

Hour of Need

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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?

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

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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

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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