

Commemorating Human Rights: Exploring Origins, Episodes, and Historicity in Constructing a Human Rights Timeline

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Historicizing and commemorating human rights struggles have become key aspects of contemporary human rights scholarship. Human rights violations represent the most extreme manifestation of political and social violence, and this often produces traumatic collective experiences that societies increasingly find necessary to commemorate and memorialize. Questions of origin and meaning are recurring themes in debates over historicizing and commemorating human rights struggles. Whereas many scholars locate the foundational history of modern human right in natural law and Western liberalism, others argue for a more eclectic understanding of the concept, focusing on divergent notions of rights across globe. This article reviews some of the dominant arguments in debates about the origins and meanings of human rights and explores their implications for constructing a historical human rights timeline for museum projects. It argues that a public history of human rights must engage multiple and contested narratives of human rights struggles and experiences. Such engagement is necessary even if the inherent analytical and interpretative tensions are not fully resolved.

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We live in an age of rights. If the 20th century marked the age of the “human rights revolution,” (Ignatieff, 2001) the 21st century is shaping up to be the age of human rights commemoration and memorialization. Human rights violations represent the most extreme manifestation of political violence, and this often produces traumatic collective experiences that societies increasingly find necessary to commemorate and memorialize. This has engendered renewed interest in human rights scholarship. Recent studies have been dominated by questions of meaning and historicity as historians seek to make connections between contemporary articulations of universal human rights and the antecedents of modern rights ideas.

Initial skepticism about *human rights* as a subject of historical inquiry or tool of historical analysis has given way to cautious engagement.

There is increasing readiness to reexamine key historical events through human rights lens—the antislavery movement (Martinez, 2012), Enlightenment liberalism, Eighteenth century Euro American political revolutions (Hunt, 2008), colonialism (Conklin, 1998), and decolonization (Burke, 2010). This renewed interest in reinterpreting human rights is not limited to historical, legal, or social science scholarship. For example, psychologists working with victims traumatized by torture and war experiences have drawn on human rights frameworks to deconstruct the psychological and cultural processes which support the normalization of wars and armed conflicts (Patel, 2007).

A recurring theme in many of these human rights studies is the question of origin and meaning. Whereas many scholars trace the philosophical foundations of modern notions of human rights to natural law and Western liberal traditions, others argue for a more eclectic understanding of the term, focusing on differing notions of rights within both Western and non-Western societies. Even more contentious is the debate over the *meaning* and the relevance of the concept of human rights in premodern contexts. Some scholars argue for an essentialist and historically specific definition of human

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rights, distinct from historical notions of rights, equity, and “distributive justice.” They contend that the contemporary idea of “human rights” is uniquely founded on post–Second World War developments and, specifically, the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) by the United Nations in 1948. Others argue for a more evolutionary definition of human rights hinged not so much on the restricted context of postwar usage as on the continuing ideas that have historically underline notions of liberty and justice in various societies.

These debates over the origins, meaning, and history of human rights, long confined to academic and policy discourses, have lately expanded into the realm of public history. This article reviews some of the dominant arguments in debates about the origins and meanings of human rights and explores their implications for constructing a public history of human rights through museum projects. It argues that a public history of human rights must engage multiple and contested narratives of human rights history. Such engagement is necessary even if the analytical and interpretative tensions are not always fully resolved. In this regard, public history projects can serve to restore historicity to human rights scholarship, which has been critiqued for being trapped in an intellectual tradition of presentism and linear progressivism that hinders full understanding of development of the human rights idea.

Human Rights and Public History

If by public history we mean broadly history as seen, heard, read, and interpreted by or for a popular audience, then all human rights histories are invariably public histories. In today’s world, human rights have become so important that even the most obscure and esoteric human rights scholarship elicit some form of public interest. Human rights have become the dominant language for public good around the world as well as the language of choice for making and contesting entitlement claims. The discourse of human rights has attained such importance that it now underlies almost every facet of public and private discussion, from claims within the family unit to national and global political debates. This makes human rights a quintessentially public history project.

Public history as used here refers to history that “belongs” to the public, differing essentially from academic history in its emphasis on the public context of scholarship (Curthoys & Hamilton, 1993; Graham, 1993). The public historian’s approach to historical research, documentation, and dissemination promotes the collaborative study and practice of history in ways that are accessible and useful to the public. Traditional forums for public history—museum presentations, audio-visual documentaries, and historic site preservation projects—now increasingly include open-access Web sites dedicated to documenting historical heritage and collective memories.

