



The global politics of human rights: From human rights to human dignity?

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Abstract

This review essay highlights the limitations and possibilities of a global human rights order based on analysis of five recently published books about human rights. The main argument states that reform of the global human rights order requires not only a shift to a more emancipatory notion of human dignity but also an emphasis on global justice and material compensation within and between the Global North and Global South. Human dignity, in this essay, embraces all types of human rights claims, ranging from political rights to socio-economic rights, among many others. The essay proposes a three-pronged reform of international human rights: (1) a shift from Western human rights to the more inclusive and pluralist notion of human dignity; (2) the promotion of global justice by rewriting the rules of global economic governance; and (3) mandatory political education on human rights and human dignity.

Keywords

Human rights, arms trade, intergovernmental organizations, European Union, United States, human dignity

Introduction

Amidst the recent resurgence of illiberal politics, how and under what set of conditions can we hope to reform the global human rights order? That overarching question inspires this essay, which reviews five recently published books that represent some of the finest scholarly works on the global politics of human rights norms. The principal analytical motivation of this review essay relates to key limitations and possibilities for reform of the global human rights order. Notably, the five books under review were written by the historian Joe Renouard; the empirically-oriented political scientists Brian Greenhill, Jennifer Erickson and Katrin Kinzelbach; and the political theorist Benjamin Gregg.

Since the end of the Cold War, various human rights norms have gained traction – and not only in terms of their further codification in the international legal system and institutionalization in

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global governance. Indeed, these norms have appeared prominently as aspirational goals in many countries' national constitutions and domestic legal frameworks. In praxis, the number of countries as well as the number of human rights treaties and conventions have dramatically increased, despite the apparently deteriorating global human rights situation (Simmons, 2009; Tsutsui and Hafner-Burton, 2005). The political science discipline, meanwhile, is divided on whether global *or* domestic factors primarily shape human rights outcomes over space and time (Regilme, 2014a). Philosophers and political theorists, on the other hand, primarily reflect upon new political utopias that would effectively realize human rights at the global level – and their creative thought experiments and philosophical reflections derive inspiration from a wide range of moral, normative, political and legal justifications (Bohman, 2010; Fraser, 1995; Regilme, 2014b).

This review essay is divided into two substantive parts. First, I present the operating definition of human rights, the motivating puzzle and principal arguments of each book under review. The second part presents a brief reflection about the limitations of the global human rights order and proposes some reforms related to global justice, human dignity and mandatory political education. Finally, I contend that the global norms order has to shift its emphasis from a saturated and frequently misused human rights language to a more pluralist yet emancipatory language of human dignity. That discursive emphasis in political and intergovernmental discourses needs to be supplemented by mandatory and universal education focusing on human dignity, human rights and global justice at primary and secondary schools. Also, I propose the radical rethinking of the rules of the global economic system, which should prioritize global justice and material restitution of the most vulnerable individuals within and between the Global North and Global South. Due to space constraints, my arguments here should be considered as exploratory and preliminary insights based on my analysis of the five books under review.

Path-breaking research on global human rights

This section is thematically divided into several parts. The first section starts with Benjamin Gregg's reflections on a human rights utopia, while succeeding subsections deal with the role of transnational and Western actors in global human rights promotion.

From the global to local: towards a human rights state utopia

Benjamin Gregg, in *The Human Rights State* (Gregg, 2016), argues that we need to rethink human rights in a post-metaphysical or even a post-religious way, thereby advocating for a constructivist conception of human rights. Gregg's book is a tour de force, as it is excellently written in a clear and accessible manner and advocates a more secular, pluralistic and localized conception of human rights. That argument dispels the canonical belief that human rights have to be codified, institutionalized and universalized. Gregg maintains that our conception of human rights should not be based on transcendental and non-worldly sources. Instead, citizens need to reflexively rethink and reconstitute human rights via 'socialization into assertive selfhood' (Gregg, 2016: 91, 106). That notion of selfhood means that the realization of human rights primarily depends upon the agency and rational deliberation of an individual and their immediate local community. This form of political selfhood can be harnessed through 'sentimental education', which implies that all humans have a biologically predisposed leaning to 'mutualism and altruism' – both of which are crucial in realizing human rights at the micro-political level. In terms of the best form of political organization for human rights promotion, Gregg advocates a vigorous flourishing of organic, grassroots, localized and non-elite-led movements within existing nation-states. This means that the construction, promotion and implementation of human rights can be done through 'institutionalized socialization' (Gregg, 2016: 6). This kind of socialization is based on a bottom-up project of persuasion and

