Do Human Rights Protect or Threaten Security?

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When Ken Booth described security as equating to emancipation, he was challenging orthodox security studies by advocating for the individual, rather than the state, to be the referent object of security and for human flourishing, rather than militarisation, to inspire security measures.[1] Booth, a leading academic within the Welsh School of thought, was inspired by Gramsci and Frankfurt School scholars' works and advocated for human issues, including human rights, to be included in the security agenda.[2] Taking form in the wake of the watershed collapse of the Soviet Union, the subsequent "victory" of capitalism, and establishing the United States as a hegemon in the new, unipolar world order, the Welsh School laid the foundations for the most salient alternative discourse on security. Broadly speaking, the Welsh School is concerned with the protection of all peoples from all forms of violence, both outside and within the state, to ensure all peoples realize their human dignity in line with the internationally recognized standards of human rights.[3] In 1994, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) engaged with the people-centred focus of critical security studies and developed the denomination of "Human Security". As auspicious as Human Security seems, it has not been without critique. Introducing human rights discourse into security measures has had a particular influence on debates concerning the Responsibility to Protect (R2P), international refugee laws, and anti-terrorism measures.[4] Moreover, Mgbeoji has observed that the application of human security measures, particularly reacting to human rights violations, buttresses and entrenches Western hegemony and liberal cultural imperialism, thus floundering its ambition to secure human flourishing.[5]

This essay also problematizes "universal" human rights. Particularly, this essay critiques the deleterious anthropocentrism intrinsic in human rights norms for prohibiting the actualization of Booth's vision of total human emancipation. Also inspired by the Frankfurt School,this essay uses a post-humanist lens to argue that true human emancipation necessarily involves dismantling the deeply entrenched belief in humanity's distinction from nature. It is this separation from, and ostensible domination over, nature from which other contemporary systems of domination, hierarchy, and exploitation begat. After briefly explaining what posthumanism means, this essay applies a post-humanist lens to both the theory and the practice of human rights within security measures to ultimately argue that universal human rights discourse prohibits the 'freeing people, as individuals and collectives, from contingent and structural oppressions' and thus undermines true security and emancipation.[6]

The Creation of (Hu)Man

Human rights are inalienable rights entitled to every human simply because of their humanity. The official mandate for a global, minimum standard of human rights is formulated in The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). For Booth, as with other critical security theorists, human rights are central to security because they structurally and judicially provide protection for the people forsaken by statist power structures.[7] Simply, it epitomizes Booth's belief that 'nobody is free until everyone is free'.[8] However, whilst having an egalitarian and emancipatory semblance, the effectiveness of enacting universal human rights, or as Douzan pithily captures, rights to which every human being, from the "wretched of the earth" to the 'pleasure-seekers and playboys of the Western world', are inalienably and individually entitled, is questionable.[9] Most obviously, the inequality inherent to, and exacerbated by, neoliberal capitalism undermines the ability of all humans to claim and protect their human rights. Those with wealth can afford a phalanx of judges to protect their rights; those without rely upon being acknowledged and recognized as "human" and thus worthy of human rights.[10] Building on this, post-structuralists like Judith Butler, leaning on decolonial and Indigenous pieces of knowledge, have engaged with alternative ontologies that consider "humanness" as being a

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boundless, enigmatic, multidimensional, and context-specific — a concept completely effaced from human rights discourse.[11] Human rights, therefore, only exist in a meaningful sense when a person has power, collective, cultural, or financial, to ensure their realization. Fundamentally, the faults of UDHR lie in its monolithic predetermination of what it means to be human and its presupposition that to be human is to be an abstraction from non-humans. Ultimately, the UDHR obfuscates the plurality of humanness and prohibits diversity in epistemology, worldview, and nature, all of which are essential to human flourishing, emancipation and, thus, security.

