International Human Rights, Decolonisation and Globalisation Becoming Human

Shelley Wright

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International Human Rights, Decolonisation and Globalisation

The analysis of human rights to date has lacked a truly deep and complex awareness of the historical context in which they developed. Examining the 'humanness' of rights, this book redresses the balance by demonstrating how the characterisation of this humanity from a Euro-American perspective shapes the content and implementation of international human rights law.

Covering a diverse range of topics, case studies and theories, the author undertakes a critique of the principal assumptions on which the existing international human rights regime has been constructed. She argues that the decolonisation of human rights, and the creation of a global community that is conducive to the well-being of all humans, will require a radical restructuring of our ways of thinking, researching and writing. In contributing to this restructuring she brings together feminist and indigenous approaches, as well as postmodern and post-colonial scholarship, engaging directly with some of the prevailing orthodoxies, such as 'universality', 'the individual', 'self-determination', 'cultural relativism', 'globalisation' and 'civil society'.

The book will be essential reading for professionals, policy makers and academics involved in the study and implementation of human rights within international law.

Shelley Wright is Senior Lecturer in the Faculty of Law, University of Sydney, Australia. She was also the Ariel F. Sallows Professor of Human Rights at the College of Law, University of Saskatchewan, for two years from 1995 to 1996. She has taught at the National University of Singapore, Canterbury University in Christchurch, New Zealand, and has been a Visiting Professor at the University of Victoria, BC, as well as a visitor and guest lecturer at the University of New South Wales, Hong Kong University, UCLA, Columbia University and Oxford University. She is the co-author, with Hilary Charlesworth and Christine Chinkin, of 'Feminist Approaches to International Law' in the American Journal of International Law (1991) and has published widely on women's rights, indigenous peoples' intellectual property and cultural rights, feminist theory and international human rights.

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Unfortunately, I read Hugh Brody's The Other Side of Eden: Hunters, Farmers and the Shaping of the World (Brody 2000) too late to acknowledge his insights in the body of my own text. But I highly recommend it as a perceptive and beautifully written narrative on the themes of Indigenousness, colonialism, gender and the process of becoming human that underlies much of what I have tried to do here.

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Sources for epigraphs

- A civil religion: Remark attributed to John Humphrey
- 2 White man's rights: Roosevelt, F. D. Statement to Congress, January 1941, quoted in Burns, J. M. (1970) Roosevelt 1940-1945: The Soldier of Freedom, San Diego: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 34.
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- Subjects, soldiers and citizens: From Gladiator, produced by Paramount Pictures and Dreamworks, directed by Ridley Scott.
- 5 Peoples of the book: Austen, J. (1818) Persuasion, reprinted 1986, London: Collins, 364.
- Speaking truth to power: From Bambi, produced by Walt Disney Inc., as quoted in Coombe, R. (1991) 'Objects of Property and Subjects of Politics: Intellectual Property Laws and Democratic Dialogue', Texas Law Review 69: 1854.
- Emerging images: 'My country/Is not a country/It is winter' by Gilles 7 Vigneault (1972) 'Mon Pays', recorded on Les Chansonniers du Québec, produced by Radio-Canada International, arr. by G. Rochon, trans. by S. Wright.
- The death of the hero: Durakovic, F. (1998) 'A War Letter (about the letter 8 from before the war)', in Agosín, M. (ed.) (1999) A Map of Hope: Women's Writings on Human Rights, London: Penguin, 27.
- Ghosts in the machine: Oodgeroo of the Tribe Noonuccal, 'Municipal 9 Gum', from My People, 1990, as quoted in Rees, S. and Wright, S. (eds) (2000) Human Rights, Corporate Responsibility: A Dialogue Sydney: Pluto Press, 66.
- 10 Becoming Human: Akello, G. (1992) 'Encounter', from Busby, M. Daughters of Africa, quoted in Agosín, M. (ed.) (1999) A Map of Hope: Women's Writings on Human Rights, London: Penguin, 315.

When I set out on this journey/I thought it would never end

When I started down that road/I could not see the end

And when I took that first step/I fell in so deep, so deep

And all the things that were so hard won/You know I thought I would always keep

Now, what do you think I see?/Standing like a wall in front of me

Defeat, not victory

Defeat, not victory

So, what are you going to do? Die? No!

You going to lay down and die!

No!

I will not admit defeat

I will not admit defeat

I will see

Victory

Pride and deceit have choked my life like weeds

And I lost sight of what I really had/What I really need

And all the things I should have valued/I gave away for a prayer and a

Now when I reach out for them

They are gone

Now do you know what I see?/Standing in front of me

Like a headstone/A fucking monument to human misery

Defeat, not victory

Defeat, not victory

So, what are you going to do? Die? No!

