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BRILL

Sociology, Human Rights, and the World Social Forum

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In recent years, academics have begun to grapple with the pervasiveness of “rights talk” on a global scale – a phenomenon documented by journalists, grassroots activists, NGO representatives, and UN officials. With the restructuring of the interstate system following the Cold War, the expansion of the European Union, a series of financial crises across the global economy, and a dramatic shift among Latin American governments, social scientists have produced a large volume of research on transnational norms,¹ cosmopolitan democracy,² and global governance.³ Rooted in the fields of international relations, government, and law, these interventions share an interest in altering the world’s economic, political, and legal architecture. More precisely, they aspire to influence debates among elite policymakers, think tanks, and UN officials not only on the meaning of such terms as human rights and democracy, but also on the future of such inter-governmental organizations (IGOs) as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank (WB), the World Trade Organization (WTO), and the UN itself. In effect, the intertwined debates on transnational norms, cosmopolitanism, and global governance have supplanted the debate on development. In light of changing global conditions, these debates have caught the attention of sociologists.

¹) Brysk 2002; Khagram, Riker, and Sikkink 2002.

²) Archibugi 2003; Held 2004.

³) Patomaki and Teivainen 2004; Fabian Globalization Group 2005.

Why were sociologists delayed in studying human rights? In examining this question, Turner points to the contradictory legacies of positivism (manifested in the rejection of normative judgments) and cultural relativism (manifested in the rejection of universal values).⁴ Notwithstanding their fierce opposition to one another, positivism and cultural relativism share an aversion to the doctrine of human rights. Whereas positivism affirms value-neutrality in sociology, cultural relativism accepts the presence of values in the sociological enterprise but rejects the universalism of the Enlightenment. The spirit of relativism was intensified by the major currents in social theory – each of which modified or problematized the grand narrative of human emancipation. Consequently, the shift from a positivist to a relativist ethos failed to open a space for the sociological analysis of human rights.

Nevertheless, the transition from positivism to cultural relativism reveals an important paradox. Amidst the consolidation of US hegemony in the late 1940s and early 1950s, the push for positivist sociology coincided with the creation of the IMF, the WB, and the UN – the institutional pillars of a development and human rights regime. On the one hand, positivism – in the form of modernization theory – inspired a series of development projects across the Third World. Modernization theorists upheld the industrialization of Western Europe and the US as a model for development in poor countries. On the other hand, the discourse of human rights – codified as a universal norm – legitimized the security, peacemaking, state-building, and poverty-alleviation functions of the UN. As a consequence, the supposedly *value-neutral* concept of development and the supposedly *universal* doctrine of human rights reinforced one another for more than two decades. In fact, owing to its initial linkage to the WB and its embeddedness in the milieu of developmentalism, the UN came to conceptualize development as a *right*. Implying a range of social entitlements – and by extension a number of institutions to bring such entitlements to fruition – the “right to development” pointed beyond WB-sponsored projects. Though imperceptible during the postwar reconstruction, the tension between the WB and UN visions of development eventually produced a rift between the two institutions.

In due course, the remarkable unevenness of development in Africa, Asia, and Latin America attracted the attention of scholars. Amidst the first

⁴ Turner 2006, pp. 5–9.

crisis of US hegemony in the late 1960s and early 1970s, dependency theorists and world-systems analysts criticized the scientism, determinism, and Eurocentrism of modernization theory. In effect, they aimed to discredit the idea that all societies must follow the same path from tradition to modernity. Buoyed by the growth of Third Worldism in the UN system – a tendency that culminated in the Declaration for the Establishment of a New International Economic Order (NIEO) in 1974 – these academic assaults amplified skepticism not only about developmentalism, but also about the doctrine of human rights. If developmentalism and rights discourse were linked to US hegemony, how could they serve the interests of the Third World? While the myth of development had been invoked to legitimize the top-down transformation of non-Western societies, the doctrine of human rights had been mobilized to justify US interventions in the Third World.

