

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights at 70: Time to De-Colonize Human Rights!

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Global Research, December 06, 2018

Region: [Europe, USA](#)

Theme: [Law and Justice](#), [Police State & Civil Rights](#)

The post-WW II promise of human rights was a compact meant for white people only, but a People-Centered Human Rights framework seeks global liberation and transformation.

"If human rights are to have any incredibility, any "universal" applicability, any value, they must be seized from the barbaric grip of European and de-colonized."

"...recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world"

These are the words in the preamble the of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) promulgated 70 years ago on December 10, 1948. They were supposed to reflect a new understanding of the causes of war and a commitment to the highest values of the "international community."

The UDHR was the first major instrument produced by the United Nations (UN), an institution itself created at the end of the Second World War. Its creation was hailed as a breakthrough that would give institutional substance to the pledge by member states to promote international cooperation, commit to peaceful relations among states and respect human rights and fundamental freedoms.

According to Eleanore Roosevelt, wife of President Roosevelt and U.S. representative to the UN Human Rights Commission, the structure responsible for producing the UDHR, the declaration reflected those natural and eternal rights that, nevertheless, were not always seen but under the right circumstances could be revealed and nurtured.

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It was thought by many that the UDHR with its commitments to freedom of thought and speech, assembly, education, life-long social security, health care, food, the right to culture etc., represented the hope of an international community that had learned from the carnage of the Second World War, grew up as a result and were ready to collectively center the dignity of everyone.

70 years later, the historic record is clear. Instead of recognizing the inherent dignity and worth of individuals and collectives, the post-war period has been an era of human depravity. It is estimated that direct and indirect state and non-state violence has resulted in over 30 million dead, whole nations destroyed, the normalization of torture, rape as a weapon of war, millions displaced and once again the rise of neo-fascist movements across

Europe and in the United States.

What happened?

What happened was the continuation of the Pan-European white supremacist colonial/capitalist patriarchy. The historic project temporarily diverted by the war as a result of the Germans bringing the horrors that European colonial domination unleashed on the “Americas” in 1492 back to Europe and applied to other Europeans. But once Hitler was dispensed with, the systematic brutality that created “Europe” continued.



Source: BAR

“The stratification of human beings into those with rights and those who were killable, enslavable, and rapable, condemned the non-European colonized to what Fanon referred to as, ‘the zone of non-being.’”

The doctrine of discover, slavery, manifest destiny, the white man’s burden, the responsibility to protect, all of the ideological and policy expressions representing what Enrique Dussell called the underside of what is referred to as Western modernity. That underside that rationalized the stratification of human beings into those with rights and those who were killable, enslavable, and rapable, condemned the non-European colonized to what Fanon referred to as, “the zone of non-being.”

The Pan-European project represented a logic and rationale at the core of the European identity and its material foundation. It created an imperative that could not be easily dispensed of, without negating the very idea and materiality of Europe and what was understood as modernity.

Therefore, there was always an internal contradiction in European thought, captured and reinforced during the so-called Enlightenment, that produced an analytical and conceptual malady that can only be explained as a kind of psychopathology.

In August 1941, with the Nazi march across Europe in full execution, the rhetorical force of collective human rights found expression in the Atlantic Charter produced by the United States and Great Britain. The Charter stated among other tenets that “all people have the right to choose the form of government under which they live.”

It boldly declared that for those people who had been denied this fundamental right, the goal of the war was for to see “sovereign rights and self-government restored to those who have been forcefully deprived of them.”

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For the 750 million colonial subjects and the tens of thousands conscripted to fight in the war, this was music to their ears.

The Atlantic Charter served as the basis for the Declaration of the United Nations, in January 1942 by twenty-six nations then at war and subsequently by twenty-one other nations. The Declaration endorsed the Atlantic Charter and expressed the conviction that complete victory over their enemies is essential to defend life, liberty, independence and religious freedom, and to preserve human rights and justice in their own lands as well as in other lands.

