

International Relations, the Science of Politics, and Human Rights

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Jiang Zemin, former leader of the People's Republic of China, once asserted, "The theory of relativity worked out by Mr. Einstein, which is in the domain of natural science, can also be applied to the political field. Both democracy and human rights are both relative concepts, and not absolute and general."

Jiang's claim strikes at the heart of the concept of *universal* human rights. Fortunately, his comparison with natural science is misplaced. There is a scientific approach to the study of politics, and therefore of human rights. It cannot provide uncertainty about human rights, but it can advance consensus, measure compliance with existing standards, help identify factors associated with respect for and violations of human rights, and perhaps most importantly combat the pernicious side of moral relativism on the question of universality.

Today, each of the three major political science associations—the American Political Science Association (APSA), the International Studies Association, and the International Political Science Association—has a separate section devoted to the study of human rights. There were 17 full panels devoted to human rights at the 2008 meeting of the APSA, plus 15 more panels organized by other sections.

Naturally, the study of human rights tends to attract those political scientists who have a normative commitment to the project. But the interest is not new. Political scientists were debating, defining, and measuring human rights long before they formed special organizations to formally advance this project. However, there is little

doubt that the process of globalization has accelerated interest in the subfields of comparative and international relations, including significant progress in developing tools to measure compliance with human rights standards.

The study of human rights within the field of International Relations has paralleled the internationalization of political science as a discipline. David Forsyth, author of the most authoritative text on the subject, writes:

Even if human rights are thought to be inalienable, a moral attribute of persons that the state cannot contravene, rights still have to be identified—that is, constructed—by human beings and codified in the legal system. While human rights have a long history in theory and even in spasmodic practice, it was the American and French revolutions of the eighteenth century that sought to create national politics based on broadly shared human rights. Despite the rhetoric of universality, however, human rights remained essentially a national matter, to be accepted or not, until 1945 when they were recognized in global international law.

This development gave rise to considerable attention to theorizing the relationship between human rights and, respectively, peace and democracy. The connection with democracy may seem obvious, but in recent years a number of theorists have advanced the notion of “illiberal democracy.” That is, in the post-Cold War era a number of regimes have emerged in which the national leader has been chosen through reasonably clean balloting but other characteristics of democracy, notably rule of law and constitutional constraints on central power, are lacking.

Rather than asserting that “illiberal democracy” is a different *kind* of democracy, the clear implication is that “illiberal” really means “not.”

International relations (IR) specialists identify human rights with the liberal tradition established by the theories of Immanuel Kant. Kant, of course, asserted the notion of a “categorical imperative” based on the principle of reciprocity. Rights are discernable by positive deduction from the axiom, “Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.” The premise that all human beings possess the rationality to recognize the validity of this principle opens the possibility of codifying such universal law—a view certainly at variance with Jiang’s assertion.

However, liberals do not in any way have the field to themselves. For most of the violent twentieth century, IR has been dominated by the “realist” tradition. Realists are wary of compromising the principle of sovereignty in favor of human rights. They fear that those who believe they have found universal moral laws of any kind are more likely to act as crusaders, leading us to war rather than peace. Certainly the attempts by the Bush administration *ex-post facto* to justify the invasion of Iraq as a humanitarian intervention to eliminate a cruel dictator supports the realist claim.

Probably the most influential theorist, besides Kant, on the study of human rights within the Anglo-American tradition is John Locke. Locke’s *Second Treatise* tries to root rights in the notion of a pre-political “state of nature,” a condition in which we imagine how as-yet stateless individuals would create political authority. More importantly for the study of human rights, Locke argues that we can also

identify what kind of authority has been withheld from the state, and in this area we find “rights” that cannot be alienated.

C.B. MacPherson, the Canadian philosopher, shows in *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism* that the problem with Locke’s state of nature is that by nature human beings, as the Greeks understood, are social animals. Using the fiction of fully formed human existing in a stateless society, Locke was able to establish the idea that property rights were among those natural rights retained by individuals once they entered into political society. As long as we political scientists operate within the constraints of this liberal assumption, the more materially substantial human rights (housing, nutrition, employment, etc.) elaborated in the U.N. Universal Declaration of Human Rights are likely to be relegated to secondary status in the comparative and IR subfields.

Locke’s methodological individualism can also be criticized on grounds that it is firmly rooted in Western values. Some Asian leaders assert that traditions, such as Confucianism, stress mutual obligation rather than rights. This narrow philosophical mindedness, of course, ultimately underlies criticism outside of the West of the notion of *universal* human rights.

So, are human rights “relative,” as Jiang asserts? The danger here is that this claim provides an excuse for violating those rights about which there is an overwhelming consensus across cultures. Furthermore, Jiang ignores the vigorous debate about the relationship between Asian culture and human rights. The Confucian emphasis on mutual obligations among persons (n.b., not “individuals”) need not contradict the Western tradition. In fact, in many ways the Confucian image of

society corresponds more closely to that held in Ancient Greece, the cradle of Western civilization.

Ultimately, as Forsythe contends, the work of specifying human rights is one of construction, not identification. It is to this project that political science and international relations can potentially make its greatest contributions.