The enduring experience of the COVID-19 pandemic and the ominous threat of climatic disasters sharply focus on humanity's insecurity and vulnerabilities on Earth. Both cases are natural crises that ostensibly threaten the survival of humanity as a whole (albeit experienced unequally because of, for example, the unnatural global (un)distribution of wealth and resources). However, there is also a growing awareness that these crises are catalyzed by the reckless practices systematized in neoliberal racial capitalism. Indeed, Booth recognizes in his theory the unprecedented power of human activity to imperil the biosphere and humanity's own survival. Never before, he argues, have 'we, the collective of global human society, been able to inflict as much decisive damage on each other and on the natural world on which we utterly depend'.[12] This draws into question whether it is humanity or nature that truly dominates, a question that undermines the foundations of Western political thought.[13] In *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Frankfurt School scholars Adorno and Horkheimer argue that the alleged domination of man over nature naturalized in Western political thought is the root of all other oppressive forces, particularly (Western and racialized white) man's domination over other peoples.[14] The rationalization project of the Enlightenment era produced a jurisprudence to purge Europe of the belief in Tera Madre (that we, nature, are part of living Mother Earth) with Terra Nalius (Nature, from which we were separate, is an unfeeling raw material for man's use), institutionalization by Enlightened thinkers such as John Locke, whose labour theory of property obligated man's exploitation of "Terra Nalius".[15] Colonial powers used their restrictive definition of the "Human" to bestow or deny humanity to their colonial subject as an exercise of violent domination. White settler colonialism, the appropriation of sacral lands inhabited by Indigenous Peoples — which continues to this day — and the enslavement and genocide of Indigenous Peoples was justified because the land was not being exploited in the way demanded by Locke's labour theory of property. Achille Mbembe's seminal work, *On the Postcolony,* articulates how the European belief in the natural right of man to exploit nature buttressed colonial brutality by imposing animality upon colonized subjects.[16] The kidnapping and enslavement of African peoples throughout the Atlantic Slave Trade and their subsequent indentured labour on slave plantations was justified because African peoples were dehumanized as animals.[17] This narrative pacified the sadistic treatment of enslaved peoples whose lives, like farm animals, were expendable once they could no longer generate acceptable surplus value.[18] Equally, the pernicious ideology of "civilization" that propelled European colonialism drew from a presupposition that there was only one acceptable way to live as a Human, and that way was the Enlightened European way.[19] What this perversely shows is that the hegemon has the power to imbue or deny a person humanity and thus treat them accordingly. For Adorno and Horkheimer, human emancipation is obtainable only with humanity's reharmonization with nature.[20]

Maldonado-Torres convincingly argues that the UDHR is a continuation of the colonial civilization mission by enforcing Majority World countries to capitulate to Western standards of "humanness" and "development".[21] Correspondingly, Linklater shames Western societies for continuing the perverse practice of imposing an animalistic and dehumanizing lexicon upon non-Western peoples and states to achieve their geopolitical interests.[22] This is evident in the "letting die" of refugees at European borders traduced by mainstream media as "invaders" and "swarms".[23] As state-less individuals, refugees rely upon a nation-state's morality to guarantee their rights, rendering them an instrument of the state.[24] Therefore, the inherent contradiction of UDHR lies in its reliance on a powerful institution to ensure the realization of human rights, thus rendering the voiceless the penurious and most marginalized. Claims of universality are a chimaera for a fundamentally ethnocentric, imperialist means for dominant powers to reify their ideological hegemony and fulfil their power interests whilst restricting the realization of the expansiveness and evolutionary potentialities of human identities.[25]

Mazama explains that the importance of spirituality in Afrocentric knowledges and lifestyles demands protection of sub- or superhuman characters, yet the value of the spiritual world is not recognized as intrinsic to human identity in the UDHR.[26] Accordingly, Mignolo calls for a radical revision of the human rights paradigm that embraces 'pluri-versality as a universal project".[27] This requires breaking away from the parochial UDHR discourse, dismantling

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preconceptions of what it means to be "human", and embracing diversity, cultural sensitivity, and respect, all of which are foundational emancipatory values. By challenging the conception of nature as diametric and subsidiary to humans and instead appreciating that the non-human informs the human experience, human rights must necessarily reflect that all matter, both human and non-human, matters.[28] The next section uses a post-humanist approach to antagonize how the application of a "universal human rights" discourse has limited human emancipation by denying diversity in epistemology, worldview, and nature.

