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Dialogue

Social Protection, Human Rights, and Please

RYAN HIGGITT

ABSTRACT *Increasing attention is now being given to linking social protection with human rights. This article accounts for the change in strategy in terms of the failure of a development agenda heretofore dominated not just by neoliberalism but, more generally, the rationality of economics as science. A case is made that the World Bank is resisting human rights because it doesn't want to give up the prevailing, scientized definition of 'human' enabling World Bank hegemony.*

KEYWORDS *inequality; economics; ideology; World Bank; humanness*

> And one must take into account a definite cushioning effect exercised both by the law, and by the moral sense which constitutes a self-imposed law; for a country is considered the more civilized the more the wisdom and efficiency of its laws hinder a weak man from becoming too weak or a powerful one too powerful.
>
> Primo Levi – *The Drowned and the Saved* (1958)

In 2014 UNRISD and the ILO launched their *Social Protection and Human Rights* web platform. Admittedly the idea, in the early days of the platform at least, was to have experts from around the world respond to a specific UNRISD-driven question. As of the time I write this, however, of the thirty-nine commentaries now published it is only in one, Mestrum's, that readers can discern anything approaching a direct challenge to the World Bank's human rights record; this despite several more mentioning the World Bank in their substantive discussions and more still citing World Bank data. I mean to say this is worrying. It is well known that despite the United Nations presenting all the trappings of being a major player in global affairs it is the Bretton Woods institutions – i.e. the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund – which in reality stand as the locus of contemporary development command and control (Head, 2008).[1] Likewise it is known that these same institutions disregard international human rights standards (Sarfaty, 2012). Even the current Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, Alston (2015: 20), acknowledges that for most purposes the World Bank is 'a human rights-free zone', treating human rights 'more like an infectious disease than universal values and obligations'.

My aim here is not to deliberate what the World Bank should be doing to 'get on board' but rather, with the above in mind, press each of us interested in the platform to start actually accounting for our inability or unwillingness, whichever it is, to question

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the apparent dichotomy that is the Bank and international human rights law guided by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Such accounting has to entail sustained critical analyses of the extent to which the relentless economic rationality characterizing the world today – to borrow from Harvey (2005: 3), the widespread tendency to understand concerns about the human condition as 'common-sense' concerns of economics – in fact amounts to colonization of our minds. Alternatively, if it is a matter of unwillingness, it means analyzing just why it is we're so scared; what exactly is at stake for us personally, collectively. To be sure, I understand that the general aim of the platform commentaries is practical guidance, but considering that global inequality is greater today than it has ever been and likewise that the historical surge in inequality in fact occurred simultaneous to not just the creation of the World Bank and IMF but indeed also the globalization of economism more broadly the above must be entirely practical questions themselves; perhaps the most practical questions now of all.

'We've come here to study you'

Inequality started to grow during a colonial period which saw waves of European gentlemen-scholars accompany militaries, administrators and investors on expeditions to far-off lands. But it began to rapidly escalate after the shock and devastation of the World Wars. The Bretton Woods institutions were founded in the immediate wake of World War II under the guise of helping the countries of Europe 'redevelop' and most every other society beyond Europe 'develop' for the first time, which in the latter case essentially meant coercing or outright forcing extra-European peoples to become actors in a globalizing free market system. Over the course of the Cold War, with the 'childlike' Third World caught in a kind of custody battle between the blue First and the red Second, the terms economics and development found themselves effectively homologous. Beyond the fact that the vast majority of the people employed by the World Bank and IMF are economists (Alston, 2015: 11), that questions of development have found themselves by and large 'economic questions' is reflected in even the UN Research Institute for *Social* Development (emphasis mine) itself now being entirely stewarded by economists – not just UNRISD's director but also each of its four current in-house research coordinators. The same is underscored in the director of the ILO's *Social* Protection Department being an economist too, trained at the London School of Economics no less; a college, compellingly, whose success in securing rights to award degrees in its own name recently prompted the School of Oriental and African Studies, also in London, to do the same.[2]