self-determination that could be more legitimate than strategies that unequivocally herald the ‘universal validity’ of human rights. The latter strategies, which are often developed in the corridors of power in the Global North, suggest the arrogance of their advocates and their inability to meaningfully consider the perspectives of the most vulnerable individuals.

Whereas powerful Western states dominate global human rights discourses (Hopgood, 2013) to the extent that local norms and sentiments from the Global South are systematically discarded, Gregg calls for reinforcing local networks of activists, institutions and political systems in order for human rights to reflect local sensitivities. In this way, human rights claims do not necessarily eradicate nation-state sovereignty; rather, human rights claims and obligations are negotiated, redefined and practiced in local communities that operate within the framework of nation-states and with institutionalized state agencies. Hence, Gregg’s notion of a ‘human rights state’ evades the reductionist puzzle of choosing state sovereignty over universal human rights. Instead, Gregg advocates, by implication, empowering local, grass-roots, and marginalized actors and civil society groups to define and to construct their own strategies for human dignity and human rights obligations.

Thus, Gregg calls for ‘constitutionalism at both domestic and supranational levels without denying the sovereign equality of member states’ as well as for stronger ‘shared governance’ (Gregg, 2016: 214–215), whereby nation-states imbibe mutual recognition for their allegiance to human rights. Gregg’s call for a metaphorical cosmopolitan human rights state that is grounded at the ‘bottom’ is laudable primarily because scholarly and policy debates usually focus on ‘top-down’, Western-oriented and universalizing approaches. In practical terms, however, it is not clear how the ‘sovereign equality of human rights states’ could emerge in the international system in which differentiation, hierarchy, and deep material inequalities enable state actors to undermine less powerful peers. How can mutual recognition emerge in this ‘bottom-up’ approach if political agents from around the globe have profoundly different ideological, cultural, religious, and personal understandings and interpretations of ‘human rights’? How and under which conditions can the global community of equally sovereign ‘human rights states’ emerge if there is a wide divergence in terms of constructive processes and substantive formulations of what human rights really constitute within, beyond and across nation-states?

Another puzzling element in the book is its call for an ‘association of human rights-embracing nation states’ (Gregg, 2016: 214–217). How exactly can this association emerge if deep-seated material inequalities as well as enduring and historically constituted ethnocentric biases hinder vulnerable political agents from fully determining their human rights personhood? Perhaps the problem with the metaphorical ‘human rights state’ is not only its political feasibility but also its legitimacy. Because human rights promotion as a public endeavour is indeed a collective cooperation problem, how do we assess the normative legitimacy of localized human rights claims? On what criteria? On whose criteria? In other words, the book might be placing too much premium on the *process-oriented* or procedural issues of transnational human rights promotion and not taking into account the *substantive core ideals* that legitimately constitute the value of the human person. On that basis, any sort of discussion of the constitution of human rights seems to require a minimum set of conditions under which human dignity can be rightfully claimed regardless of temporal conditions, cultural context or even political circumstances – an important point that seems to have been downplayed in the book.

The complexity of US foreign policy and human rights promotion

In contrast to Gregg’s *The Human Rights State*, the other four books under review investigate the dynamic influence of Western states and transnational actors on the human rights situation in the Global South. Those books loosely coalesce on this important puzzle: what has been the impact of

transnational actors, including Western countries, in the global diffusion of human rights norms, in general, and in the domestic human rights politics in the Global South, in particular? How and why do those policy patterns of transnational actors and Western countries emerge the way they do?

