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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

How the Human Rights Movement Failed

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The human rights movement, like the world it monitors, is in crisis: After decades of gains, nearly every country seems to be backsliding. Viktor Orban in Hungary, Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines and other populist leaders routinely express contempt for human rights and their defenders.

But from the biggest watchdogs to monitors at the United Nations, the human rights movement, like the rest of the global elite, seems to be drawing the wrong lessons from its difficulties.

Advocates have doubled down on old strategies without reckoning that their attempts to name and shame can do more to stoke anger than to change behavior. Above all, they have ignored how the grievances of newly mobilized majorities have to be addressed if there is to be an opening for better treatment of vulnerable minorities.

“The central lesson of the past year is that despite considerable headwinds, a vigorous defense of human rights can succeed,” Kenneth Roth, the longtime head of Human Rights Watch, contended recently, adding that many still “can be convinced to reject the scapegoating of unpopular minorities and leaders’ efforts to undermine basic democratic checks and balances.”

That seems unlikely. Of course, activism can awaken people to the problems with supporting abusive governments. But if lectures about moral obligations made an enormous difference, the world would already look much better. Instead, those who care about human rights need to take seriously the forces that lead so many people to vote in majoritarian strongmen in the first place.

The truth is that the growth of international human rights politics has accompanied the very economic phenomena that have led to the rise of radical populism and nationalism today. In short, human rights activism made itself at home in a plutocratic world.

It didn’t have to be this way. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which was promulgated in 1948 amid the consolidation of welfare states in Europe and North America and which formed the basis of the human rights agenda, was supposed to enshrine social protections. But in the

1970s, when activists in the United States and Western Europe began to take up the cause of "human rights" for the victims of brutal regimes, they forgot about that social citizenship. The signature group of that era, Amnesty International, focused narrowly on imprisonment and torture; similarly, Human Rights Watch rejected advocating economic and social rights.

This approach began to change after the Cold War, especially when it came to nongovernmental advocacy in post-colonial countries. But even then, human rights advocacy did not reassert the goal of economic fairness. Even as more activists have come to understand that political and civil freedom will struggle to survive in an unfair economic system, the focus has often been on subsistence.

In the 1990s, after the Cold War ended, both human rights and pro-market policies reached the apogee of their prestige. In Eastern Europe, human rights activists concentrated on ousting old elites and supporting basic liberal principles even as state assets were sold off to oligarchs and inequality exploded. In Latin America, the movement focused on putting former despots behind bars. But a neoliberal program that had arisen under the Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet swept the continent along with democracy, while the human rights movement did not learn enough of a new interest in distributional fairness to keep inequality from spiking.

Now the world is reaping what the period of swelling inequality that began in the 1970s through the 1990s sowed.

There have been recent signs of reorientation. The Ford Foundation, which in the 1970s provided much of the funding that made global human rights activism possible, announced in 2015 that it would start focusing on economic fairness. George Soros, a generous funder of human rights causes, has recently observed that inequality matters, too.

Some have insisted that the movement can simply take on, without much alteration of its traditional idealism and tactics, the challenge of inequality that it ignored for so long. This is doubtful.

At the most, activists distance themselves from free-market fundamentalism only by making clear how much inequality undermines human rights themselves. Minimum entitlements, like decent housing and health care, require someone to pay. Without insisting on more than donations from the rich, the traditional companionship of human rights movements with neoliberal policies will give rise to the allegation that the two are in cahoots. No one wants the human rights movement to be remembered as a casualty of a justifiable revolt against the rich.

If the movement itself should not squander the chance to reconsider how it is going to survive, the same is even truer of its audience — policymakers, politicians and the rest of the elite. They must keep human rights in perspective: Human rights depend on majority support if they are to be

taken seriously. A failure to back a broader politics of fairness is doubly risky. It leaves rights groups standing for principles they cannot see through. And it leaves majorities open to persuasion by troubling forces.

It has been tempting for four decades to believe that human rights are the primary bulwark against barbarism. But an even more ambitious agenda is to provide the necessary alternative to the rising evils of our time.

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