Finally, many of the colonial subjects believed the principles of the war and the fight against racism and white dominance in Europe would allow all that were still colonized and denied national democratic rights to assume a new status as full human beings and exercise national rights just like white Europeans.

However, Winston Churchill and Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the British and U.S. leaders made it clear that the principles in the Atlantic Charter did not apply to colonial subjects in colonial territories but only to those nations in Europe under the “Nazi yoke.”.

What happened to the human rights idea?

Samuel Huntington was clear in *Clash of Civilizations*:

“The West won the world not by the superiority of its ideas or values or religion (to which few members of other civilizations were converted) but rather by its superiority in applying organized violence. Westerners often forget this fact; non-Westerners never do.”

So, when the interests of maintaining the Pan-European colonial/capitalist project, which is fundamentally grounded in systematic violence, clashed with respect for the “inherent dignity of all members of the human family” and their human rights and fundamental freedoms, those high-sounding liberal principles were sacrificed at the altar of realpolitik. In fact, they were not actually sacrificed. Because as we have witnessed, those liberal principles were never meant to apply to non-Europeans colonial subjects.

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The European empires of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, exhausted from two devastating wars found themselves as wounded vassals to a newly emergent hegemon — the United States, which was now the unchallenged leader of the Western capitalist world, or what imperialist propagandists would call the “free world.”

British, French and the Portuguese still dependent on their colonial empires but weakened by the war, nevertheless were compelled to attempt to reimpose themselves on their colonial subjects after the war. These efforts were supported by the United States in what Kwame Nkrumah called the post-war process of [“collective imperialism.”](#)

Therefore, despite the promulgation of the UDHR, individual and collective human rights were violated from Algeria and Vietnam, to Kenya, India and eventually Angola and Mozambique and many nations in between. The commitment to maintain European colonial/capitalist dominance resulted in a veritable bloodbath in which literally millions died and whole nations and cultures destroyed.

But what is incredible about this orgy of death and destruction imposed on so many over the decades and centuries, is that simultaneous to committing genocides and enslaving and perfecting new and more effective weapons of mass destruction, the Western world claimed to be the champion of human rights, and they largely got away with it.

Western commitments to human rights and fundamental freedoms were once again exposed for the lie that they have always been for the world’s colonized peoples. And with the cynicism and psychopathology generated by the cognitive dysfunctionality of white supremacy, the U.S. and the Western world proclaimed themselves the creators and champions of human rights as the blood flowed across the planet.

“The commitment to maintain European colonial/capitalist dominance resulted in a veritable bloodbath in which literally millions died.”

That is why I argue that if human rights are to have any incredibility, any “universal” applicability, any value, they must be seized from the barbaric grip of European and de-colonized.

The cognitive dysfunctionality of the white supremacist consciousness renders Europeans infected with this malady unable to “see” the contradictory history of liberal thought from the Enlightenment to the contemporary period that continues to stratify human beings and human civilizations and cultures. The assumed superiority of Western cultures and peoples are not even a point of contention. Its material development, the wonders of its science, the variety of its consumer goods are all testimonies to its innate superiority.

The problem is that all of this is based on lies. As Franz Fanon reminded us, Europe is a creation of Colonialism.

This has been the terrible contradiction at the heart of the European colonial project. The bifurcation of human beings into those with rights and those without is and has always been a racialized distinction. How else can one explain how a Benjamin Netanyahu, a criminal whose hands drip with the blood of Palestinians can be honored by the U.S. Congress but Marc Lamont Hill can be fired by CNN for advocating for Palestinian rights?

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Therefore, it is not a coincidence that the same year the UDHR was promulgated, Israel was born as a nation after it terrorized over 750,000 Palestinians into leaving their homes and territories, and Dutch white nationalists assumed power in South Africa, commencing the formalization of their system of racial apartheid, and is the same year both nations were

welcome into the community of nations without much controversy.

The only ones who were pointing out the contradiction inherent in recognizing a regime like the South Africans and questioning the stripping of the rights of Palestinians, were African Americans who were engaged in serious advocacy efforts at the U.N. demanding an end to colonialism and racial oppression in the U.S. and throughout the colonial world.

