

The Moral Imperialism Critique Is Not Valid

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The argument that human rights are a form of moral imperialism usually contends that:

1) human rights promote a single moral vision based upon a liberal, capitalist individualism; and 2) human rights are unconditionally imposed by the West on the rest by fiat rather than consent.



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Plural, Not One Moral Vision

If we examine this argument closely, we can see that both the “moral” and the “imperialism” dimensions of the critique are injudicious and unsound. While critics contend that human rights only advance one liberal morality, we should remember that international con-

ventions or national bills of rights are lists of things that states cannot do to their citizens (for example, torture them) or that they must do for their citizens (such as, provide universal education for children).

These minimal lists do not represent a comprehensive political charter based upon one morality. Indeed, they may incorporate many different visions, and this ideological expansiveness is one reason for their allure. During South Africa's transition from apartheid, constitutional human rights protections were advocated by communist party members, HIV/AIDS activists and center-right conservatives, each with their own agenda. Nor are human rights always individualistic. Many collective rights now exist, from indigenous rights granting communal land tenure to the collective right not to be subjected to genocide as contained in the 1948 Genocide Convention.

Rights Are Willingly Adopted

Secondly, let us consider the “imperialism” charge. Imperialism involves a territorially expansive state

or state-like organization through which one people colonize and rule over one or more, usually distant, peoples. The modern human rights system looks nothing like this, unless one perceives the UN as an incipient state bent upon global domination, which seems rather far-fetched. For human rights to be an instrument of imperialism, one would have to completely ignore the ways in which people across the world willingly adopt and transform human rights discourse in order to fulfill their particular life projects.

COMMENTARY

In the places I have done fieldwork, I have seen how an engagement with human rights arises less out of external imposition than a desire to resolve concrete local problems. In Guatemala, families of the disappeared campaigned to find their lost relatives. In South Africa, human rights represented the language of equality after decades of institutionalized racial segregation.

Human rights do not only appeal to African or Latin American social movements; last year, in my own state of Connecticut, gay couples successfully campaigned for civil unions using the language of equal human rights. This globalization of human rights discourse belies the charge of imperialism.

The only “moral imperialists” in this debate are those who dismiss these efforts at claiming equality and make dupes of local actors working within a human rights framework. Of course, this framework is agonizingly flawed. It is often too ineffective, over-legalistic and prey to cynical *realpolitik*. Human rights are certainly not above criticism, but the “moral imperialism” critique is not a valid one. Moreover, it smacks of a high-handed Leninist vanguardism that ought to have been consigned to the dustbin of history at the end of the Cold War. *AW*

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The Value of Liberalism and Truth Standards

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I can think of two answers to the question whether human rights discourse has been a form of moral imperialism since the end of the Cold War.

Role of Anthropologists

For cultural anthropologists, the most obvious is yes—of course the spread of human rights discourse has been a form of moral imperialism. What else to make of grand rhetoric backed



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by Western military and economic might? We need only look to US foreign policy for glaring examples; to international human rights organizations for more subtle ones; and of course, to our own paradoxical

experiences with states, NGOs, mafias and each other.

I mention “each other” because moral imperialism is one of the ways we make our living. Analogous to how lawyers build their careers by focusing blame on particular individuals and defending them, a good number of anthropologists have been making our careers by pumping for human rights and decrying the unfortunate results. The language of rights has justified countless power-grabs by lawyers and the people who pay them—limited-liability corporations are only the most spectacular example. Unlike lawyers, few of us anthropologists rake in the money. But some of us have quite a weakness for grabbing moral authority, and the way we do it is through theatrics: by playing up the victimhood of a distant constituency and offering ourselves as surrogates.

Maybe we're rushing to a genuine emergency—or maybe we're rushing past questions that need to be asked. In my own experience in Central America, key questions

include: exactly who has defined the enemy? Who has chosen the representatives of the oppressed? Precisely who is being listened to and who isn't? Exactly whose agenda is being pushed?

COMMENTARY

Unfortunately, our professional distaste for universal claims, for state authority and for other expressions of Western rationality can make it all too easy to dodge these questions. Consider how invoking “social construction” can vanquish any fact or issue that gets in our way. If that doesn't work, suggest that opponents are appealing to subtle forms of objectivism, racism or colonialism. Smokescreens such as these give the impression that anthropologists regard any invocation of Western standards as moral imperialism. This is how we have our cake and eat it too—we call upon human rights when convenient but,

when unwelcome information rears its head, theorize our way out of the truth-testing needed to implement human rights standards.

Human Rights Variability

There is a second and more basic answer to the question under review. It is that, however much human rights discourse has been exploited since the end of the Cold War, it is not inherently a form of moral imperialism. As other contributors have argued in these pages and in the March 2006 *American Anthropologist*, human rights does not refer to a single body of laws or a single agenda. Instead, it's an arena like trade, politics or communications that includes the expansion of Western legal thinking around the world but does not end there—and may not have begun there either.

By speaking to the aspirations of subordinate groups, debates over human rights become a negotiating ground with elites. Think of Paul

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Sullivan's "unfinished conversations" between different cultural traditions that continue for generations and enable disagreements to be waged by activists and politicians rather than gun-thugs. Consider the parallel with missionary Christianity, which could be both an imposition and a vehicle for defensive reorganization.