Human Rights as Nature's Rights

The Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine appeared to be a watershed in international peacekeeping and security abilities, not least because it challenges the Westphalian dogma of nation statism in the face of mass atrocities.[29] R2P creates a framework for the integrity of the international community to oppose gross human rights violations outside of their borders by first deciding whether to nullify the sovereignty of a state failing to protect its citizens against gross human rights violations and then how best to protect the citizens against tyranny.[30] However, as with the UDHR, its emancipatory potentialities are undermined by its real-world implications within a moral-power nexus.[31] To justify intervention, the R2P framework requires evidence for a 'reasonable chance of success'.[32] Realistically, this restricts the application of R2P to states with dominant political and military strength. This allows powerful states and corporations to take advantage of the amorphous and ambiguous framework with which to judge gross human rights violations.[33] The pervasive inveigle of realpolitik in R2P doctrine has given R2P a reputation for prioritizing the protection of Western hegemony over human rights by failing to protect, as in the case of Syria, and using R2P with deleterious effects, as in the case of Libya.[34]

Invoking R2P in Libya was sanctioned by the United Nations Security Council when, in 2011, Libyan dictator of forty years, Muammar Gaddafi, prepared to crush the insurrection mounting in Benghazi. At the same time, similar mass atrocities were being committed under the Assad regime in Syria, with mass arbitrary killings of pro-democracy protesters and civilians, yet a mandate for 'civilian protection' in Syria was disregarded.[35] The incontrovertible and inimical inconsistency in the R2P application knowingly jeopardized the lives of Syrian civilians and provided an immediate reason to question the real impetus behind the Libyan case. Moisés Naím cynically points to several critical geopolitical differences between the two states: Syria had supreme military power; Libya had larger oil reserves; and Libya's leader, Gaddafi, was an internationally and nationally marginalized leader.[36] David Rieff observed that NATO's military actions in Libya appeared to be pursuing interests of regime change, and 'the civilian-protection mandate of R2P was its cover'.[37] Over a decade later, it is clear that the intervention failed its mandate to protect human rights. Since the overthrow of Gaddafi, Libya has been entrapped in growing anarchy and instability, with over ten thousand violent deaths and more than thirty thousand civilians displaced, as recorded by Human Rights Watch.[38] Given the international community's purported solicitude for the human rights of the people of Libya in 2011, it is at the very least dubious that the well-being of Libyans receives such little Western concern today. Indeed, the superficial portrayal of R2P in Western media paints the Minority World as the 'heroic saviours', destroying nefarious aberration ruling in the Majority World and restoring the world to peace and prosperity.[39] Accordingly, human rights violations are treated as isolated episodes devoid of any historical lineage, and hence, only the most visible and immediate manifestations of violations receive attention.[40] It obfuscates the complex sequences of historical, intra-related injustices that accumulated into the violation in question, thus ignoring the deleterious impacts of dominant global institutions and states in sustaining and entrenching the geopolitical structures that resulted in gross human rights violations.[41]

In reality, the conflicts and atrocities experienced across post-colonial states are inextricable from enduring European (neo)colonial entanglements and are further augmented by an incessant, US-dominated imperialist present.[42] Yet the asymmetrical power balance inherent in the R2P framework entrenches, rather than challenges, (neo)imperialism. Moreover, the enduring inferiorization of Majority World countries by Minority World countries, through incessant intervention and exploitation, has unfortunately actuated fundamentalism as a means for marginalized and silenced peoples to discover a sense of self and a sense of meaning.[43] By failing to confront the devastating implications of the colonial systems of violence upon the geopolitical and economic security of formerly colonized nations, R2P has proved to exacerbate global insecurity, as evidenced by the perdurable political violence languishing in Libyan society and the rising cases of fundamentalism globally. Therefore, emancipation that frees

everyone from contingent and structural oppressions requires dismantling all colonial and imperial structures of power and welcoming pluralist ways of being.[44]

