has been a regional base for the Colombian armed forces as well as for leftist guerrillas and a national paramilitary movement. In the midst of a dirty war in which the majority of victims were civilians, urban and rural social movements from Barrancabermeja and the surrounding area came together to establish a human rights movement. These frontline activists called upon the Colombian state to protect basic human rights and denounced the deeper socioeconomic inequalities they saw as sources of conflict. Through close study of the complex dynamics at work in Barrancabermeja, van Isschot shows how the efforts we describe as "human rights" activism derive in large part from these lived experiences of authoritarianism, war, poverty, and social exclusion. Through its social and historical approach, his analysis both complements and challenges the work of scholars who look at rights issues primarily through a legal lens.

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