Though confined to the domains of development sociology, political economy, and historical sociology, the dependency/world-systems critique of developmentalism eventually converged with Marxist, feminist, post-structuralist, and post-colonial critiques of such Enlightenment values as “freedom,” “equality,” and “democracy.” While Marxism and feminism emphasized the exclusion of workers and women from full participation in democracy, post-structuralism and post-colonialism undermined the *foundation* of the Enlightenment project of human emancipation. Since the influence of these theoretical frameworks remains significant in the current period, sociologists have been forced to work harder in *recuperating* the discourse of rights. More precisely, they have begun to refashion rights discourse not only to meet the objections of critical social theory, but also to compensate for a series of historical exclusions.

A number of factors – including a proliferation of movement-NGO coalitions advocating equality, justice, and direct democracy – have prompted sociologists to turn their attention to the rights claims of impoverished, exploited, and marginalized populations across the globe. The common denominator among movements of indigenous peoples, peasants, workers, women, environmentalists, and anti-corporate activists can be found in the language of human rights. Rights discourse serves as a master frame insofar as it links diverse movements to one another (without denying them autonomy). In light of ongoing debates among movements, UN agencies, NGOs, and scholars on the scope of human rights legislation, the rights frame proves malleable.

Based on the slogan of the French Revolution – “Liberty, Equality, Fraternity!” – the conventional classification of “generations of rights” illustrates the evolution of rights talk from the postwar period through the age of globalization. First-generation rights pertaining to individual liberty and security were proclaimed in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the 1976 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). Though sketched in the UDHR, such second-generation rights as the entitlement to housing, healthcare, employment, and social security were elaborated in the 1976 International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). Finally, such third-generation rights as the entitlement to natural resources, a clean environment, cultural heritage, and communication have been advanced in the 1993 Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action, a number of declarations, and a series of publications by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). With a view to actualizing second and third-generation rights, UNESCO has been instrumental in promoting collaboration among scholars and NGO representatives. In the process, UNESCO has given credence to the idea that second and third-generation rights can be mobilized to challenge neoliberalism. This signifies a major breakthrough.

The aforementioned UN documents serve as signposts not only of the growing rift between the UN and the WB, but also of intensified interactions among UN agencies (especially UNESCO), NGOs (especially Amnesty International), and social movements (especially those operating in conjunction with the WSF). To the end of situating the origin of the rights revolution in the global South, I have coined the term “movement-NGO-UN nexus” to designate the sphere in which different organizational actors *collaborate* and *compete* with one another in defining rights agendas. In effect, pushes from “below” and “above” have created a force field of movements, NGOs, and UN agencies – a political opportunity structure founded on the highly contested discourse of rights. Accordingly, I argue that the movement-NGO-UN nexus constitutes an important topic for the sociology of human rights.

Sociology of Human Rights

How are sociologists contributing to the analysis of human rights? At present, it is possible to demarcate two tendencies in the sociology of human

rights. Grounded in the sociology of law, the first approach explores the social conditions under which human rights legislation is drafted, interpreted, enforced, and violated.⁵ In conceptualizing “rights as practices that are required, prohibited, or otherwise regulated within the context of relations governed by law”,⁶ the legal approach elucidates how rights *circulate* among a range of social actors – including IGOs, nation-states, communities, and individuals. More precisely, this approach examines how the conferral of rights by IGOs and nation-states *empowers* communities and individuals to act. In referring to human rights legislation or UN declarations, communities and individuals legitimize their rights claims. Though oriented toward the scrupulous analysis of how rights circulate among different actors, the legal approach does not preclude normative judgments on the global governance system or neoliberal policies.

Grounded in the initiative for public sociology in the American Sociological Association (ASA), the second approach builds advocacy of human rights into sociological research, teaching, and service.⁷ Proponents of the public sociology approach point to an irony that marks the discipline. Though trained to analyze inequalities of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation, sociologists have been reluctant to enter debates on *equality*. Though skilled in explaining an array of injustices, sociologists have been disinclined to reflect on the meaning of *justice*. Although the hesitance of sociologists to intervene in the name of equality and justice stems from the competing traditions of positivism (dominant from the late 1940s through the early 1970s) and relativism (dominant from the early 1970s through the present day), the initiative for public sociology has created a space for scholar-activism. Recent meetings of the ASA and the Society for the Study of Social Problems testify to growing solidarity with popular forces seeking more expansive rights and deeper participation in democracy.