Why then are economists – researchers of economics; teachers of economics; advisors of economics to the G8 and 'less developed' countries of the world – so celebrated as the ultimate authority on development issues? Another way of asking the same question, why has the work of Primo Levi, who actually lived and survived World War II's Holocaust, not featured in any way in the history of mainstream development discourse (let alone be given the primacy of Hayek, Rostow and Friedman)? At least part of the answer lies in the way economists present their discipline as science (Lazear, 1999; Kayatekin, 2009: 1113), whereby 'development' and 'evolution' work as synonyms equally at home in biology (Baldwin, 1902; Coburn, 2016).[3] In other words, to use Gramsci's phraseology, economics is 'contaminated with positivist and naturalist encrustations' in ways which *The Drowned and the Saved* simply is not. And it's in very much the same vein that 'Oriental' and 'African' tribal voices are given virtually nil consideration within Doha negotiations backed by World Bank leaders insisting that '[f]ree trade would lead to an overwhelming boost to welfare everywhere, but especially in the developing world, [if only] this generation could grasp these benefits' (Anderson and Martin, 2006; Anderson and Lomborg, 2008). Subaltern 'stories', simply put, do not meet the state nobility's elaborate criteria for scientificity (Bourdieu, 1996, 1998).

'The use of a human rights framework makes an enormous difference', argues Alston (2015), 'which is exactly why the Bank is so resistant to using it'. I agree, but I would also go a step further and say that the resistance comes from the Bank's recognition that the UDHR's inherently intersubjective notion of human stands as a wholesale contradiction to the Bank.

Owning the definition of human

Economic rationality has come to constitute the intellectual processing of practically all problems and solutions in our lived world today and in this way has come to constitute reality itself (Janzen *et al.*, 2015: 8).[4] The World Bank's $2-a-day money metric poverty measure is a manifestation of this *par excellence*. With the authority of its 'scientists' the Bank has actually reduced what it means to be human to a veritable mathematical formula; one which insinuates that the more money any given individual has the more human that individual is. The vicious ingenuity here lies in the way Bank 'development' projects, which amount to entrenching not just free market capitalism but also, inextricably, the language and ethos of economics as discipline on a global scale, by default create poor people whose poorness ('subhumanity') legitimates yet more 'development' projects. In other words, World Bank and IMF hegemony is accomplished through the articulation of capital possession as a marker of humanness but also, critically, economism itself as a marker of human progress too. And it is of little coincidence that the Bank's 'Mind, Society and Behaviour' (World Bank Group, 2015) goal is very much the same for the capitalist factory owner. While the capitalist's ideal factory is that which operates most 'economically' (the factory realizes highest output for lowest cost via the enshrinement of data, correlations, performance and workers' perpetual calculation of each), mainstream development's efforts to industrialize countries whose masses have 'long struggled to realize their humanity' include highly systematic processes of quantification, codification and, as we similarly see in microcredit and its 'financial systems approach', celebrating the internalization of economism. Thus this thing called development is likewise about hierarchization, with economists, the special masters of all things economic, at the very top.

Institutions and scientific disciplines, having at their disposal established language structures through which all forms of imposition on society are made, work in unison in order to regulate behaviour, and certainly to have authority to define what counts as human is to own the ability to dictate what is good and bad for humankind. But the 'Mind, Society, and Behaviour' strategy, amounting to what Nye (1990) calls 'soft-power', has its practical limits, and the modern use of military and police surveillance under the pretence of 'geo-security' and even, particularly in the USA, 'freedom' helps repress any challenges to the authority of the definers.[5] Consider that I am right now writing this commentary from Canada, a country whose Prime Minister for the past ten years, Stephen Harper, has an MA in economics and is the first Prime Minister since Joe Clark to not have a law degree. Compellingly, each year 10 percent of Canada's foreign aid is allocated to the World Bank (about $1 billion). And while these funds are by Canadian law – namely, Canada's Official Development Assistance Accountability Act – to be used in a manner consistent with the promotion of human rights delineated in international treaties and custom, the World Bank, again, has no human rights policy, requires no human rights impact assessments, and refuses to acknowledge international human rights agreements. The Canadian Government, despite growing inequality even within Canada, which includes high rates of Aboriginal women as victims of violence and murder, is aware of the Bank's position but proceeds with its allocations anyway. And the debates in the current Canadian federal election campaign period are dominated by two issues, the economy first and, as a matter of security, what to do with the 'Oriental Other' domestically and abroad (Edwards, 2010; Abu-Laban, 2014). 'Today, I'm asking you to vote Conservative to protect Canadian jobs and our economy', writes Harper in a final pre-vote tweet to the public;

further testimony that there is nothing more important now to these things called life and existence than economics and, it follows, those with privileged insight into exactly how it works.

