Neoliberalism and Human Rights

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Egalitarian modes of political argument, which flourished in the first half of the twentieth century, lost traction in the 1970s and 1980s. In those decades, according to Samuel Moyn, they were overtaken by an odd couple: “neoliberalism,” or market-oriented economic policy, and human rights, which, he thinks, embraced a politically libertarian view along with a sometimes-vacillating commitment to meeting basic needs.

The story of the rise of neoliberalism is familiar. Social democracy (in Europe) and softer forms of managerial liberalism (in the United States) were blamed for economic stagnation and social decay in the 1970s. In the same decade, the limits of socialist central planning in the eastern bloc and developing countries became impossible to ignore. In the 1990s, this style of economic organization collapsed nearly everywhere. It was inefficient and unpopular. Development success stories in poor countries that resisted the lure of socialism or abandoned it and adopted market reforms, culminating in the astonishing transformation of China, further enhanced the prestige of economic liberalism.

The less familiar part of the story is the role of human rights. In the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union spewed forth propaganda in which they presented idealized versions of their core political commitments. The United States stood for freedom and democracy (and religious piety), the Soviet Union for equality and solidarity. Western Europe took the middle road of social democracy.

While many people found (and continue to find) egalitarian ideals appealing, the debate in the 1970s and 1980s ultimately turned on political and civil rights. It is not hard to see why. The European countries and even the United States were welfare states, with progressive taxation and subsidies for the middle and working class as well as protections for the poor. An egalitarian could make her peace with these countries even if they fell short of perfect distributational fairness. The Soviet Union and its unhappy satellites were dictatorships. A kind of economic equality prevailed but solidarity (and consumer
goods) were in short supply. By the 1970s, this system enjoyed few defenders.

The human rights movement in the west attracted cosmopolitan reformers. Heirs to the religiously inspired international political movements of the previous century, these activists sought to end abuses around the world. In the east and south, dissidents who focused inwardly on reforming their own governments were reclassified as human rights activists, and drew sustenance from the international movement. Led by organizations like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, the international human rights movement was initially oriented toward political repression, finding common cause with the dissidents behind the iron curtain and victims of repression elsewhere. But the movement diversified, along with the human rights treaty obligations that it championed, and could best be described, for all the disagreement among its members over priorities and even goals, as an effort to export welfare-state liberalism around the world.

The movement—or at least, its most important and visible organizations and leaders—did not promote socialism, or central planning, or full-blown egalitarianism of the sort that could be achieved by high tax rates and generous transfers, or government control of capital and wages. At least not explicitly—one might wonder how the vast range of economic and political protections could be supplied without high tax rates and government involvement in the economy, on the model of Sweden. Socialism withdrew to a handful of miserable outposts. Cuba and North Korea persisted with their socialist ideals as well as central planning long after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Left-wing populists like Hugo Chávez came to power, or maintained power, based on redistributive programs. One suspects that these and other examples reinforced rather than undermined the growing neoliberal consensus.

Yet neoliberalism was headed for its own fall. The financial crisis of 2008 and the global recession reminded people of the risks and costs of capitalism. The receding credit bubble exposed a neoliberal legacy of low growth and rising inequality in the west. The immense gains to the rest of the world—including China, India, and other developing countries—was not felt as compensation by those left behind in the rich countries. Instead, it stoked right-wing populist rage against foreigners, and a backlash against international trade and migration.

But what does this have to do with human rights? A fringe view blames the human rights movement for the rise of neoliberalism, and the growth of inequality within countries. (Across countries, and in aggregate, inequality has fallen, an inconvenient fact for this view.) Moyn disagrees, but the precise nature of his claim is unclear. He makes much of the fact that the rise of human rights and neoliberalism was temporally correlated. This is hardly a coincidence. With the collapse of socialism, the market economy seemed like the only game in town. Chastened reformers on the left were forced to limit their ambitions. Welfare-state liberal democracy emerged as victor in the west, with the human rights movement and the World Bank playing the evangelists to the rest of the world.

Yet Moyn wants to make a larger point—or seems to. He implies that the human rights movement was tainted by its association with neoliberalism. But the human rights movement was not based on or inspired by neoliberalism; it was merely the residue of left reformist thinking once socialism died. Moyn offers no evidence that a human rights movement devoted to egalitarianism would have been able to stop the neoliberal juggernaut, and if there was no realistic alternative, why a taint? In the wake of Soviet-style socialism, which firmly contradicted the suggestion that once economic equality was put into place, political freedom would follow in the natural course of things, the abandonment
of Socialist International-style methods of advancing equality seemed quite reasonable or at least politically necessary if any good at all was to be done.

Moyn thinks that political and civil rights cannot be sustained in the long term without equality as well. He gestures at an argument that, by ignoring equality, neoliberalism and human rights are responsible for today’s populist backlash. But the populist backlash is predominantly right-wing, not left-wing. If neoliberals are to be blamed for populism, then we should blame their cosmopolitanism, not the plutocratic effects of their policies, and it would follow that this appealing cosmopolitanism was also human rights advocates’ original sin. But it’s not clear how seriously Moyn intends this argument.

Like in his earlier book on human rights, Moyn’s preoccupation seems less with uncovering new facts in the archival records than with influencing moral attitudes toward the human rights movement, which has seen itself in triumphal terms. Moyn sees it in elegiac or even tragic terms. If any non-egalitarian social order is morally indefensible, as Moyn seems to think, the human rights movement picked the wrong goal even though it could never have achieved the right one.

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