This is not the place to engage the debate over the value of public history. It suffices to note that not everyone is keen on public history. Some academic historians remain skeptical of public history, seeing it as a dumbing down of historical scholarship or as an opportunistic enterprise (Liddington, 2002). What is indisputable however, is the relevance of and interest in public history as evident in the ever-growing popularity of public representations about the past. Museums, once synonymous with “dry as dust history,” now enjoy high public regard as influential sources of national histories. When people in Australia and the United States were recently asked to rank the sources of information about the past that they trust, museums came close to the top, well ahead of history teachers (Davis, 2004: 52). In many parts of the world, public interest in museums appears to have grown along with mounting concern about globalization, illegal migration, terrorism, and other threats to the integrity of the nation state (Davis, 2004, p. 52).

In recent years, there has been an explosion in interest in the public history projects focusing on human rights. This interest is most evident in the documentation of historical heritage and the commemoration of collective memories. Heritage and memorial projects are seen as crucial to processes of addressing historical injustice and promoting national reconciliation. Museums in particular have become key spaces for commemorating and memorializing human rights violations. There has been acute interest in museums and memorials as media of history and memory and the challenges of intergenerational transmission of traumatic histories, or what has

been termed “postmemory” (Hirsch, 2009, p. 166).

Museum scholars make a distinction between “human rights museums” and “human rights museology.” Human rights museums explicitly take up the subject of human rights as central to their mission. Human rights museology on the other hand is about a form of practice relating to human rights: “one that proclaims the social vocation of the museum and incorporates practices other than those traditional to the museum: that is, teaching about citizenship practices and methods of activism” (Carteri & Orangeii, 2011).

By the nature of their collections and exhibitions, museums are integral sites in the representation of past abuses, and they are becoming increasingly responsive to human rights violations in their programming. Besides several museums around the world dedicated to memorializing the Holocaust and other genocides, there are now a growing number of museums dedicated to human rights issues—slavery, torture, and historic incidents of political or social oppression. Many of these are national museums, relating narratives that are geographically and time specific. There is the International Slavery Museum in the U.K.; the National Slavery Museum, the Civil Rights Museum, and the Museum of Tolerance, all in the United States; the Apartheid Museum in South Africa; the Museum of Genocide Victims in Lithuania; the Tuol Sleng Museum in Cambodia; the Kigali Genocide Memorial Centre in Rwanda; the Museum of Memory and Human Rights in Chile; the *Lugar de Memorial* in Peru, and the Museum of Terror in Hungary.

These “Museums of Suffering” have been critiqued for freezing the past. They transform the past into discrete units of time, and petrify it within classificatory labels. The museum format situates the painful past as an object of spectatorship, no matter how empathically this objectification is framed. The spectator in the *museum of suffering* is a witness, but this is witnessing at a remove: in controlled conditions, and within spatial divisions between life and death, viewer and the observed, now and then (Feldman, 2004: 165).

Such is the growth in the number of museums dedicated to human rights commemoration that there is now an umbrella organization called the Federation of International Human Rights Mu-

seums (FIHRM). Many museums and museology projects associated with this Federation combine the traditional roles of information, education, and commemoration with an activist mandate. For example, the theme of the second international conference of the FIHRM in 2011 was “Fighting for equality: Social Change through Human Rights Activism.”

A Global Museum of Human Rights

A recent addition to the growing list of human rights museums is the Canadian Museum of Human Rights (CMHR). At its establishment in 2008, the CMHR was the first national museum created in Canada since the 1960s and the first to be located outside the capital territory. The museum is unique in its scope and mandate. Unlike other human rights-oriented museums that tend to have a national and geographically limited focus, the CMHR was conceived to be broadly dedicated to the subject of human rights in Canada and beyond (CMHR, 2012). Its aims, as mandated by the Museums Act, is to “inform visitors about human rights, promote respect for others, and to encourage reflection and dialogue.” Its stated approach is to “foster critical thinking about the ways that large-scale human rights abuses unfold at home and *in the world*.” Its goal is to inspire people to “take a stand for human rights in their community, their country, and beyond” (CMHR, 2012). This aspiration toward supranationality and globality is what makes the CMHR the quintessential human rights public history project.