Joe Renouard's *Human Rights in American Foreign Policy* (Renouard, 2015) is an empirically-rich, comprehensive and masterful survey of US foreign policy strategies starting from the Vietnam War period to the end of the Cold War in the early 1990s. Opposing the conventional belief that US human rights policy is built on hypocrisy, Renouard offers a more complex picture of American human rights policy, which is a substantive policy area that demonstrates the enduring 'classic struggle between the realist tradition in foreign affairs... and the idealist tradition...' (Renouard, 2015: 6). He identifies three critical junctures in American human rights policies abroad, all of which exemplify tensions and struggles in the construction of US foreign policy: (1) the late 1960s, characterized by American support for anticommunist yet repressive regimes vis-à-vis the human costs of the Vietnam War; (2) 1973, when the US policy establishment and activists focused on South America where General Pinochet toppled President Allende, thereby initiating the first generalized human rights hearings in the US congress; and (3) the late 1980s, when US policymakers widely expanded the scope of human rights promotion and liberal reforms in many parts of the globe.

Renouard successfully rebuts the canonical belief that characterizes American foreign policy as full of 'double standards' or 'hypocrisy'. Instead, he argues that 'consistency is an impossible standard' (Renouard, 2015:13). He reinforces that case based on four empirically informed arguments. First, the deep ideological divisions during the Cold War era facilitated human rights activism within and beyond the American policy establishment, yet other American stakeholders also permitted the pervasive abuses of US allies for the sake of US interests. Second, the complexity of US foreign policy construction was aggravated by a 'high degree of politicization, and even opportunism' (Renouard, 2015: 15). That may be the case when American politicians and policymakers strategically deployed 'human rights' discourses to score winning political advantages – particularly in debates in the US Congress, on foreign aid, democracy promotion initiatives and other policy spheres in US external relations. Third, US foreign policy and its human rights outcomes cannot be accurately interpreted by any single theoretical framework, because 'there were simply too many unique cases worldwide and too many interests driving American involvement' (Renouard, 2015: 15). For example, the distinctive combination of factors that facilitated Cold War foreign policy during the Reagan administration may be dramatically different from the set of factors that shaped the Bush administration's counter-terror policies abroad. Thus, divergence in the set of explanatory factors is plausible even if the outcomes are nominally the same (human rights crisis). Hence, Renouard rejects any form of simplistic generalization concerning US foreign policy and its impact on human rights abroad.

Finally, Renouard maintains that American human rights policy was constituted by the conflicting motives, policies and rhetoric of a wide range of political actors exerting influence within and beyond the US policy establishment. Consequently, the plurality of actors influencing human rights policy suggests that 'inconsistency was central to human rights policymaking and enforcement' (Renouard, 2015: 17). Despite those contradictions, Renouard asserts that the US played a pivotal role in the global diffusion of human rights norms, and he maintains that it is quite likely that those norms would still be considered in the future of American foreign policy. Obviously, Renouard's prediction did not anticipate the rise of the illiberal populism of Donald Trump, but the forecast of an eventual collapse of the human rights order because of Trump's presidency should be taken with a grain of salt. As Renouard's account shows, the plurality of actors involved in US human rights policy construction might restrain, if not fully prevent, the emerging illiberal politics of the new leadership in the White House.

Western arms-exporting democracies and human rights compliance

Jennifer Erickson's *Dangerous Trade: Arms Exports, Human Rights, and International Reputation* (Erickson, 2015), meanwhile, deals with the important puzzle as to how and why large arms-exporting democratic states adopt multilateral restrictions of arms export to human rights-abusive states, as exhibited by states' support for the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT). Notably, the ATT was adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2013 and became effective in 2014. The adoption of the norm of arms export restrictions becomes even more puzzling when one considers how these exporting states have financially benefitted from various trade deals in the past.

