

Critical Race and Whiteness Studies



www.acrawsa.org.au/ejournal

Volume 11, Number 1, 2015

BOOK REVIEW

Stephen Hopgood

The Endtimes of Human Rights

Ithaca, NY Cornell University Press 2013

ISBN 978-0-8014-5237 (hb)

\$27.95 (USD)

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According to Hopgood, we are witnessing the last gasp of human rights as the “prospect of one world under secular human law is receding” and “the foundations of universal liberal norms and global governance are crumbling” (p. 1). It is from this vantage point that Stephen Hopgood launches into a nuanced and powerful demolition of the normalising metanarrative of the Human Rights agenda. But given the broad nature of such an agenda it is important to contextualise what he means by human rights. Hopgood takes great care to differentiate between *human rights*—“a nonhegemonic language of resistance allied to a variety of causes and motivations” (p. 178)—and *Human Rights*—an international discourse that “structures laws, courts, norms, and organisations ... that claim to speak with a singular authority in the name of humanity as a whole” (p. ix). Regardless of their difference, Hopgood ultimately concludes there is no present future in either as our current epoch is one of imminent decay.

As a way of framing his argument, Hopgood begins this text by grappling with the often-contradictory nature of Western idealism then shifts to the rise of global power consortiums (particularly as the West developed rights and laws in response to conflicts and mass atrocities) and concludes with our present state of decay. However (or maybe more to the point), as the title’s reference to ‘endtimes’ suggests, Hopgood has attempted to provide the reader with eschatological oration documenting the end of what he calls the secular ‘church of human rights’. The anger in his voice is palpable as he stands in judgement to write about the end of an era of Western ideology, iconography, and power. The major impetus for this decline is, according to Hopgood, that “the vast superstructure of international human rights law and organisation [are] no longer ‘fit for purpose’” (p. 2). Most notably, the text addresses the decline of European power within the global political sphere, North American ambivalence about global norms and regulations, and the rise of conservative and fundamentalist

religious forces. This tri-partite collapse has led to a rise in assertive nation states and a world willing to say no to the pressures of a weakened and fractured international community.

A concurrent symptom of this collapse is the increased influence of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) and a growing intolerance from the global community toward the hegemonic agenda of Human Rights. This shift in the power structure of international rights is not marked by an explicit anti-human rights message but a vocalised disdain for the specific parameters of the rules of national conduct and the exclusionary conditions under which the rules are drafted. The increased power of the BRICS coupled with relative decline of the United States (situated by Hopgood as first among equals) has vanquished the notion of unilateral mandates across international borders. To this point, the recent events in Syria and Ukraine/Russia should be viewed as the reality of our present epoch and not an anomaly in the structure of human rights. This new multi-polar or 'neo-Westphalian' system will lead to the demise of human rights as we know it as sovereignty becomes more of a prerogative than a responsibility.

But when these shifts are considered within the context of Hopgood's historical/ideological framing of the Human Rights movement none of our present contexts should appear surprising. Rather, the current hegemonic quarrel is the creation of the bourgeois, European middle-class and (more recently) American power. The book decisively eviscerates the moral hypocrisy of these movements, documenting their penchant for authority and self-preservation over any form of egalitarianism or humanitarian mission. Through his historical deconstruction of Human Rights organisations and events, Hopgood contextualises the moral architecture of suffering and heroism where singular factions seek to impose their will in the name of good. To illustrate, he deconstructs the sacred metanarrative where the "passive and innocent victim" (p. 72) came to adorn the front covers of books and human rights reports as a "displacement of Christ's sacrifice in favour of human suffering" (p. 26). In this way, Hopgood argues that the Human Rights agenda uses "social magic" (p. 7) to "turn ... ideology into facts" (p. 6) and "place 'why' questions out of bounds" (p. 8).

So where are we left at the end of Hopgood's critique? His text leaves us with little hope but to accept that the humanist space of impartiality is crumbling. His analogous references to the fall of the Roman Empire suggests it is only a matter of time before civilisation enters a humanitarian dark age. Instead of challenging the sacred metanarrative, individuals/organisations constructed an institutional "superior power" of Human Rights and now we all stand before our utopia to watch it crumble. While many of Hopgood's arguments prove compelling they feel, at times, unsubstantiated. However, given that this text was explicitly a polemic and not an historical account perhaps this is not as problematic as it might be in other contexts. Ultimately, as a reader you are left wondering if Hopgood wants the system to fail or if his point, as Žižek (1991) argues, is that it is precisely when we see through our precious fantasy that we can begin to escape the historical fallacy and deadlock of our present moment.

For readers of this journal, such as myself, who may not be au fait with Human Rights or international affairs, this is a compelling text as Hopgood grapples with

issues of 'who gets to decide global rules' and who gets to define "legitimate exceptions to them" (p. 2). Further, we see Human Rights are not, and never have been, above the fray of national sovereignty as organisations and states have always sought to set the parameters of the political sphere and define who would be excluded from the outset. And as Hopgood reminds us, at its most basic level the foundation of the Human Rights endeavour began in terms that will sound startlingly familiar to critical whiteness scholars:

Bourgeois Europeans responded to the erosion of religious authority by creating authority of their own from the cultural resources that lay scattered around them. And then they globalized it via the infrastructure that the imperial civilizing project bequeathed to them. (p. x)

Thus, we see the movement toward human rights has been whitewashed from the beginning.

Author Note

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