Capitalizing on economism

To the extent that it finds its form in epistemological fallibilism and hence communication, consensus and a presupposition that all peoples, regardless of background, are inherently equal, the UDHR may have genuine emancipatory potential. But of course though UNRISD and the ILO are the catalysts for the *Social Protection and Human Rights* web platform (more precisely the catalyst was the previous UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights with the support of UNRISD's former director) it's very hard to imagine anyone associated with UNRISD or the ILO ever writing something similar to Alston's report to the UN General Assembly, something so precisely targeted at prevailing institutional power, and this despite (or perhaps because of) UNRISD itself now seriously struggling to stay afloat financially.[6]

Like so many other organizations concerned with development, UNRISD and the ILO along with their respective networks and partners from time to time defer to the World Bank, draw upon the literature it produces, including its 'objective' and 'value free' poverty statistics, and yet know as well as anybody else that the Bank's refusal to respect human rights can in the end only be called corruption. We're concerned about this corruption, but, more than convinced that money is the 'general medium of exchange between all civilized [(evolved)] nations' (Ricardo, 1821: 48; brackets mine), certainly never very concerned. The dominance of economism, and as corollary a will, conscious or unconscious, to maintain the extant hierarchy, precludes the possibility of putting human rights above everything else and duly taking the Bank to task, just as it precludes the possibility of referring to Primo Levi in any work published under an UNRISD or ILO banner, or at least doing so and having anyone take that work seriously. The same explains why altogether too rarely does it cross our minds to actually cite in our work Aboriginal women, fighting for their lives, who may know nothing about the theory of general-competitive equilibrium and in fact, the real point, have no desire for membership in the kind of knowledge regime which even produces such a theory. In a manner similar to that which sees a refusal on the part of so many in the broader development community to stop using the term 'peasant studies' in official research despite post-Holocaust awareness that making people into objects and 'Others' hurts those people very much, the dilemma is reflected in the way emerging 'feminist economists' are producing a discourse which, even though it may challenge patriarchy, still thoroughly legitimates the primacy of the economic.

Even many non-economists struggle to recognize just how peculiar it is that nothing approaches the discipline of economics in terms of the proximity of economic theory and practice with formal political decision making, or at least struggle to not write off that peculiarity as somehow indicative of the 'complex depths' of the 'Chief Economists'. In Bebbington *et al.* (2006), Bebbington and his co-editors speak of a number of Bank social scientists – the distinction from economists Bebbington fully intends – who worked to 'nudge the institution in more human directions' (Bebbington *et al.* 2006: xii).[7] And yet the term human rights, in those rare instances when it appears at all in the book, is used in only the most tangential manner. Alston (2015) himself may be another example. He speaks of the World Bank being concerned that any engagement on its part with human rights 'would bring about a radical paradigm shift with unknown consequences' (Alston, 2015: 23). Yes, it would. But the Bank, economic to the core, seems to understand quite clearly that a radical paradigm shift (is there another kind?) would obviate the Bank, a circumstance which would enter the world into a kind of sociopolitical sphere wherein we have to actually discuss things, *sans* quantification; recognizing and valuing as important what people, especially those who are suffering, have to say with respect to how we might live with each other. Indeed it's

inconceivable, in my eyes, that the increasing impotence of the UN today, lamented as it is by many, isn't in any way a consequence of the triumph of economism over democracy properly understood as talking to one another, considering one another. Even a young child knows when she or he is being treated unfairly. She or he doesn't need a calculator to figure it out, or for that matter an economist's vocabulary to communicate that unfairness. And nor do those voted into positions responsible for listening and protecting the powerless need a calculator (person or instrument) either.

