

Seven Theses on Human Rights: (3) Neoliberal Capitalism & Voluntary Imperialism

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Thesis 3: The post-1989 order combines an economic system that generates huge structural inequalities and oppression with a juridico-political ideology promising dignity and equality. This major instability is contributing to its demise.

Why and how did this combination of neoliberal capitalism and



humanitarianism emerge? Capitalism has always moralized the economy and applied a gloss of righteousness to profit-making and unregulated competition precisely because it is so hard to believe. From Adam Smith's 'hidden hand' to the assertion that unrestrained egotism promotes the common good or that beneficial effects 'trickle down' if the rich get even bigger tax breaks, capitalism has consistently tried to claim the moral high ground.¹

Similarly, human rights and their dissemination are not simply the result of the liberal or charitable disposition of the West. The predominantly negative meaning of freedom as the absence of external constraints — a euphemism for keeping state regulation of the economy at a minimum — has dominated the Western conception of human rights and turned them into the perfect companion of neoliberalism. Global moral and civic rules are the necessary companion of the globalization of economic production and consumption, of the completion of world capitalism that follows neoliberal dogmas. Over the last 30 years, we have witnessed, without much comment, the creation of global legal rules regulating the world capitalist economy, including rules on investment, trade, aid, and intellectual property. Robert Cooper has called it the voluntary imperialism of the global economy. "It is operated by an international consortium of financial Institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank ... These institutions ... make demands, which increasingly emphasise good governance. If states wish to benefit, they must open themselves up to the interference of international organisations and foreign states." Cooper concludes that "what is needed then is a new kind of imperialism, one acceptable to a world of human rights and cosmopolitan values."²

The (implicit) promise to the developing world is that the violent or voluntary adoption of the market-led, neoliberal model of good governance and limited rights will inexorably lead to Western economic standards. This is fraudulent. Historically, the Western ability to turn the protection of formal rights into a limited guarantee of material, economic, and social rights was partly based on huge transfers from the colonies to the metropolis. While universal morality militates in favour of reverse flows, Western policies on development aid and Third World debt indicate that this is not politically feasible. Indeed, the successive crises and re-arrangements of neoliberal capitalism lead to dispossession and displacement of family farming by agribusiness, to forced migration and urbanization. These processes expand the number of people without skills, status, or the basics for existence. They become human debris, the waste-life, the bottom billions. This neo-colonial attitude has now been extended from the periphery to the European core. Greece, Portugal, Ireland, and Spain have been subjected to the rigours of the neoliberal “Washington Consensus” of austerity and destruction of the welfare state, despite its failure in the developing world. More than half the young people of Spain and Greece are permanently unemployed and a whole generation is being destroyed. But this *gene-cide*, to coin a term, has not generated a human rights campaign.

As Immanuel Wallerstein put it, “if all humans have equal rights, and all the peoples have equal rights, then we cannot maintain the kind of inegalitarian system that the capitalist world economy has always been and always will be.”³ When the unbridgeability of the gap between the missionary statements on equality and dignity and the bleak reality of obscene inequality becomes apparent, human rights will lead to new and uncontrollable types of tension and conflict. Spanish soldiers met the advancing Napoleonic armies shouting “Down with freedom!” Today people meet the ‘peacekeepers’ of the new world order with cries of “Down with human rights!”

Social and political systems become hegemonic by turning their ideological priorities into universal principles and values. In the new world order, human rights are the perfect candidate for this role. Their core principles, interpreted negatively and economically, promote neoliberal capitalist penetration. Under a different construction, their abstract provisions could subject the inequalities and indignities of late capitalism to withering attack. But this cannot happen as long as they are used by the dominant powers to spread the ‘values’ of an ideology based on the nihilism and insatiability of desire.

Despite differences in content, colonialism and the human rights movement form a continuum, episodes in the same drama, which started with the great discoveries of the new world and is now carried out in the streets of Iraq and Afghanistan: bringing civilization to the barbarians. The claim to spread Reason and Christianity gave western empires their sense of superiority and their universalizing impetus. The urge is still there; the ideas have been redefined but the belief in the universality of our world-view remains as strong as that of the colonialists. There is little difference between imposing reason and good governance and proselytizing for Christianity and human rights. They are both part of the cultural package of the West, aggressive and redemptive at the same time.

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1. Jean-Claude Michéa, *The Realm of Lesser Evil* trans. David Fernbach (Cambridge and Malden: Polity Press, 2009), Chapter 3. [↩](#)
2. Robert Cooper, “The New Liberal Imperialism,” *The Observer* (April 1 2002), 3. [↩](#)
3. Immanuel Wallerstein, “The Insurmountable Contradictions of Liberalism” *Southern Atlantic Quarterly* (1995), 176–7. [↩](#)

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