To answer her puzzle, Erickson examines five important cases of arms-exporting democratic states: Belgium, France, Germany, the UK and the US. While the US did not initially support the ATT process during the 2006 UN General Assembly resolution or the 2001–2008 UN small arms conferences, all of the other states have officially signed and ratified the ATT. Only the US has yet to ratify the treaty. *Dangerous Trade* highlights the importance of rational self-interest (by avoiding reputational costs for arms exports to rights-violating regimes) and social motivations (inherent in arms-exporting democratic regimes that are responsive to a public outcry against arms exports to rights-violating states) as important factors for norm compliance.

The main argument of the book is that the ATT and the recent introduction of multilateral humanitarian export restrictions became part and parcel of the decision-making calculus of arms exporting states. While there is still a gap between exporting states' publicly stated policy and actual practice, arms exporting states' interest in protecting their social reputation in the international system created incentives to commit to ambitious yet 'responsible' arms transfer practices. This social reputation argument is not only limited to the international dimension. Erickson argues that exporting states, in the face of an arms trade scandal, marginally shift to responsible arms transfer practices to protect their domestic reputation.

Erickson's work is a welcome addition to the rich scholarly debate on international norm compliance. The analytical focus on state reputation as part of the policy calculus is surely one of the several missing perspectives in the current literature that *Dangerous Trade* seeks to redress. There are, however, some further questions that the book inspires us to ask.

On the question of legitimacy, how is it possible for arms-exporting regimes to restrict their arms trade activities to specific countries, while pacifist transnational networks advocate a total ban on arms exports? To what extent and under what conditions can arms export be justified, considering that it could lead to mass political violence and the loss of human lives in importing countries? How can Western countries legitimize their arms exports while making some conditional restrictions by invoking 'human rights' norms? One may argue, quite controversially, that Western countries' sensitivities to reputational costs in arms exports could be an indirect way of reinforcing double standards in human rights – that is, 'good states' (particularly the country cases of Erickson) are normatively permitted to export arms, while bad states should not. On what normative basis is that premise acceptable?

Surely, *Dangerous Trade*, notwithstanding its empirical orientation, opens up a lot of intriguing normative issues pertaining to the global political economy of security and conflict. In addition, if reputation is indeed an important factor for arms export restrictions, then it appears to be quite ineffective in ensuring the long-term norm compliance of arms-exporting states. It is not clear under what conditions arm-exporting states shift from an instrumentalist perspective on norms to the stage of authentic norm internalization, based on the logic of appropriateness. Under what conditions can reputational considerations be internalized to the extent that compliance becomes a non-calculating policy decision on the part of states? It appears that a reputational cost-benefit analysis is just one of the many plausible constituent components in state actors'

deliberation on whether to restrict arms export to rights-violating states. After all, states are not monolithic entities: they do not only respond to public outcry and various interest groups; different organizational motivations and reputational considerations may very well be key factors in states' policies on arms exports.

The European Union and China's human rights problem

In addition, one of the key challenges of the global human rights regime relates to the issue of whether and to what extent can transnational actors, including key Western countries, encourage China to improve its human rights record. Katrin Kinzelbach's *The EU's Human Rights Dialogue with China* (Kinzelbach, 2014) is perhaps one of the most fascinating and revealing studies of the micro-politics of Western influence on domestic human rights and coercive politics in China. Kinzelbach highlights the impact and dynamics of the 'quiet diplomacy' that the European Union (EU) has deployed when dealing with Chinese government officials on human rights issues. By engaging in private, classified and formalized annual dialogues (two dialogue rounds every year) with Chinese government officials, the EU has actively implemented 'constructive dialogue' since 1995 – devoid of any public scrutiny or transparency to external observers – encouraging Beijing to take human rights more seriously. Focusing on bilateral dialogues from 1995 to 2010, Kinzelbach asks the following key questions: Did the EU's 'quiet diplomacy' substantially influence Beijing to comply with global human rights norms? If so, how and under what conditions did it shape Beijing's record of state repression?