Levi's definition of civilization is rules ensuring the dignity of one's place or role in the political system, rules that should do away with the sharpest tendencies towards hierarchy as well as those of coercion (Homer, 2001: 210). He also confirms for us, on the basis of experience on the receiving end of the kind of inhumanity the UDHR and the UN itself were designed to prevent from ever occurring again, that 'in today's normal world one almost never encounters a total linguistic barrier, that is, finds oneself facing a human being with whom one must absolutely establish communication or die, and then is unable to do so' (Levi, 1989: 88). The question I am most interested in now is how the World Bank would respond if the UN's Secretary-General simply looked Jim Yong Kim in the eyes and said please:

> *Please*, World Bank, give human rights foremost importance.

This one word, in any language, is perhaps the most human of all words. How would the Bank respond? Would it answer with a yes or a no? Or would it simply deny the plea altogether; pretend it didn't quite hear and move on?

Notes

1 Likewise, the World Trade Organization, the US Treasury, and the HM Treasury have long been recognized as having more impact on global affairs than the UN.
2 In addition to helping inspire the creation of various programmes in 'Oriental Studies' at a number of European and American universities, the School of Oriental and African Studies was itself pivotal to the emergence of *Peasant Studies*, a leading development journal devoted to exploring 'peasantries and their social structures; the nature and logic of peasant agriculture; peasantries and their "moral communities"; and peasants and politics' (Byres, 1993: 2). Byres, an early editor of the journal, puts economists at the top of his seven-item list of the various specialists *Peasant Studies* seeks to cater to (Byres, 1993: 7).
3 Spain's Department of International Economics, run under the direction of the Spanish Government's High-Level Council of *Scientific* Research (emphasis mine), is one example of many of state reification of economics as science and, reflected in 'high-level', the hierarchizing of economism (and thus economists) over and above other ways of seeing and understanding the world.
4 See also Kayatekin (2009) about the 'ontological modernism' of economics.
5 Another way of 'policing', as we see in Sarfaty's (2012) analysis, is secrecy. In the case of the World Bank, blocking the circulation of information endows senior Bank officials with social power and the capacity to produce order (Sarfaty, 2012: 71).
6 Unpaid intern labour has long been a major means by which UNRISD maintains its productive output. However, growing discontent with the reality that across the world, as much in the public sector as the private, entire careers have been built on the back of unpaid intern labour (a recent Geneva intern was found living in a tent just beyond UN grounds) has been one of the catalysts for emerging dialogue on unconditional basic income, and indeed UNRISD, while ramping up actual public appeals for financial help, is now apparently scaling down the number of interns it takes on at any given time (though not at all scrapping its use of interns or, following the ILO, activating its explicit level of autonomy and taking the decision to actually pay its interns a minimum wage).
7 The concept of social capital is principally attributed to Pierre Bourdieu. It is more than ironic that the World Bank would so swiftly move to (mis)appropriate Bourdieu's ideas after his death in 2002 given the efforts made by Bourdieu to expose the symbolic violence perpetrated by the Bank and foster resistance to what the Bank represents (Yair, 2009). '[S]o today many topics directly issued from the particularities and particularisms of US

society and universities have been imposed upon the whole planet under apparently dehistoricized guises', Bourdieu has said (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 2001: 2–3). 'These commonplaces (in the Aristotelian sense of notions or theses with which one argues but over which there is no argument), these undiscussed presuppositions of the discussion owe most of their power to convince to the prestige of the place whence they emanate, and to the fact that, circulating in continuous flow from Berlin to Buenos Aires and from London to Lisbon, they are everywhere powerfully relayed by supposedly neutral agencies ranging from major international organizations (the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, European Commission and OECD), conservative think tanks (the Manhattan Institute in New York City, the Adam Smith Institute in London, the Fondation Saint-Simon in Paris, and the Deutsche Bank Foundation in Frankfurt) and philanthropic foundations, to the schools of power (Science-Poin France, the London School of Economics in England, Harvard's Kennedy School of Government in America, etc.)'.

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