The creation of white supremacist thought, represented by classical liberalism converging with the material necessity of domination in order to exploit, represents a certain kind of colonialist dialectic that ensured the failure of the state-centric, legalistic, liberal human rights project of the last 70 years, while unleashing a continuing epoch of parasitic capitalism.

The human rights idea today primarily serves as an ideological prop for aggressive imperialism. The 21st century version of the “white man’s burden” is reflected in the concept of “humanitarian intervention” and the “responsibility to protect.”

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Humanitarian intervention and the right to protect evoke the unacknowledged white supremacist assumption that the “international community” — read as the governments of the capitalist/colonialist West — has a duty and a right to arrest, bomb, invade, prosecute, sanction, murder and violate international law anywhere on the planet to “save” people based on its own determinations and values.

As I have said [on many occasions](#):

“De-contextualized from the reality of globalized Euro-American domination, the idea that there is a collective responsibility on the part of states to protect people from gross and systemic human rights violations associated with war crimes, genocide, crimes against humanity, and ethnic cleansing could be viewed as a progressive development for international relations and global morality — even if that protection is offered selectively. But in the hands of an arrogant minority that still dominates the international system and sees its civilizational project as representing the apex of human development, the right to protect has become a convenient cover for rationalizing and justifying continued Euro-American global hegemony through the use of armed interventions to refashion local realities in line with Western geopolitical interests.”

However, the human rights idea does not have to be jettisoned, but it must be de-colonized if it is to have any value for oppressed people and classes.

We must embrace and exercise the [black radical human rights tradition](#) and its subsequent expression in what I call “People(s)-Centered Human Rights (PCHRs).”

People(s)-Centered Human Rights (PCHR) are those non-oppressive rights that reflect the highest commitment to universal human dignity and social justice that individuals and collectives define and secure for themselves through social struggle.

This is the [Black Radical Tradition’s approach to human rights](#). It is an approach that views

human rights as an arena of struggle that, when grounded and informed by the needs and aspirations of the oppressed, becomes part of a unified comprehensive strategy for de-colonization and radical social change.

The feature that distinguishes the people-centered framework from all of the prevailing schools of human rights theory and practice is that it is based on an explicit understanding that to realize the full range of the still developing human rights idea requires: 1) an epistemological break with a human rights orthodoxy grounded in Euro-centric liberalism; 2) a reconceptualization of human rights from the standpoint of oppressed groups; 3) a restructuring of prevailing social relationships that perpetuate oppression; and 4) the acquiring of power on the part of the oppressed to bring about that restructuring.

“PCHRs provides that alternative ethical framework to inform a politics of transformation.”

We agree with sister Bell Hooks who reminds us that “to be committed to justice we must believe that ethics matter, that it is vital to have a system of shared morality.” PCHRs provides that alternative ethical framework to inform a politics of transformation, no matter one’s ultimate ideological orientation.

PCHRs is grounded in the experiences of the people, the source of its legitimacy. It is, therefore, a historical product born out of oppression, “intersectional” and committed to global societal transformation. It is an attempt to develop a politics of integrity when it comes to human rights. A politics of being whole that, in the words of Puerto Rico activist Aurora Levins Morales, suggests:

Sacrifices neither the global nor the local, ignores neither the institutional power structures nor their most personal impact on the lives of individual people. That integrates what oppression keeps fracturing. That restores connections, not only in the future we dream of, but right here in the glory, tumultuous, hopeful, messy, and inconsistent present.

We don’t have 70 more years to de-colonize. The ecological, social, economic, political and spiritual contradictions of modernity, still driven by Western coloniality, reveals the terms of struggle. Either we (the people as a historical project still in formation) overthrow the global bourgeois oligarchy and build a new world, or we experience what some say will be the sixth extinction. It is still in our hands, but we don’t have long.

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This article was originally published on [Black Agenda Report](#).

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