Considering the inaccessible information pertaining to the EU–China Human Rights Dialogues, Kinzelbach's book provides significant insights into scholarly and public dialogues about human rights promotion in China. Reminiscent of several arguments in *Dangerous Trade*, Kinzelbach's book suggests that an arms embargo could function as an effective 'alternative to the impotent EU–China Human Rights Dialogue' (Kinzelbach, 2014: 199–200). The confidential EU–China dialogues prevented Brussels from publicly engaging in human rights criticism of China. The starting point of Kinzelbach's puzzle is the widespread belief that an effective way of motivating Chinese government officials to comply with human rights norms is not to publicly shame Beijing for its abuses. Political instruments of public shaming include sanctions, UN resolutions and public diplomacy initiatives that openly criticize the Chinese government. Discrediting this dominant belief, Kinzelbach's research shows that the Chinese government strategically used private dialogues with EU officials to subvert any form of publicly stated Western criticism. Arguing that the 'quiet diplomacy' of the EU is ineffective, Kinzelbach also underscores the counterproductive effect of those dialogues: 'regular confidential talks behind closed doors had served as intensive training for a small number of Chinese officials on how to engage with – and effectively counter – human rights related inquiries, criticism and recommendations' (Kinzelbach, 2014: 214). This book is well-argued, as demonstrated by the careful collection and analysis of archival data and interviews. It displays fine scholarship about the EU's role in world politics.

Kinzelbach's path-breaking work offers two important insights with regard to the promotion of global human rights norms. First, in contrast to the self-congratulatory narratives of the EU as a 'normative power' (Manners, 2002:235-258), the EU–China Human Rights Dialogues remind us of their serious limitations in promoting human rights norms in many parts of the world where they are perhaps needed the most, including China. Kinzelbach's investigation reveals several instances where Chinese diplomats have successfully undermined EU diplomats' pressure for stronger human rights compliance. Indeed, the Dialogues demonstrate how a state's material power and geopolitical ambitions can actually trump normative pressures and external influences from a relatively less powerful actor, as in the case perhaps of the EU. One should note, however, that the

‘quiet diplomacy’ approach may have helped Brussels gain some non-human rights-related advantages (for instance, better trade deals) in exchange for the EU not publicly criticizing China for the latter’s abuses.

Second, the confidential nature of the Dialogues undermines the legitimacy and effectiveness of the EU in exerting its influence beyond its traditional spheres of influence. By disenfranchising the public and human rights-oriented civil society groups, Brussels misses the chance of building a more pluralistic, transparent and multi-stakeholder coalition within Europe that could potentially inflict more effective pressure for Beijing to take human rights more seriously. The secretive nature of the Dialogues reinforces a sense of ‘democratic deficit’ in the EU, particularly by limiting participation to a group of experts and policymakers. That strategy does not only undermine legitimacy, but it also promotes overt technocratization in the global governance of human rights. Yet, is it even ethical to limit global governance of human rights to experts and elites? The problem with this technocratic and ‘closed-door’ approach to diplomacy is that the EU is interested in human rights *advocacy* – and that entails transparency, public accountability and the involvement of non-state actors including domestic as well as transnational civil society groups.

Intergovernmental organizations and human rights socialization

Finally, Brian Greenhill’s *Transmitting Rights* (Greenhill, 2015) offers another intriguing development pertaining to the role of transnational actors in human rights promotion. In particular, Greenhill focuses on the role of intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) as ‘important but often overlooked actor[s] in the globalization and human rights story’ (Greenhill, 2015:1). These IGOs include the most prominent ones such as the EU and the United Nations, and also some less obvious ones, such as the European Space Agency. *Transmitting Rights* contends that, controlling for a diverse range of other plausible domestic and transnational factors and pressures, a state’s pattern of human rights compliance tends to converge with those of their peer IGO member countries. Although the rights-compliant states reinforce each other in the context of their IGO membership, Greenhill cautions that less compliant member states also undermine the behaviour of other member states.