So there's an important difference between 1) analyzing how human rights can lead to moral imperialism and 2) assuming that human rights, along with any other exercise of Western thought or influence, is fated to become moral imperialism. This second position is reductionist and leads to no good. We all need to face the likelihood that our current niche in the safety zones of global capitalism is coming to an end. Gender and racial equity is not assured even in the most prosperous countries, let alone elsewhere. There is no shortage of religious zealots who would like to destroy the Enlightenment tradition that gave birth to anthropology. That fundamentalists are against the Enlightenment should tell us something important—that the Enlightenment is worth defending.

Valuing Enlightenment Ideals

In conclusion, if you plan to continue speaking your mind regardless of your gender, ethnicity and sexual preference, then stand up for the flawed but open-ended cultural tradition that makes it possible for you to do so. Won't it be a shame if we are so busy critiquing the West, transcending the episteme, and multiplying our unconquerable subjectivities, that we fail to defend liberal guarantees and truth-standards in their hour of need?

Fortunately, Enlightenment ideals of equality, personal choice and empirical truth are attractive far beyond our own social boundaries. The permutations of these ideas in other cultures are endless and fascinating. The other traditions we study have helped us to appreciate the crimes and limits of the West. Thus we can safely acknowledge our vested interest in the Enlightenment and in the Western human rights tradition without disrespecting the rest of the human race. ■

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Human Rights and State Violence

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I first started composing my thoughts in response to Mark Goodale's question on whether the spread of human rights discourse since the end of the



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Cold War is a form of moral imperialism while conducting research in Lebanon this summer. These preliminary reflections were, however, hijacked by Israel's military attack on Lebanon in mid-July, and the subsequent destruction the Israeli Defense Forces have visited upon the country's infrastructure and their targeted killing of the civilian population. Faced with this new reality, my response to Goodale's provocative question necessarily takes a detour into the field of violence, a detour that any contemporary reflection on the topic of human rights must take into account.

COMMENTARY**US and the Middle East**

For many of us who have watched events unfold in the Middle East over the last 10 years, it is clear that Israel's war on Lebanon is a new front in the Bush administration's ambitious plan to reshape the present and future map of the Middle East. This is evident in the unqualified military, strategic and diplomatic support Israel has received from the US government in Israel's savage assault on Lebanon, and the Bush administration's consistent refusal to support an early ceasefire that would hamper the execution of the Israeli-American mission—all this to the tune of cynically cheery remarks made by US State Department officials such as Condoleezza Rice that the devastation of Lebanon is evidence of the "birth pangs of a new Middle East."

As news and pictures of civilian casualties (the majority of whom are children, women and the

elderly) pour in, one cannot but ask what the relevance of human rights discourse is in this moment? How might this exercise of unobstructed violence lead us to reconsider what, if any, moral force does human rights discourse command in putting an end to this carnage? Or, as many in the Middle East are asking right now, is it not the case that the agenda of human rights and democracy is only a foil for the more insidious goals of the US to establish unparalleled imperial hegemony in the region? Why else, the victims of this unrelenting violence ask, would the international institutions be so incapable of intervening in the situation?

[O]ne cannot simply stand for or against human rights, but must locate one's understanding of this conceptual practice in the field of violence that makes the discourse of human rights possible. . . .

In pondering these questions, one might be tempted to say that while the Bush administration has hijacked the language of human rights and democracy, it does not mean that these are not legitimate goods in themselves with commendable properties and characteristics. Furthermore, one might wonder what other recourse the Lebanese people have in the court of public opinion than to deploy the discourse of human rights to call attention to their plight and suffering.

History of State Violence

These are important points and their rhetorical and strategic import cannot be denied. But what is equally important to realize is that such a position presumes a necessary opposition between the exercise of violence and the invocation of human rights that is increasingly hard to sustain in these imperiled times. I find myself incapable of affirming or negating the claim that human rights are a form of moral imperialism in our post-Cold War world today because the discourse of human rights is, I would suggest, deeply enabled by and indebted to the

history of violence, particularly state violence. This is as true today as it was at the time of inception of human rights discourse, evident in the principle of national sovereignty enshrined in the UN Charter of Human Rights, as well as in the state's claim to monopolize the legitimate use of violence.

Given this deep imbrication, it is crucial to inquire into historically specific forms of state violence and the accompanying discourses of human rights endemic to each form of violence. Consider, for example, the project of "regime change" the US government is currently promoting in the Middle East through the use of outright

military force, whether through the deployment of its own troops or, in the case of Lebanon, proxy Israeli Defense Forces. While this project of regime change has earlier precedents in the US-engineered overthrow of popularly elected governments in Iran, Chile, and Guatemala in the 1950s, the current moment is distinct in the overt use of heavy military force (versus covert operations) and the kind of resistance this has provoked, the encountering forms of violence it has spawned in its wake.

Any understanding of human rights discourse must therefore explore the systematic and modular forms of relations between violence and redress, between the propagation of violence and terms of critique. This means one cannot simply stand for or against human rights, but must locate one's understanding of this conceptual practice in the field of violence that makes the discourse of human rights possible in the first place. ■

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