



IN FOCUS

ANTHROPOLOGY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

"[C]ompeting and divergent perspectives on anthropology and human rights make this one of the areas of anthropology that is ripe for renewed attention, especially in light of the underlying stakes involved," wrote Mark Goodale, assistant professor of conflict analysis and anthropology at George Mason University, in his introduction to the AN series on *Anthropology and Human Rights* he guest edits. In this AN series spanning from April until October 2006, people from a range of different backgrounds and perspectives respond to one of four questions: Do anthropologists have anything useful or relevant to say about human rights? (April)

Should anthropologists try and answer whether human rights are universal? (May) Is the spread of human rights discourse since the end of the Cold War a form of moral imperialism? (Sept) And, do anthropologists have an ethical obligation to promote human rights? (Oct)

Is the Spread of Human Rights Discourse Since the End of the Cold War a Form of Moral Imperialism?

Human Rights and Moral Imperialism

A Double-Edged Story

LAURA NADER
UC BERKELEY

Increasingly anthropologists are writing about human rights from a critical perspective, documenting how human rights organizations may operate as facilitators of Western hegemony. Those who have written are troubling the waters. On the one hand, that human beings have rights to air, water and life because they are human seems obvious. On the other, interventions by human rights activists or truth commissions can and do have hurtful consequences. In other words, there is a double edge to the human rights story.



Laura Nader

gies and cultures. Yet in the commission there were no representatives from the indigenous peoples of the world, from the so-called Third World, from the peoples of Islam, and little input from women in spite of Roosevelt's presence.

With all due respect for her one world, Roosevelt belonged to an era of women reformers, women who viewed their positions as possible role models for other capable, educated women. They were social welfare workers first—they knew what was best for others. In addition, the movement to create a new international apparatus for human rights promotion was led largely by Americans. The US State Department orchestrated the early drafts and the crucial meetings took place in the US.

The generalities were unassailable: Everyone has a right to life, liberty and security of person; freedom of thought, conscience and religion; no one shall be held in slavery, subjected to torture, subjected to arbitrary arrest, detention or exile. And all but two drafts were written in English. It was definitely a paradigm open to interpretation, especially with the presupposition that international human rights standards are culturally neutral. For these reasons the human rights lens is bound to find violations of human rights that point to deficiencies elsewhere.

From the beginning human rights are something Euro-Americans take to others. Richard Falk, a scholar who has distinguished himself for his lucidity on human rights issues, labels the problem one of normative blindness—a blindness that accompanies a modernization outlook, one that regards premodern cultures as a form of backwardness that needs to be overcome.

Rights of Women

Normative blindness is never more obvious than in Western dealings with the rights of women, elsewhere. For example, the actions and accusations of human rights activists waiting to liberate Islamic women was used as a justification for preemptive war during the Gulf conflict, then the invasion of Afghanistan, then Iraq—to liberate

Comparison Needed

Not long ago a headline in the New York Times noted that 25% of Syrian men beat their wives. At a World Bank conference I noted people reporting that Bolivian men beat their wives. Could this be related to axis-of-evil politics? Comparative figures would reveal that American domestic violence is about the same as Syria—25%.

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Islamic women. Islam and Islamic women are essentialized.

Afghan women are presumably like Iraqi women—both repressed and in need of help from more modern countries. Even ethnographic work has not articulated effectively the differences from place to place—for example, Iraqi women under Saddam Hussein were the most equal in the professions like medicine, law and engineering than any other Arab country, and there were more women in engineering classes in Baghdad University than at UC Berkeley during the same time period. Basically anthropological writings have been case by case—now Saudi Arabia, now Iran, now Morocco, analyzing status regimes. But our work did not compare Islamic realities with American realities.

Perhaps they should appear in the same article along with the observation that assaults by husbands, ex-husbands and lovers cause more injuries to women than motor vehicle accidents, rape and muggings combined.

It's about time that anthropologists used such comparisons to support the public health observation that male-dominated society is a threat to public health *everywhere*. The credibility of a human rights spirit requires that we look at ourselves as well as those others whose plight moves us to reach out while ironically also ensuring that we are blinded. ■

Laura Nader's current work focuses on how central dogmas are made and how they work in law, energy science and anthropology.

COMMENTARY

Normative Blindness

The exercise of power through the categorization of knowledge requires an understanding of how the human rights movement started. The human rights movement had its beginnings at the end of WWII. As chairperson of the UN Human Rights Commission, Eleanor Roosevelt insisted that the declarations had to be acceptable to peoples of all religions, ideolo-