Transmitting Rights offers an IGO-mediated ‘norm diffusion model’ that is composed of three stages: (1) human rights culture, where an IGO is subjected to the norms constructed by the member states; (2) the IGO context, where the human rights culture embedded in the IGO influences the compliance incentives of a member state; and (3) norm internalization. One of the most important lessons from the book is that the transnational social context, where IGOs are embedded, facilitates human rights compliance among member states – and *not* the individual IGO per se. In other words, Greenhill advances a social constructivist and structuralist approach to norm diffusion *instead* of a purely rationalist and agency-oriented explanation of compliance behaviour among IGO member states. To be exact, *Transmitting Rights* contends that IGOs go beyond their formal institutional mandates. Particularly, these IGOs function as effective forums for socialization whereby ‘states can influence each other’s domestic practices across a wide range of issue areas’ (Greenhill, 2015: 164). Put differently, various IGOs mediate emerging human rights norms through many diverse networks of interaction amongst influential policy actors of member-states, who have the capacity to exact those human rights-friendly policies in their home countries.

Greenhill’s work highlights several important concerns pertaining to the legitimacy and effectiveness of global human rights promotion. First, the role of IGOs in international politics is not fully accepted in some parts of the globe, most especially by authoritarian and illiberal regimes that strategically invoke ‘sovereignty’ to deflect exogenous human rights criticisms. That is particularly true not only in the relatively strong authoritarian Chinese state, but also in the newly

installed illiberal regime of Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte, who has been openly critical of the human rights advocacy of the EU and the UN. The anti-democratic arguments made by those illiberal regimes illustrate the sense of legitimacy deficit associated with many IGO networks. Ensuring that domestic and local human rights non-governmental organizations (NGOs) strongly collaborate with IGO networks, mostly based in the West, could bolster the overall perception of legitimacy of those networks as they push illiberal regimes towards the pathway of human rights reforms.

Second, we should not overstate the power of IGO networks in promoting human rights norms amongst and within member states; an effective global human rights promotion policy depends on finding a unique yet appropriate combination of transnational and domestic advocacy and policy strategies that suit the target state. While IGOs certainly include influential and human rights-friendly policymakers and diplomats, building the intensive cooperation of IGO networks with the vast networks of transnational and local human rights NGOs and civil society actors seems to be a more promising approach to global human rights advocacy. Besides, under what conditions can we expect government representatives of IGO member states to mediate human rights norms supposedly *transmitted* by IGO networks if the representatives themselves are forced by their home governments to deny or provide strategic excuses for abuses committed at home? That issue seems to be too important to be ignored in the seemingly optimistic characterization of IGO networks in *Transmitting Rights*.

Conclusions: Rethinking global human rights

In sum, the five books under review provide us some important insights about the contemporary state of the global human rights order. While Benjamin Gregg's *The Human Rights State* highlights philosophical limitations in our contemporary understanding of human rights, the remaining four books underscore the dynamic interactions of transnational and local factors in shaping human rights outcomes especially in the Global South. To be exact, Gregg expresses his dissatisfaction with a universalist conception of rights. He advocates, instead, a 'human rights state' that is composed of the local community and voluntary groups of individuals, who then dialogically construct the substantive elements and ways in which those rights can be realized within the community. Kinzelbach exposes the ineffective and counterproductive dialogues that the EU conducts with China. Dispelling the belief that US foreign policy is hypocritical when it comes to human rights promotion, Renouard maintains that US human rights policies abroad are outcomes of the complex interactions, negotiations and conflicts amongst different institutions and actors within and beyond the US government. Erickson discovers that, despite the emerging practice of human rights considerations in arms trading decisions, the arms-exporting state's likelihood of trading with human rights-abusive states depends on a variety of factors including its social reputation. Whereas Kinzelbach, Renouard and Erickson seem to offer a pessimistic characterization of transnational human rights, Greenhill expresses a more optimistic outlook by highlighting the role of IGOs, especially when they effectively expose abusive states to a wide variety of compliance pressures from other human rights-minded governments and transnational civil society organizations.