Building on the sociology of law and public sociology currents, I propose a *post-development* perspective on the study of human rights. Grounded in the literature on post-development,⁸ this approach pursues two objectives. First, it extricates rights discourse from the tradition of developmentalism. Though routinely counterposed to the neoliberal policies of the IMF, WB, and WTO, the second and third-generation rights demanded

⁵) Sjoberg, Gill, and Williams 2001; Hajjar 2005; Levy and Sznajder 2006.

⁶) Hajjar 2006: 207.

⁷) Blau and Moncada 2005, 2006; Blau and Iyall Smith 2006; Turner 2006.

⁸) Sachs 1992; Rahnama and Bawtree 1997.

by grassroots groups and legitimized by sympathetic NGOs and UN agencies cannot be equated with a vision of returning to developmentalism. Phrased differently, there is no reason to assume that the solution to poverty, inequality, and environmental degradation comes in the form of “development” – a notion that implies the top-down transformation of society in accordance with a rigid model. Second, the post-development approach offers a materialist analysis of how movements, NGOs, and UN agencies interact with one another in operationalizing second and third-generation rights.

The post-development approach highlights three aspects of the movement-NGO-UN nexus. First, movements have made themselves more attractive to NGO sponsors by articulating their demands in the language of human rights and embracing non-violent tactics of resistance.⁹ Second, NGOs have channeled resources into promising movements, in exchange for influence on objectives, strategies, and tactics.¹⁰ Third, UN agencies have provided intellectual fodder and material support for NGOs. Amidst a growing tendency to separate human rights from development, the movement-NGO-UN nexus has provided the context for the emergence and evolution of the WSF. Owing to its status as the largest arena for justice activists, the WSF has become the most prominent player in the movement-NGO-UN nexus. Moreover, the progress of the WSF has promoted cross-pollination between development sociologists and social movement scholars.

Post-development and the WSF

With the emergence of the Zapatista insurrection in 1994, the WSF in 2001, and a series of popular eruptions in Latin America, development scholars have shown a remarkable willingness not only to reflect on the origins, evolution, and possible future of their field, but also to interrogate the foundational concept of development itself.¹¹ If development researchers manifest a high degree of reflexivity – attentiveness to how theoretical constructs facilitate and constrain social scientific discoveries – it is because they recognize not only that development theory remains plagued by

⁹⁾ Bob 2005.

¹⁰⁾ Bob 2005.

¹¹⁾ Peet and Hartwick 1999; Desai and Potter 2002.

semantic ambiguities (and contested interpretations), but also that the problems of poverty, inequality, exclusion, and environmental degradation in the global South remain paramount in the current period.¹² In targeting these problems, subaltern groups have made an array of claims to second and third-generation rights.

While it is true that the Truman administration's fateful decision to articulate its reconstruction plans in the language of development enabled both the discovery of "underdevelopment" in the non-Western world and the creation of an academic field to analyze the phenomenon,¹³ it is also true that the newly minted concept of development found a receptive audience among reformers in Latin America, the Caribbean, Africa, and Asia. For example, in the late 1940s and early 1950s, the Economic Commission for Latin America facilitated the spread of developmentalism by explaining the structural imbalance between the industrialized countries of the core and the agricultural countries of the periphery¹⁴ – a discovery that would serve not only to inspire the policy of import-substitution industrialization, but also to foreshadow the *critiques* of development offered by dependency theory in the late 1960s and world-systems analysis in the early 1970s.

For thoroughly comprehensible reasons, the decline of developmentalism in both theory and practice has given rise to innumerable polemics on capitalism, modernity, the "rise of the West," and the logic of US hegemony. For the sake of clarity, it makes sense to disentangle the three most common uses of the concept: first, development as the teleological unfolding of human history from barbarism to civilization (or more charitably, from antiquity to modernity); second, development as the extensive and intensive growth of capitalism in the permanent quest for new sources of raw materials, fresh supplies of labor, and untapped markets; and third, development as a post-1945 project – spearheaded by the US government and implemented under the auspices of the WB and a network of financial institutions – to create the conditions for economic growth in the global South.¹⁵

While the first two uses of the concept have fallen into disrepute, the third use of the concept remains the subject of considerable debate – especially

¹² Leys 1996; Nederveen Pieterse 2004.

