

Humanitarian Rhetoric Deployed in the Service of Empire: The Need for an Ethical and Political “De-Colonization of Human Rights”

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Can human rights rhetoric be deployed in the service of empire?

You bet. In the current state of the planet, asserting human rights without fighting for local and global transformation is at best hollow, and at worst hypocritical, because the principal violators of these rights are global and transnational economic and social systems.

“The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.” Audre Lorde

December 10 is recognized as International Human Rights Day and celebrated around the world. Various heads of states and leaders of human rights organizations will issue stern statements declaring their unshakable commitment to human rights. The governments of many Western nations will take the opportunity to demonstrate their moral superiority by conjuring up whatever regimes or heads of state that are currently in the cross-hairs of these pious protectors of human rights.



This annual ritual poses an interesting set of questions as to how the U.S. and other Western powers are able to get away with wrapping themselves in the cloak of human rights respectability while being responsible for unspeakable atrocities over the last few centuries. And how is it that many other non-Western nations and most Western-based international human rights organizations are complicit in this charade?

For some who have attempted to answer these questions, the conclusion was that cynicism and hypocrisy explained the obvious disparity in deed and action on the part of these powerful states. But while attractive, that explanation seems too easy and does not explain how sincere advocates of human rights, who see themselves as unbiased and who occasionally will criticize Western states, still find themselves more often than not supporting Western powers in their various adventures to “defend” human rights in the form of [“humanitarian military interventions”](#) to economic warfare through sanctions against select states.

A better explanation for the double standards and intellectual myopia of human rights organizations rests with the distorted, partial and biased world-view projected as universalism that is at the heart of the liberal ideological project. For mainstream human rights practitioners, the assumption that the human rights idea is a “universally” accepted political and moral construct is uncontested. This position asserts that the human rights idea

represents an objective, politically neutral framework that reflects the natural evolutionary progress of the global community.

However, those of us who are human rights activists and also members of groups that have been at the margins – the colonized, the enslaved, the targets of European genocide and national oppression – the view of the unassailable truths of a human rights framework emanating from the same nations and peoples responsible for our suffering requires a more serious and critical analysis.

Our perspective suggests that the human rights idea is not innocent. As the ideology of the capitalist market system and its imperialist expansion in its colonialist, neo-colonial and now neo-liberal forms, the “naturalization” of Eurocentric classical liberalism with its supposed universal applicability, represents one of the most successful ideological victories of mainstream human rights.

While classical European liberalism professed a fidelity to the “rights of man” and the proclamation that all “men” are equal, it simultaneously provided philosophical justifications for slavery, genocide, settler colonialism, capitalism, patriarchy and imperialism – systems that degrade, dominate, destroy, and systemically oppress human subjects.

How has liberalism been able to achieve this? Because at the heart of the liberal project are exclusionary criteria for who deserves to have rights, that tragically for millions of people during the last 500 years of European dominance, rest on a stratification of humanity in which Europeans and their civilizational project is at the apex. It is that internal moral contradiction that explains how Thomas Jefferson could speak of fundamental equality while holding slaves and raping Black women; how Winston Churchill could call for self-determination of nations while maintaining a colonial empire; how U.S. authorities can justify kidnapping and assassination even of U.S. citizens and the invasions of States, all in the name of fighting Islamic terrorists; and how war can be employed in the name of “humanitarian intervention” and the “responsibility to protect” that violates the United Nations Charter and results in the loss of hundreds of thousands of lives.

It is that internal moral myopia that explains how President Obama can justify Israeli colonial brutality in the Palestinian Occupied Territories and Gaza, largely ignore the slaughter at the hands of Egyptian security forces while arguing passionately for waging humanitarian war on Syria, and turn his back on the predominantly Black retired public sector workers in Detroit whose human right to the social security of old age in the form of their earned pensions and health care is unprotected while the city is being looted by private banks and bondholders.

For many social justice activists, it is precisely these moral contradictions by both Western and non-Western states that has created deep dissatisfaction and even mistrust of human rights as an instrument for radical social change. It appears to many of these activists that the orthodox framework is not able to offer any more than bland reforms and a depoliticized politics.

In response to the human rights crisis of relevance, a [“people-centered human rights”](#) (PCHR) concept and approach has been developing from the margins of the U.S. human rights movement over the last few years. Politically informed by the African American radical human rights tradition and radical feminism, the modern expression of which

developed out of the organizing and agitation directed at the newly formed United Nations between 1945 and 1951, this tradition of human rights struggle combined anti-racism and anti-colonialism with a commitment to systemic transformation. In the contemporary period, PCHR advocates continue that approach and have as a primary strategic objective the decolonization of human rights in order to effective an authentic decolonization of U.S. society.

As a political project historically and socially grounded in the needs and realities of oppressed communities and peoples and committed to social justice and the development of the people as autonomous political subjects, it rejects the mystification of the supposedly non-political, universalist perspective and practice of human rights.

This revolutionary approach to human rights is informed by an analysis of the oppressive, anti-human social/historical context of national and global social relationships. This analysis concludes that all of the forms of contemporary national and global relationships – capitalism, neoliberalism, white supremacy, patriarchy, colonialism and imperialism – are oppressive and serve as structural and ideological impediments for the realization of the full range of human rights.

The alternative ethical foundation that drives the vision of PCHR advocates is based on the communitarian principles of social solidarity, cooperation, non-discrimination in all social relationships, collective public ownership of the earth's resources, respect for difference, self-determination of all peoples and the recognition and respect for the inherent dignity of all individuals and peoples.

A commitment to these values automatically places PCHR advocates in opposition to capitalist society and its social relationships. Capitalism by definition denies individuals and groups voice and dignity in all spheres of social life. The corrosive realities of extreme social inequality, economic dislocation, unemployment and job insecurity, violence and social fragmentation, corporate and community level criminality, neo-fascist repression, corruption and ecological destruction are material and cultural expressions of the incompatibility of neoliberal capitalist society with the idea of the inherent dignity of human beings that is at the center of the human rights idea.

As the bipartisan hustle continues to intensify the policies of economic austerity domestically and war abroad to protect and extend the power of the 1 percent, we have no illusions about the possibilities of PCHR being embraced and implemented without a fight. We have already experienced body blows from all quarters and expect more because the PCHR approach will not be easily accepted by the human rights mainstream.

But on this human rights day, for those of us fighting from the margins for a new social reality in the U.S. and globally, we declare without apology that it is only through the radical transformation of society based on an alternative set of ethics and social relationships that the full potential of the human rights idea can be realized. For us, the fight for human rights is a life and death struggle with the future of our communities and peoples at stake. It is a fight that we have no other choice but to wage and to win, knowing that we are on the right side of history and in reciprocal solidarity among people around the world who understand that human rights and dignity are not granted but lived.

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