The end of the Cold War in the 1990s stimulated a global appetite for liberal democratic values and human rights norms. More recently, the prospects of a converging global human rights order seem to be bleak. Such pessimism may stem from 9/11 and the US-led war on terror, which impaired human rights and civil liberties in the name of state security and stability of the international order. Even worse, the apparent rise of illiberal populism both within and beyond the supposedly 'core human rights states', or what one scholar calls 'steward states' (Hafner-Burton, 2013:5), seems to undermine a converging global human rights order instead of reinforcing it.

To accommodate perspectives from both the Global North and the Global South, our understanding of human rights needs to be reframed, involving a shift from the discourses of *rights* to one of *dignity*. Human dignity should not be considered as ideologically antithetical to human rights. Rather, human dignity encapsulates all forms of human rights claims including civil and political rights, social rights, economic rights, physical integrity rights and cultural rights, among many others. The notion of dignity avoids the unnecessary political tensions between states and key actors of the North and South. It guarantees equal normative value for both socio-economic rights, which are often dismissed by the global North, and political and civil rights that many regimes in the Global South perceive as less important. By invoking dignity, actors from both the North and the South are placed on equal political footing, and the debate then becomes post-ideological as the terms of conversation shift toward actual policies and governance structures.

Notably, the notion of human rights (particularly civil and political rights) is usually associated with its historical evolution in the Western socio-legal context, whereas the notion of human dignity functions as a quintessential principle in many, if not all, major world religions and serves as an emancipatory rallying cry against oppressive agents and institutions (May, 2006; Wronka, 1998). Notably, the Dutch legal scholar Bas de Gaay Fortman highlights the universal applicability of human dignity:

In a Western historical context, human rights developed as a protective concept to defend the autonomy of individual citizens against threats coming particularly from sovereigns (states) that would try to over-extend their power into the realm of the private citizen. In the cultural context of Africa, Asia, and Latin America, however, the human rights idea is of a much more emancipatory character. There, it constitutes a struggle for *truly universal human dignity through realized rights of the have-nots*. (Fortman, 2011: 1, emphasis added).

Emphasizing dignity, I support Benjamin Gregg's arguments, particularly on the need to empower local communities in determining the scope and implementation conditions of human rights and normative principles. Indeed, this call for localization is usually ignored by transnational political elites, who often call for an unconditional implementation of '*global human rights*', which is often bereft of the meaningful input from the real, vulnerable people from the *local* and micro-political levels. No wonder Stephen Hopgood even called for a shift from 'Human Rights' to 'human rights' (Hopgood, 2013:x-xi), thereby undermining the globalizing and imperializing tones of the international human rights order. If we are to make human rights legitimate to as many communities as possible, then we need to adopt pluralistic, deliberative, and just institutions and modes of participation that enable everyone to take part in its construction and defense.

I acknowledge two virtues of emphasizing human dignity in the global norms order. First, we allow individuals to deliberately determine and actualize how and in what ways they can fully realize their individual worth in relation to their immediate community – based on the intricacies of their cultural, economic and political conditions. Second, global governance institutions should not impose specific principles of rights, and they must also prevent powerful states from unjustly intervening in other countries' domestic concerns by couching their strategic interests in their preferred 'human rights' language (e.g. China on economic rights; the US on civil and political rights). The failure of the EU–China Human Rights Dialogues, according to Kinzelbach's account, is perhaps caused by Brussels' reluctance to recognize the value of Beijing's insistence on socio-economic rights as a legitimate claim to human dignity. In fact, it is only in the last few years that historians and other scholars have started exploring the pivotal role of Global South actors in the formation of international human rights order after the Second World War (Jensen, 2016;

Ramcharan, 2016). The discourse of ‘universal human rights norms’ is sometimes characterized as being too Western, an incorrect but often-invoked response by dictators and abusive leaders in their attempts to rebut human rights criticisms.