In recent times, political actors have publicly admitted that as the climate crisis intensifies, cases of human rights violations and human insecurity, including military, food, and health, will augment. Over twenty per cent of global land area is estimated to be degraded.[45] Drastic landscape changes also intensify ethnic and border conflicts, as is the case between Liberia and Sierra Leone.[46] In response, discussions around mitigating climate change have made only liminal appearances on security agendas, with ongoing debates as to whether climatic disasters are intrinsically human rights violations and to what extent we are impelled to protect the human rights of future generations. In all instances, "climate change" is presupposed as a regrettable, outside force attacking humanity by making scarce the key, insentient natural resources, including food, water, and land, essential for human security. For example, the 2011 UN report by former Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, Olivier De Schutter, traced the violent conflicts, political instability, and mass displacements in Syria to the rising cases of droughts across West Asia.[47] Blaming such geopolitical instability and human rights violations on an abstract, ahistorical notion of "nature" from which "the human" is divorced diverts attention away from the human-made causes for these insecurities that can be traced to Enlightenment.[48]

In 2021, the Security Council rejected a draft resolution proposing to integrate climate-related security risks into conflict-prevention strategies. Representatives from Russia and China were among the most vocal in rebuking this rejection, both expounding the West for effacing their historical and present culpability in (re)producing the systems of domination that catalyze climate change and undermine security.[49] The premise of their argument drew attention to what Agamben identified as the racialized biopolitics underpinning human rights discourse. Climate disasters disproportionately impact the Majority World countries, and the Minority World's negligence in confronting its historical culpability jeopardizes human rights and imperils lives. Capitalism's addiction to fossil fuels, over-exploiting land, and mistreating peoples to amass exponential profits sequestered by the one-percent capitalist elite entrench global separation, oppression, and insecurity.[50] The one-percent elite is imbued with the power to manipulate the direction of international discussions on climate insecurity mitigation so as to protect their industry profits.[51] For example, the Big-Agro industry has successfully disseminated mendacious propaganda diverting public awareness from the deadly impact of synthetic nitrogen fertilizers, which are responsible for three-hundred times more greenhouse gas emissions than carbon dioxide.[52] As cynically observed by Horkheimer and Adorno twenty years prior to mass industrial farming, 'reason itself has become a mere instrument of the all-inclusive economic apparatus'.[53]

Challenging corporate and state power, Shiva suggests returning "economics" to its semantic, ecological origin; "economics" is derived from the Greek word "oikos", meaning "home".[54] This replaces the capitalist logic of economic growth, exploitation, degradation, and corporate greed with ecological prosperity and rejuvenation by recognizing that the security of humanity is endogenous to the security of Earth. People-centred security must necessarily be nature-centred, and human rights are nature's rights. Recognizing this, in 2008, Ecuador became the first nation to constitutionally recognize the rights of "Pachamama", who is Mother Earth, plants, animals, and Earthly elements.[55] Similarly, the mountain State of Bhutan has replaced the capitalist growth measures, Gross National Product (GNP), with Gross National Happiness, whereby the happiness and well-being of Bhutanese people, rather than monetary accumulation, guides their economic policies.[56] Most importantly, this opens up the possibilities for global economic and epistemological democracies — or respect for the pluralism of worldviews — because measures of "happiness" are culturally, geographically, temporally, and personally unique. This necessitates respect and responsibility for the diversity of being and knowing and respect and protection of biodiversity; or, more simply, it fosters true emancipation through humanity's reharmonization with nature.

Human rights discourse is premised upon the deleterious assumption that humans are separate from and supreme to nature. This assumption was institutionalized at a time dominated by white supremacy and was used within the juggernaut of "civilization" to commit the egregious acts of violence of enslavement and colonialism, which destroyed many lives, cultures, knowledges, and ways of being. The application of the R2P doctrine revealed its inherent inability to rid the world of mass atrocities sustainably. As demonstrated with the Libyan case, invoking R2P propelled Libyan society into enduring instability, rendering it close to a failed state and simply served to legitimize

Western Imperialism. Moreover, persistent climate disasters experienced disproportionately by people in the Majority World and caused by the destructive over-exploitation of nature by the Minority World are a result of the artificially constructed hierarchy between humans and nature and are an ominous threat to humanity's survival. By embedding this separation, human rights discourse operates within these systems of oppression. Therefore, human rights must be reconceptualized to incorporate all of nature, without whom we could not live. Only through reharmonizing human rights with nature rights can humanity's emancipation be realized.

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