The CMHR and other new-generation human rights museums call into question the social purpose of public museums. Museums constantly deal with accusations of imposing their visions of the past on their public audience (Davis, 2004). Scholars have drawn attention to how museums have been used historically to construct and promote specific social and political agendas within the public sphere. Studies have also emphasized the museum’s role as a locus to which artifacts are transported into a constructed narrative as a manifestation of power (Carrier, 2006). As spaces of memory and heritage, museums are increasingly defined by the ability to act, not only as disseminators of culture and history, but also as conveyors of controversial issues (Grenier, 2010, p. 573).

There is recognition, and in some cases concern, that human rights museums, like other museums, serve more than just archival and repository functions, becoming instead “advocacy organizations” and “social justice centers.” It is a concern with which human rights museums constantly struggle. Faced with lingering controversies over what to include in the museum and how, officials of the CMHR sought to position the museum not just as a memorial to the past but also as a window into the future and an agent of change (Basen, 2011). They stressed that the purpose of the museum is not to be a memorial for the suffering of different groups but to be a learning experience for visitors. The vision of the CMHR, officials claimed, was to be an inclusive “museum of ideas,” not just a museum of past events (CMHR, 2012).

Apart from questions pertaining to their roles and relevance, human rights museums face a fundamental challenge of conceptualization in constructing and curating human rights narratives. This challenge can be posed in the form of a simple question: What are human rights and where does the story of human rights begin in local and global contexts? This question is central to the work of human rights museums. In the critical public spaces where museum researchers and curators do their work, the human rights story has to be told in ways that make practical sense. For the CMHR, telling the human rights story began with academic and public consultations. Public consultations were aimed at ascertaining what Canadians wanted to see in a human-rights museum (Basen, 2011). Academic consultations were aimed at addressing questions about the concept, origins, and evolution of human rights. One goal at the museum’s inception was to develop a comprehensive “Global Human Rights Timeline” to guide the museum’s displays and its inaugural exhibits. The aim of the Global Human Rights Timeline was to analyze major events, documents, and personalities in the development of human rights ideas around the world. These epochs and personalities of global relevance would provide curatorial reference points for the museum planning. This was in line with the museum’s vision of fostering critical thinking about human rights at home and around the world (Murray, 2011).

The ambitious task of creating a Global Human rights Timeline for the CMHR invariably raised some of most contentious questions in

human rights scholarship. In what follows, I examine the debates about the *meaning*, *origins*, and *scope* of human rights and the challenges they pose for constructing a Global Historical Human Rights Timeline and, more generally, a public narrative of universal human rights. This article draws on my work with the Canadian Museum of Human Rights in developing a “Global Historical Human Rights Timeline” to guide the Museum’s displays. The mandate from the CMHR was to create a global and comprehensive historical human rights timeline analyzing the role of key events, people, places, and ideologies in the development of human rights.¹

Questions of Meaning and Origin

For public history projects, questions of origins and scope have practical implications. Questions about the *meaning* and *origins* of human rights determine where museum displays begin. They also determine what to include or exclude, what to emphasize, and how to order displays and make connections between them. For the historian engaged in constructing a public history of human rights, post-modernist ambiguities have limited appeal. Here, the familiar claim that “human rights are indeterminate and deeply contested” is of little value. Human rights may indeed be contested in an abstract sense, but for the museum curator a working historical timeline needs to provide clarity on the meaning and scope of human rights. Constructing a public history of human rights therefore raises old questions in new ways and forces us to rethink old answers to these questions.

The universal human rights regime continues to be challenged and complicated on multiple fronts—by proponents of varying degrees of cultural relativism, by positivists who refuse to recognize any human rights other than legally enforceable entitlements, and by “essentialists” who subscribe only to a post-Second World War United Nations-inspired definition of human rights. Marie-Bénédicte Dembour (2010b) has offered an innovative proposal for making sense of these competing understandings of hu-

¹ The views expressed in this article are exclusively mine and do not reflect those of the CMHR or its officials.

man rights: “natural scholars,” scholars who conceive of human rights as given; “deliberative scholars,” who conceive of human rights as political values that liberal societies choose to adopt through agreement; “protest scholars,” who see it as something fought for; and “discourse scholars,” who see human rights as talked about. This classification underscores the complexities of the human rights idea and holds both possibilities and challenges for constructing a public history of human rights.