¹³ Escobar 1995; Rist 2002.

¹⁴ Peet and Hartwick 1999, pp. 41–43.

¹⁵ McMichael 2003.

with the rise of the WSF and an array of interlinked movements against neoliberalism. On the one hand, the accumulated experiences of postwar development states – not only in Latin America, but also in the former European colonies of Africa and Asia – have dampened enthusiasm for the old formula of state planning and industrialization in the name of improving living standards. On the other hand, the shift from development as “catching up” to neoliberal policies of fiscal austerity, privatization, deregulation, financial liberalization, and free trade have worsened living conditions in many parts of the global South. Thus, in envisioning “another world,” the WSF and allied movements reject both developmentalism and its successor neoliberalism. Yet the WSF’s Charter of Principles (2001) precludes the promulgation of a blueprint for a post-developmental and post-neoliberal world.

Having produced a balance sheet on both the developmental period (late 1940s-early 1970s) and the neoliberal period (early 1970s-present), movements and NGOs within the WSF have intervened in the debates on “alternative development” and “alternatives *to* development.” More precisely, WSF actors have entertained the following questions. Should we reconstruct the concept of development to meet the requirements of the 21st century? Or should we abandon the concept of development in favor of something else? Although the WSF accommodates a diversity of perspectives and refrains from advancing political programs, its overall trajectory points in the direction of post-development.

The WSF Model

Decoupled from the legacy of developmentalism, the doctrine of human rights – conceptualized as a norm to be claimed, contested, and modified by a variety of actors (including grassroots groups, NGOs, and UN agencies) – provides the grammar for disputes on the organizational structure, ideological orientation, and political objectives of the WSF. This argument has two components. First, notwithstanding its origins in the European Enlightenment and its subsequent appropriation by powerful nation-states, rights doctrine constitutes the master frame of the WSF Charter. Second, in advancing a vision of human rights “from below”, the WSF Charter serves not only to encapsulate the *forum model* of mobilization, but also to regulate the major disputes within the WSF. The WSF Charter summons human rights not only in rejecting the neoliberal poli-

cies of the IMF, WB, and WTO, but also in criticizing the dominance of the global North over the global South. As a consequence, the WSF Charter has become a touchstone for movements and NGOs advancing claims to second and third-generation rights.

Scholars and activists routinely cite the WSF Charter in analyzing the nature, scope, and direction of the WSF as an entity.¹⁶ In effect, the WSF Charter serves as a mechanism for generating and enforcing “soft law” among grassroots groups and NGOs pushing for global justice. Often employed by legal scholars to designate conventions that are respected by institutions, the term “soft law” describes not only the code of conduct that binds disparate groups to one another within the WSF, but also a new model of organizing that has been diffused to smaller gatherings. In effect, the WSF Charter codifies a set of rules in the realm of transnational activism: the affirmation of human rights and non-violent tactics of resistance; the exclusion of political parties and sitting government officials from participation; and the rejection of political programs (WSF 2001). Gatherings at the continental, national, and municipal levels bearing the name “social forum” and embracing the motto “Another World Is Possible” are organized according to the specifications of the WSF Charter.

By custom, organizations affiliated with the WSF are presumed to observe these rules even though they are permitted considerable autonomy as actors in a loose-knit transnational network. The openness of the forum model has led to a proliferation of smaller forums – including the African Social Forum, the Asian Social Forum, the Social Forum of the Americas, the European Social Forum, the United States Social Forum, and a series of forums in major cities across the world. By traveling from one social forum to another – transmitting philosophical, organizational, strategic, and tactical knowledge along the way – grassroots activists, NGO representatives, and sympathetic intellectuals are contributing to the diffusion of the forum model.

