

World Poverty and Human Rights (2nd edition)

Thomas Pogge, 2008

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The title of this book reflects its content: a confrontation between global poverty and universal human rights. The author writes from a moral-philosophical perspective. Thus, world poverty is approached as global economic injustice and human rights as a moral justice discourse. The reader enjoys the benefit of an extensive general introduction in which the basic facts are presented, while the gist of the argument is already set out.

This is the second edition, with updates and a new chapter, like the others based on an earlier published article. Apparently, the fundamental data concerning world poverty have not shown any change for the better since the book first appeared (2002), despite global economic growth. The number of undernourished people appears to be stagnant: almost 800 million in 1996, 830 million in 2006. Particularly disturbing is the number of daily deaths due to poverty-related diseases; this amount still stands at one-third of the total (with over two-thirds of these children under five years old). Behind that frightening figure lies a distribution of income that leaves no more than 1.2% to the poorest 46% of the global population. Pogge argues that the rich part of our world is not only failing to contribute possible solutions to the predicament of the global poor, but is actually a decisive part of the problem. This view is based on the existence of a functioning global political-economic order in which the OECD governments participate directly, as well as through the international financial institutions that they dominate in both treaty negotiations and actual policies.

Particularly convincing is the author's response to 'four easy reasons to ignore world poverty': futility (any effort to do something would be no more than a drop in the ocean), jeopardy (eradicating world poverty would demand an investment that the rich societies cannot bear), perversity (it would lead to overpopulation and hence to more poverty-related deaths in the future) and over-optimism (thanks to concerted global efforts there is already sufficient progress in tackling world poverty). The latter is probably the most dangerous blinker today due to the Millennium Development Goals' shift of perspective to the year 2015, while based on merely soft commitments at world summits.

Pogge's analysis ends in a moral-political plaidoyer for a Global Resources Dividend that would tackle the 'Global Burden of Disease' through a shift of only 1% of global income to those who need it most. The moral argument that should convince the world of decision-makers to adopt this proposal is set out in chapters with titles such as 'Human Flourishing and Universal Justice', 'How should Human Rights be Conceived?', 'Loopholes in Moralities', 'Moral Universalism and Global Economic Justice', and 'Cosmopolitanism and Sovereignty'. Tough philosophical stuff, one would gather, but Pogge writes quite lucidly, while confronting the reader with relevant

facts and illustrating his argument with convincing examples. Actually, he might have used much less words to present his case but is hindered here by the desire to reprint earlier articles, each of which could stand very well on its own.

Rather crucial to the author's argument is a distinction in legal and moral rights. While legal rights are grounded in supranational, national and sub-national legal systems, there are also moral rights "whose validity is independent of any and all governmental bodies" (p. 58). It is a distinction that one often comes across, particularly from a political science and philosophy perspective. Unfortunately, those who handle it do not show much understanding of its generally weakening effect on human rights. Essential in the concept of rights is protection of interests by *law*. Human rights are rights turned to protection of fundamental human interests (i.e. those that are indissolubly connected with human dignity). Now the apparent problem lies in what are sometimes derogatorily called 'Manifesto rights'. Literally, we are talking here of 'proclaimed' or 'declared' rights; the latter term refers directly to the Universal *Declaration* of Human Rights (UDHR). We might, indeed, speak of declared rights in contrast with 'conclusive' or 'acquired' rights. Yet, in respect of concrete human rights, their 'declared' character entails a transformative function. In the case of the UDHR this has generally worked. Thus, one might say that in the course of its 60 years it has acquired a strong legal substance, including the 'proclaimed' economic, social and cultural rights. Indeed, 'rights without actual entitlements', as I would prefer to call them (rather than 'manifesto rights'), stand not at the end but at the beginning of processes of political, social and legal change. While certainly in the initial stages of socio-economic transformation they tend to be used as primarily political instruments, they do already serve as legal resources in actual litigation, too.

Strategically, in the attack on world poverty I would not start from a moral-political perspective but rather take the UDHR as the foundation: a universal legal document, beginning with Article 1: "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood." This is in fact a global confession, specified in concrete human rights that might be used as concrete legal resources but also as political instruments towards structural reform.

"Our challenge, then", concludes Barack Obama in his analysis of world poverty in *The Audacity of Hope*, "is to make sure that U.S. policies move the international system in the direction of greater equity, justice, and prosperity — that the rules we promote serve both our own interests and the interests of a struggling world" (p. 316). In the change of administration in the USA lies more hope for those living in daily hardship than in any academic treatise. Yet, it is in the ideas of scholars like Thomas Pogge that leaders like Obama find their inspiration for concrete *change*.

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