The academic discourse on the origins and philosophical foundations of human rights has been characterized by what I call “defining episodes.” These are the historic landmarks in the development of the human rights idea that various scholars have identified and emphasized. Most scholars agree that these defining episodes represent milestones in the development of contemporary notions of human rights. There is, however, substantial disagreement over which of these episodes marked the most significant turning point in the developments of the human rights idea. I have identified seven of these defining episodes: Ancient religious and secular humanism; Western legal, philosophical traditions and Enlightenment liberalism; Eighteenth Century Euro American Political Revolutions; the Antislavery Movement; the Holocaust and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) epoch; Anticolonial movements; and the universalization agenda of the 1970s. An exhaustive discussion of each of these defining episodes is not possible within this limited space. Here, I examine the most dominant of these episodes in human rights scholarship.

Historical Antecedents of Human Rights

The dominant defining episode in the debate over the origins of human rights is Western legal and philosophical tradition, specifically *natural law theory*. Most academic studies begin the human rights story here (Morsink, 1999; Lauren, 2003; Headley, 2007; 2008; Hunt, 2008; Morsink, 1999). They trace contemporary conceptions of rights and liberties from natural law and ancient Greek stoicism through the medieval period to the Enlightenment. Natural law philosophy characterized by a belief that laws and rules of conduct are embedded and derivable from the nature of man has become a secure place in antiquity to ground universal

human rights. Because the nature of man is the same the world over, the laws derived from that nature are seen as universal and true to all men [and women], at all times and places. Thus, they are objective and eternal and are neither changeable nor alterable (Macdonald, 1984).

Related to Enlightenment liberalism in discourses about human rights origins is the emphasis on the wave of Euro American revolutions of the 18th century. The revolutions and the documents they inspired are said to be central to this history of contemporary human rights because they were founded on the notion of the autonomous man endowed with certain inalienable rights. In *Inventing Human Rights*, Lynn Hunt locates the origin of the human rights idea firmly in the American and French Revolutions and the Declarations they inspired. Hunt traces the impact of Enlightenment ideas on the social and political expansion of human right and argues that equality, universality, and naturalness of rights gained direct political expression for the first time in the American Declaration of Independence and the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen (Hunt, 2008). These developments underscore a “*sudden*” crystallization of human rights claims at the end of the 18th century” (Hunt, 2008, p. 20). Is this then an appropriate place to begin a global public history of human rights?

Privileging the Enlightenment as the origin of human rights may have gained currency in human rights scholarship but it remains a decidedly Eurocentric approach. Limiting the “invention” of human rights to the history of the Western world lends credence to the notion, already deeply held in certain quarters, that human rights are a Western invention—an idea conceived in the West and exported to the rest of the world. It is an argument that hardly serves the cause of universal human rights and one that may be problematic for a constructing a global public history of human rights. Unless used figuratively, the term “invention” clearly gets in the way of a full historical understanding of the complex cross-cultural processes by which human rights ideas have evolved. It simply implies too one-sided a historical happening.

If the origins of the human rights idea cannot be narrowed to Enlightenment liberalism or 18th century Euro American revolutions, perhaps it can be located in a related movement

with more global ramifications—the antislavery movement. Several scholars have pointed out that the defining character of universal human rights has been significantly shaped by key reformist impulses of the late 19th century—the abolition of the slave trade, the development of factory legislation, mass education, trade unionism, and universal suffrage (Blackburn, 2011). These developments served to broaden the scope of individual rights and stimulate an increasing international interest in their protection (Sanneh, 1999).

In *Bury the Chains*, Adam Hochschild presents the 18th-century antislavery movements as a story of successful human rights struggles led by a few groups of men and women who took on the vested interests of state, church, and big business. With organization, enthusiasm, and imaginative campaigning that foreshadowed the work of present day human rights organizations, these abolitionists forced the British parliament to uphold the rights and humanity of the enslaved and accede to the will of the British people in their opposition to slavery (Hochschild, 2005). The conceptualization of the slave trade as a crime against humanity, and of slave traders as *hostis humani generis* (enemies of mankind), helped lay the foundation for 20th century International human rights law (Martinez, 2012, p. 149). Still, there are many reasons why the public historian may be skeptical of beginning the history of human rights with the antislavery. The most compelling of these is the argument that in spite of the universalist parallels with antislavery, contemporary human rights are a uniquely modern invention with roots in Second World War.