In essence, the WSF Charter was designed to nurture an enduring coalition against neoliberalism by embracing the doctrine of rights, circumventing the reform-revolution debate, renouncing violence as a tactic of resistance, mitigating the risk of bureaucratization, and refusing to draft a blueprint for a post-neoliberal world. In this sense, the WSF Charter takes developmentalism – in its Keynesian, social democratic, state socialist, and

¹⁶ Fisher and Ponniah 2003; Leite 2005.

Third Worldist guises – as a *negative* model. Notwithstanding the achievements of developmentalism in the areas of employment, social security, health care, and education, the WSF Charter effectively presupposes that the old model – as applied in the welfare states of North America and Western Europe, the state socialist regimes of the Soviet bloc, and the development states of the Third World – has run its course.

At the same time, the WSF Charter explicitly “opposes the domination of the world by capital and any form of imperialism”,¹⁷ echoes repressed currents in the history of the working-class movement (including anarchism and autonomism), and indulges in “utopistics”¹⁸ or “grounded utopia”.¹⁹ These alternative tendencies – options excluded by the official socialist and communist parties of the postwar period – find expression in the intertwined motifs of prefigurative politics and subsidiarity. Closely connected to the philosophy of non-violence, the principle of prefigurative politics holds that activists should anticipate in the present day the world they wish to create in the future. Historically, this principle played a prominent role in the push for decolonization in India, the Civil Rights Movement and currents of the New Left in the US, and Liberation Theology in Latin America. In the contemporary period, this principle has been mobilized by the Landless Rural Workers Movement (MST) in Brazil, the Zapatistas in Mexico, the Movement of Recovered Factories in Argentina, and other groups.

The principle of subsidiarity stipulates that decisions should be made by the smallest or lowest competent agent. Arguably, it seeped into WSF discourse through Christian base communities, NGOs, Liberation Theology, and the Zapatistas. The term is most closely associated with the “relocalization” current in the WSF, which advocates the strategy of “reclaiming the commons” – whether by seizing and farming previously unused land (as the MST has done) or by repossessing and operating previously abandoned factories (as autonomist Argentine workers have done). Vandana Shiva elucidates this perspective:

Localization provides a test for justice. Localization is a test for sustainability. This is not to say all decisions will be made on a local level. There will of course be decisions made on the national level and the global level, but to reach these other levels they have to constantly pass the screen of living democracy. Authority is delegated to more distant

¹⁷⁾ WSF 2001.

¹⁸⁾ Wallerstein 1998.

¹⁹⁾ Mittelman 2005.

levels of government on the principle of subsidiarity: things are most effectively done at a level closest to where the impact is felt. This principle is an ecological imperative.²⁰

In one stroke, Shiva has described the point of convergence among advocates of Zapatismo, autonomists, anarchists, and environmentalists working within or alongside the WSF. More broadly, the principle of subsidiarity can be connected to the campaigns for food sovereignty and fair trade undertaken by such organizations as Via Campesina and Food Not Bombs.

What are the implications of these principles? Taken together, the principles of prefigurative politics and subsidiarity exclude recourse to a fixed recipe for social transformation or a top-down approach to governance. They serve not only to codify the lessons learned during the postwar regime of development and human rights, but also to contribute to the debates on transnational norms, cosmopolitanism, and global governance.

Conclusion

In exploring the underpinnings of the WSF Charter, I have advanced two arguments. First, I have contended that the WSF mobilizes the principles of prefigurative politics and subsidiarity to avoid the pitfalls of developmentalism (in its Keynesian, social democratic, state socialist, and Third Worldist forms). In the process, the WSF builds on the previously marginalized traditions of anarchism and autonomism not only by emphasizing the “process” over the “outcome,” but also by favoring decentralization, pluralism, and diversity in its organizational practices. Second, I have contended that the principles of prefigurative politics and subsidiarity – in echoing the sentiments of movements led by indigenous activists, feminists, and environmentalists – have facilitated the spread of the forum model across the world. These principles hold the key to the WSF’s endeavor to refashion human rights in the 21st century. Though fraught with difficulties – including the challenge of grounding second and third-generation rights in “planetary citizenship” – this project holds considerable promise.

²⁰) Shiva 2005, p. 64.

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