You going to lay down and die?

No!

I will not admit defeat

I will not admit defeat

I will see

Victory

(Nomeansno, 'Victory' (lyrics by Rob Wright) from Small Parts Isolated and Destroyed (Alternative Tentacles Records, 1990))

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1 A civil religion

There will be peace on earth when everyone's human rights are respected.

(John Humphrey)

As the new century begins international human rights have become a central focus of international relations, law and politics. Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948 declares that 'all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights' and that we should all 'act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood'. But what do these words mean? Who are human rights for? What standards whether individual or collective can be accepted as universally applicable to everyone? What does a 'spirit of brotherhood' imply? In other words, what constitutes the 'humanness' of human rights?

[W]e have come to understand that what we took to be humanly inclusive problematics, concepts, theories, objective methodologies, and transcendental truths are in fact far less than that. Instead, these products of thought bear the mark of their collective and individual creators, and the creators in turn have been distinctively marked as to gender, class, race, and culture. ... Western culture's favored beliefs mirror in sometimes clear and sometimes distorting ways, not the world as it is or as we might want it to be, but the social projects of their historically identifiable creators.

(Harding 1986: 15)

One of Western culture's most favoured beliefs is in the existence of inherent and universal human rights. Yet, after more than fifty years of effort by the United Nations and other bodies the world is still far from the full adoption and implementation of universally recognised human rights for all. The Universal Declaration was meant to be a lasting statement of basic human rights. Nevertheless, when it came to implementing these standards into a binding convention two main covenants had to be drafted (the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966) or 'ICCPR' and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966) or 'ICESCR'). Many subsequent treaties on human rights indicate that turning universally acceptable standards into enforceable norms is very difficult.

This fragmentation and contention over what human rights might mean is particularly curious with regards to the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women 1979. Women constitute more than 50 per cent of the world's population. If the Universal Declaration, covenants and other conventions are inadequate in dealing with women's rights then whose human rights are they? As Hilary Charlesworth has noted, there has been a rather embarrassed silence within the halls of international diplomacy and law-making concerning women's rights (Charlesworth 1998). The fiftieth anniversary of the adoption of the Universal Declaration by the United Nations General Assembly occurred on 10 December 1998. Leading up to the anniversary there was considerable discussion about altering this most basic document better to represent differing cultural perspectives on human rights. Asian countries were particularly insistent while most so-called 'Western' nations responded with horror. But regional documents on human rights indicate the existence of significant differences over what human rights are and what they might mean.

The African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights contains civil and political rights similar to those in the European Convention on Human Rights (1950) and the ICCPR. It also contains economic, social and cultural rights as in the European Social Charter, the ICESCR and other conventions. In addition, however, Articles 19 to 24 contain a list of peoples' rights. These include the right to self-determination, the right to dispose freely of a peoples' wealth and natural resources, the right to development, the right to peace and the right to a satisfactory environment. This is the only major human rights treaty that explicitly recognises peoples' rights (other than Common Article 1 of the ICCPR and the ICESCR recognising the right of self-determination), but the reiteration of the other rights is similar to most other regional and global conventions. Although political and civil rights are generally treated separately from economic, social and cultural rights, as in the two main covenants, the African Charter is not alone in grouping them together. But because of the emphasis on group rights peculiar to this Convention the individual human rights that are enumerated cannot in fact be seen in the same light as in, for example, the ICCPR or the European Convention. Individuality, so central to human rights in Western Europe and North America, has a much less central role in the rights of Africans - or at least as they are expressed in the African Charter. In addition this convention sets out a list of duties in Chapter II for each individual covered by the Charter. These include duties towards 'the family and society, the State and other legally recognised communities, and the international community'. The rights and freedoms contained in the African Charter must be exercised 'with due regard to the rights of others, collective security, morality and common interest' (Art. 27). This hybrid formulation illustrates how difficult it is to identify human rights as universally binding in the light of culturally specific or regional needs, whether as an inheritance of a colonial past, or as part of the desire to create a postcolonial present and future.

A major gap in many analyses of human rights is the lack of any deep or complex awareness of the historical context in which they developed. International human rights are intimately connected to a range of issues. The expansion of

Europe, including the economic, political, scientific and technological values that have accompanied it, is a crucial factor, although perhaps in ways less obvious than is usually accepted within international human rights discourse. Religious and ethnic struggles are an important issue. Less generally recognised, however, are the changing nature of the patriarchal family in Europe and elsewhere, the development of printing, the chronology of empire through mainstream history, the connection between citizenship and militarism, and the establishment of human rights within Euro-American literate cultures. Where histories of these structures have been referred to they tend to be dominated by one history – the rise of Europe – whose dominance is taken as axiomatic (Landes 1999).

