Review - The Endtimes of Human Rights

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The Endtimes of Human Rights
By: Stephen Hopgood
New York: Cornell University Press, 2013

More than 65 years have passed since the General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in 1948. To this day, the document's purpose is to protect individual human rights to which all human beings are entitled to, regardless of who they are or where they live. However, when seeing how states and individuals from different parts of the world violate these rights, one can question whether international norms and institutions really make a difference in protecting and promoting civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights. In*The Endtimes of Human Rights*, Stephen Hopgood argues that between "human rights," defined as "a non-hegemonic language of resistance" integrating self-styles and local actions (p. 178), and "Human Rights," an international, sacred discourse consisting of "laws, courts, norms, and organizations . . . that claim to speak with singular authority in the name of humanity as a whole" (ix), the international community is "on the verge of the imminent decay of the Global Human Rights Regime" (ix).

Hopgood's first reason for Human Rights' decay is the fact that "the vast superstructure of international human rights law and organization is no longer 'fit for purpose'" (2). Going back to the 19th century, Hopgood argues that the "three branches of the humanist tree we now call humanitarianism, human rights, and international justice" (9) all came from the same roots—from the 19th century European middle class intellectuals, who believed that they had "privileged insight" (11). With inequality and human suffering emerging at the time, these intellectuals saw themselves as "Good Samaritans," having a duty to save their souls by providing humanitarian assistance to "less civilized" societies (11). Hence, Hopgood makes the argument that these intellectual Europeans "elevated [humanism] into a set of social practices and institutions" that was "grounded by a culture of transcendent moral sentiment with strong Christian components" (x).

To illustrate, Hopgood provides two examples which, to this day, are rooted in this sacred metanarrative tradition: the International Committee of the Red Cross's (ICRC) "displacement of Christ's sacrifice in favour of human suffering" (26) and humanitarianism's use of the image of an "abandoned child, the starving child, and the war orphan" as "the passive and innocent victim" on front covers of books and reports (72). By using this sacred metanarrative, he believes that Human Rights has developed two strategies: "*turn your ideology into facts on the ground* [Hopgood's emphasis]" (6) and "place 'why' questions out of bounds" (8). In other words, Hopgood argues that Human Rights discourse uses religious symbols or images of suffering children as a way to create political outcomes, or what he calls "social magic" (7). He believes this is true for two reasons: 1) anyone's child(ren) could become victim to this type of suffering and 2) God is calling His followers to help their brothers and sisters. Unfortunately, he notes, instead of challenging this metanarrative tradition, many construct and institutionalize this "superior power" called Human Rights (8).

The second reason why Hopgood believes that Human Rights is crumbling as a discourse is because "a shift in the distribution of power globally, away from a unipolar American-led system toward a more multi-polar world" (3) is now occurring. To illustrate this shift, Hopgood provides two examples. First, since Human Rights has its own set of codes and conventions which have very little use for the everyday struggles for human rights at the local level, we are

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already seeing developments of East Asian and African human rights emerging; these are challenging the so-called "one-size-fits-all universalism of global Human Rights," which they argue is an outdated model (2). Second, labeling this multi-polar system as "neo-Westphalian," Hopgood sees the rise of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (BRICS) already challenging US world hegemony (2). Although BRICS are not necessarily against international law, Hopgood writes that the "issue is who gets to decide global rules to define legitimate *exceptions* to them" (2). According to him, this neo-Westphalian system "will be more about sovereignty as prerogative than as responsibility" (18), leading to the disappearance of Human Rights, as we know it.

Although *The Endtimes of Human Rights* is a provocative, angry book—acceptable since Hopgood is a former Amnesty International (AI) worker—some issues need to be addressed. First, as political scientists, especially realists, have been skeptical about the advancement and effectiveness of the international human rights regime, Hopgood does not offer anything particularly shocking or novel. Several academic books such as Emilie Hafner-Burton's *Making Human Rights a Reality* (Princeton University Press, 2013) and Jo Becker's *Campaigning for Justice: Human Rights Advocacy in Practice* (Stanford University Press, 2013) have expressed the weaknesses of the concept of human rights, as well as the struggles and challenges of human rights advocates. Second, whether we are entering a "neo-Westphalian" world of multi-polarity is still questionable. Recent actions by the US seem to indicate that the country is modifying international law. Unfortunately, Hopgood fails to directly address the debate on whether US power is, in fact, in decline. Third, Hopgood seems to argue that non-Westerners will simply not buy into the idea of human rights over time because they are "Western." However, examples such as when numerous Chinese individuals demand that public authorities respect their human rights provide a different account. Even if American and European power in Human Rights declines as we enter a neo-Westphalian system, non-Westerners will certainly not abandon all hope about Human Rights.

Overall, the book does make the reader think quite hard about the past, the present, and the future. Hence, it is not suited for an introductory but rather for a seminar class. Nevertheless, those who are familiar with human rights, humanitarian aid, and/or the international system will find this book worth the read and may only hope that Hopgood's arguments and examples are not completely right.

About the author:

Daniel Golebiewski is a PhD student in Political Science at the Graduate Center-City University of New York (CUNY) and the Assistant to the Director for the Center for International Human Rights at John Jay College of Criminal Justice (CUNY). He is also a Graduate Assistant at the Ralph Bunche Institute for International Studies at the Graduate Center. Daniel holds a MA in Human Rights Studies from Columbia University-Graduate School of Arts and Sciences and a BA in Political Science, with minors in English and History, from John Jay College of Criminal Justice (CUNY). For additional information, please visit his website.