The emphasis on dignity also means the rejection of the paternalistic paradigm of human rights promotion, as in the case perhaps of the EU (see Kinzelbach, 2014), the US (see Renouard, 2015) and other powerful states (see the discussion in Erickson (2015)). In practice, the current global order systematically privileges the ‘human rights’ concerns of the Global North, particularly its emphasis on civil and political rights. That status quo has to change, and that transformation is possible if we could shift to a global discourse of dignity. The notion of dignity recognizes the humanity in each one of us, but it is also emancipatory as it allows further deliberation and localization of the ways in which the value of human life could vary across different contexts.

My second argument refers to global justice, which is often muted in a highly individualistic conception of international human rights. Yet, the current neoliberal order has prevented many vulnerable sectors from meaningfully articulating their claims for human dignity. Scandalous levels of material inequality and systematic identity-based discriminatory practices hinder the most vulnerable communities from engaging in meaningful political participation. This is why discourses about dignity and rights have to be juxtaposed with important questions of global justice. That political task requires rectification of historically constituted material injustices that occur within and between the Global North and South. Thus, procedural legitimacy for global human rights construction is not enough; it has to be fundamentally supported by substantive material justice and a celebration of differences in terms of identity, still bound together through human dignity and rights (Benhabib, 2011; Fraser, 1995). For example, the Netherlands, a small European country that is often celebrated as a human rights champion, demonstrates the fundamental problems of myopically focusing on the civil and political rights problems of countries in the Global South. For sure, many non-Western countries struggle in upholding civil and political rights, but we also need to recognize the systematic failures of the Netherlands (and of other rich Western countries) in eradicating the terrible and enduring effects of colonialist projects in the past and of the powerful Dutch corporate conglomerates that still continue to exploit the material and human resources of the Global South. No wonder that Makau Mutua expresses his discontent with the self-congratulatory human rights discourses that Western countries tell unto themselves, and he urges us to ‘construct a society free of the daily avalanche of cruelties and oppression’ and to abandon ‘colonialist and exploitative doctrines, no matter their origins’ (Mutua, 2002: 157). For a truly just international system to emerge, we need to rethink the current rules of global governance by seriously considering global justice and fairness in various policy areas.

The third strategy refers to mandatory and universal political education on human rights and human dignity. This strategy empowers young individuals by equipping them with practical knowledge about their rights that could be useful in their future roles in society. As the human rights scholar David Forsythe argues, ‘the future of human rights is not assured but rather depends on human endeavor—agency as compared to structural determinism in the stilted language of academe’ (Forsythe, 2017: 250). So, I propose that human rights and dignity be integrated in the core curriculum of primary and secondary educational institutions worldwide. This program may emphasize two key elements: (1) practical lessons that reinterpret global and local historical events through the lens of human dignity; as well as (2) philosophical and historically grounded lessons about various cultural perspectives pertaining to human dignity. One of the intended outcomes is that future generations realize how various public policy problems can be linked to issues of human dignity, and to see the common humanity that binds all individuals worldwide despite their visible cultural differences.

Finally, shifting to a pluralist and deliberative discourse of human dignity could be an effective response to contemporary global governance challenges. By highlighting the notion of dignity in theoretical and practical discourses of global norms, we depart from the problematic and Western-oriented discourses of ‘universal human rights’. By espousing human dignity (instead of the highly misused and saturated human rights language), particularly through mandatory and universal education, we empower political communities and individuals to independently yet deliberatively decide how self-actualization is best achieved. Yet, transformative reform does not stop at the level of education and a discursive policy shift to human dignity. Instead, emancipatory reform of the global human rights order entails the abolition of unjust rules of global economic governance. Reform ought to substantially minimize, if not totally eradicate, the acute material inequalities that enable powerful individuals and states to implement their own imperialistic agendas of intervention, agendas often couched in a language of ‘human rights’.


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