

What do human rights do? An anthropological enquiry.

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## What Do Human Rights Do? An Anthropological Enquiry

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

### What Do Human Rights Do? An Anthropological Enquiry

*Talal Asad (bio)*

A false start

I begin with a banal question. In the torrent of reporting on human rights

in recent years far more attention is given to human rights violations in the non-Western world than in Euro-America. How should we explain this imbalance?

It is commonly asserted that it reflects the hypocrisy of the Western powers. Thus Daniel Singer, writing in *The Nation* weekly about reactions in Europe to the NATO war against Serbia, observes: “The left is bewildered and divided because it is struck by the horrors of the war and by its own impotence. The antiwar movement is relatively weak because it has no certitudes to offer. It must condemn Milosevic the purger and the NATO bombers, while the advocates of war claim to be the knights in shining armor. They don the mantle of champions of the Rights of Man, while the antiwar movement points out that you can’t have universal laws based on double standards, one for Kosovars and another for Rwandans, Kurds and Palestinians. Indeed, one role of the peace movement is to reveal the real issues beneath the hypocritical smokescreen.”<sup>[1]</sup>

The tone of cynicism also emerges in an article in *The Christian Science Monitor* newspaper on the recent UN Human Rights Commission meeting in Geneva: “to the frustration of many delegates to the United Nations Human Rights Commission, the behind-the-scenes reality of negotiations often overlooks human rights. Analysts bemoan the fact that economics and political strategy tend to take precedence — especially in the cases of China and Russia. ‘This is not an august body of world harmony. This is political from beginning to end,’ says one European Union official of the six-week convention. For example, the New York-based Human Rights Watch is lobbying various Western governments to introduce a resolution against Moscow for alleged war-time abuses in Chechnya. But the United States and its European allies have been slow to take action.... [M]any activists feel that members have already made up their minds against angering Russia, which holds a permanent seat on the UN Security Council. ‘There is absolutely no doubt whatsoever that the extent and scale of human rights violations in Chechnya deserve UN condemnation,’ says Adam Berry at the Center for Peace-making and

Community Development, which operates in and around the breakaway republic. ‘But will any country dare to say so at the Human Rights Commission?’” The article ends by stating that the overwhelming majority of countries being condemned for violations belong to the third world simply because they are the countries in which Western powers have neither economic nor strategic interests.[2]

However, if our primary concern is to understand what human rights *do* in the world — what they do as legal rules deployed by sovereign states and as moralizing discourses produced by individuals — then I think this kind of talk about Western hypocrisy isn’t useful. Instead we should look at the variable functions of the nation state, the shifting structures of international power, and the moral languages in which injustice is identified and its elimination advocated. This is what I shall try to do, tentatively, in what follows. But because champions of human rights have strong emotions invested in their point of view, I must begin by clearly warning the reader that what may appear to be a criticism of the very idea of universal values is not so at all but simply an attempt to describe something of what it means to apply universal values in the world today, and to enquire briefly into some of their specifically Christian roots.

## Beginning again

Human rights are now universal in the sense that virtually all states have formally endorsed them and citizens in many countries as well as organizations like Human Rights Watch invoke them. In this section I want to talk a little about human rights violations. However, I want to consider not why and where they happen but rather why and in what circumstances they *don’t* happen. Consider the following example from the domain of military strategy.

In the course of the UN intervention into Somalia...



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