**Human rights**

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International Human Rights Day is December 10. On that day in 1948 the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) was promulgated as the first in a series of covenants, treaties, and legal interpretations that would make up the post-war human rights framework.

However, the history of struggle that produced the UDHR, beginning with the 1945 convention in San Francisco that created the United Nations, is one that can only be characterized as contentious. It is not possible to cover all of that history here. However, it is important that the historiography of Black activism that saw Black activists as central players in UN processes and debates between 1945 and 1951 is well known. Suffice to say that the contentious ideological character around the concept of human rights is still being played out today.

The understanding of what constituted human rights mirrored the post-war ideological polarization that started to reemerge between the Soviet Union and the U.S. and its allies. Human rights, according to the US and Western European powers, were civil and political with economic, social, and cultural rights (ESCR) – like the right to healthcare, housing, food, education, leisure, and the practice of one’s language and culture – being merely aspirational. Consequently, the breakdown between the two approaches was between the West and civil and political rights grounded in the individual, and the East that championed collective ESCR’s.

Operating from the narrow perspective that marginalizes ESCR’s, but champions political rights, US president Joe Biden is exploiting human rights day to advance the obscene notion that the U.S. and by extension the colonial states of Western Europe are somehow the defenders of ‘human rights’.

The idea that Western colonial/capitalist states were defenders of human rights struck many in the colonized South as either delusional or an affirmation that in the eyes of the West they were not human. For the colonized and racialised who were burned alive, tortured, and murdered by these champions of human rights, it was understood that whatever human rights were supposed to be they did not include the racialised and colonized peoples of the world.

Yet, the fiction that Western societies were committed to human rights persisted in the colonial metropoles. Today however, after the forty-year onslaught of the neoliberal counterrevolution that begin in the global South in 1973 before moving on to Northern economies, the brutal contradictions of capitalist accumulation meant that the capitalist bribe offered to workers in the North during the post-war years until the 1970s, was withdrawn.

The global economic crisis of neoliberal capitalism exacerbated by the Covid pandemic exposed the ethical, moral, and political contradictions of the liberal human rights framework. The massive economic displacements with hunger, unemployment and unnecessary deaths that occurred among the population the United States, with a disproportionate rate of sickness and hospitalization among non-white workers and the poor in the US, was never condemned as violations of human rights.

Why? Even though the liberal human rights framework gives a begrudging acknowledgement to ESCRs in its founding documents, in practice liberal capitalist states have been uneven in providing ESCR protections. The US, however, has been the most successful in separating the idea of fundamental ESCRs – like the right to health, food, housing, education, a means to subsist at an acceptable level of material culture, leisure, and real, life-long social security – from democratic discourse on what constitutes the responsibility of the state and the interests and rights the state should uphold in order to be considered legitimate.

Therefore, similar to Obama’s assertion that a war is only a war when US military personnel die, US policymakers, the press and consequently, the public do not apply a human rights lens to state and private capitalist policies.

Excerpted: ‘Countering Liberal Human Rights with the Black Radical Human Rights Framework’.

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