In one sense a focus on the history of European institutions and traditions is an accurate portrayal of the development of such supposedly 'Western' traditions as international law and international human rights. But the dominance of the West is not a matter of economic, technological, scientific, political or legal superiority. The 'lever of riches' (Mokyr 1990) in the West was the colonial conquest of most of the rest of the world. Despite considerable academic debate over the relative costs and benefits of colonisation and imperialism in Europe it is no coincidence that 'the rise of Europe' accompanied its expansion outside the boundaries of western Eurasia (Blaut 1993: 186-206). This expansion involved the dispossession and appropriation of most of the rest of the world. Whatever the particular expenses and burdens this may have imposed on specific European states the overall impact for colonial Europe was access to and acquisition of the world's resources. This resulted in the transformation of European states into centres of world capital, political development and control over legal discourse, including discourses of international law and human rights. This monopoly on the language of power was extended to European colonial settlements established by the English, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Russians, Dutch, Danish, Belgians, Italians, Germans and the United States. Even today only Japan really qualifies as an exception to this centralisation of power. Its economic preeminence is both dependent on the European models it adopted with enthusiasm from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, and inherently fragile because of this dependence. International law and human rights are closely connected to this wider colonial history. Part of this connection is reflected in the disturbing lack within human rights discourse of the histories of those people who have been silenced within and because of the Western 'meta-narrative', i.e. women, children, the poor, the colonised, the indigenous, the 'disappeared'. These are the 'people without history' in Eric Wolf's evocative phrase (Wolf 1982). These are the people who, when they are brought within the reach of Western rationalist narratives, are treated as objects, static, unchanging, their 'development' dependent on biology or nature or tradition and, above all, the guiding hand of white European man.

Although I believe it is necessary to place human rights within the very complex context of European colonial history it is not my intention to demean or destroy the deeply transformative effect human rights or a belief in their efficacy can have. Shirley Scott has posited that international law can be seen as ideology (Scott

4 A civil religion

1994). Human Rights may also be seen as an aspect of the ideology of international law—as ideas that have power and can enable action. But these ideas are also subject to processes of reexamination and reimagination. They are not immutable. The following chapters are meant as an exploration, a kind of archaeological dig through the past and present of human rights within international law. In particular I would like to examine the 'humanness' of rights and how the characterisation of this humanity from a Euro-American perspective affects who gets to be fully human and who doesn't quite make it. My intention is to take a critical perspective. As Charlesworth has said on another occasion:

While there have been lively debates about the relationship between the generations of rights and the best methods of implementing human rights law, there has been a general reluctance to question the basis or value of the international human rights system itself. Analyses of the foundations and scope of international human rights law frequently lapse into heroic or mystical language; it is almost as if this branch of international law were both too valuable and too fragile to sustain critique.

(Charlesworth 1994: 59)

This book is an attempt at bringing together different perspectives and different voices in order to see how they can contribute to a critical analysis of international human rights. I draw freely on feminist and indigenous approaches as well as some postmodern and post-colonial scholarship. I have made no attempt to survey the literature from any of these sources. A direct engagement with some of the prevailing orthodoxies of human rights such as 'universality', 'the individual', 'self-determination', 'cultural relativism' and 'civil society' is explored. Decolonising human rights, and creating a global community that is conducive to the well-being of all humans and the earth that we share, requires a radical restructuring of our ways of thinking, researching and writing. Linda Tuhiwai Smith describes these processes as 'indigenizing' research (Smith 1999: 146-147), or they might be described as 'feminising' traditional discourses. The point is not to replace one perspective with another but to decentre our focus of attention in the hope that human rights can be expanded and strengthened. It is an uncomfortable but necessary project (see Anaya 1996; Anghie 1999; Barsh 1994: Battiste and Henderson 2000; Cass 1996; Charlesworth and Chinkin 2000; Knop 1993; Orford 1997; Otto 1996a, 1999; Spivak 1995; Stark 2000).

A critical evaluation of the history of international human rights can be very difficult to sustain. A visit to the Holocaust Museum in Washington, DC, provides a vivid example. The depiction of loss represented within the Museum is sometimes overwhelming in its intensity - the names of European villages emptied of their Jewish populations engraved on the glass walls of the walkways from one exhibit to the next; the tower of photographs from the *stetl* in Lithuania out of which no survivors came; Eisenhower's determination to visit the camps so that he could be a witness ensuring that no one could deny this, no one could forget; the Temple of Memory on the ground floor with its candles, the flame of