The emerging consensus is that the post-Second World War notion of universal human rights is fundamentally different from anything that had come before. The rise and fall of Nazi Germany had a most profound impact on the idea of universal human rights in the 20th century as the world united in horror and condemnation of the Holocaust. Nazi atrocities, more than any previous event, brought home the realization that law and morality cannot be grounded in any purely utilitarian, idealist, or positivist doctrines (Patterson, 1995: 177). Certain actions are wrong, no matter the social or political context, and certain rights are inalienable no matter the social or political exigencies. It also led to a growing acknowledgment that all

human beings are entitled to a basic level of rights and that it was the duty of both states and international community to protect and promote these rights.

Postwar international consciousness of the need to protect the basic rights of all peoples by means of some universally acceptable parameters is evident in the UN Charter's affirmation of fundamental human rights and the "dignity and worth of the human person" (Article 1, UN, 1945). This commitment to universal human rights was followed by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in 1948 and international human rights conventions that have come to be collectively known as the International Bill of Rights. The UDHR and these conventions, many now contend, constitute the source and essence of human rights.

The UDHR Epoch

The idea that the UDHR marked a paradigmatic shift in the understanding of the notion of the human in relation to historic rights discourses has become a canon of human rights scholarship. In one of the early contributions to the debate over conceptualizing human rights, the political scientist Jack Donnelly made the argument for distinguishing between the concepts of *distributive justice* and human rights. Distributive justice, he argued, involves giving a person that which he or she is entitled (his or her rights). Unless these rights are those to which the individual is entitled simply as a human being, the rights in question will not be human rights. In many premodern societies, rights were assigned on the basis of communal membership, family, status, or achievement. These were therefore, strictly speaking, "privileges" granted by ruling elites, not human rights (1982). The idea of human rights, properly so called, is firmly rooted in the adoption of the UDHR by the United Nations in 1948. Other historical thoughts or events may well have influenced contemporary human rights, but the UDHR created an entirely new and unprecedented concept of rights. More recent contributors have made the same point. "There were no human rights prior to Second World War except those concretized domestically by the state" (Moyn, 2012, p. 162). Thus, the argument goes, the UDHR should principally define our understanding of human rights.

At an abstract and intellectual level, this argument has undeniable appeal. It is clean and structured. It allows us to talk about human rights with almost clinical precision and with much less uncertainty and ambiguity. We can clearly map their parameters, date them, and measure their enforcement. Beyond these, however, what are the implications for public history? Is the public historian then constrained to begin the human rights story in the tumult and uncertainties of postwar internationalism? Does this imply, as some have argued, that talking about human rights in pre-1940s contexts is historically anachronistic? Can pre-UDHR rights discourses be (re)constructed as human rights histories?

Admittedly, the UDHR was a ground-breaking document; perhaps indeed an epoch-making event. It heralded a global milestone in the long struggle for human rights, promising “a *Magna Carta* for all humanity” (UN, 1997). Its language of universal rights provided a framework for articulating new and long-standing demands for fundamental freedoms and political autonomy across the globe. However, crediting the UDHR and its drafters with “inventing” the notion of human rights may be stretching its historical significance. The idea that human beings are born free and equal certainly did not emerge in 1948. The articulation of this universalist principle under the auspices of an institution representative of nations of the world is what is unique about 1948. But even this process of articulating a universal humanity, like those before it, was profoundly flawed.

It is well documented that in the discussions leading to the establishment of the United Nation and adoption of the UDHR, representatives of the key players in the UN negotiated the meaning of human rights in such a way that it did not encroach upon their sovereignty and, in some cases, the possession of colonies. One of the most persistent critiques of the postwar human rights movement is that it was, at least at inception, an essentially Western movement with spurious claims to universality. Makau Mutua (2002) has argued that the contemporary human rights corpus, only put into effect after the atrocities of the Second World War, has its theoretical underpinnings in Western colonial attitudes and that it continues to be driven by totalizing Eurocentric impulses.

Such skepticism is not limited to “Southern” voices. In 1947, the American Anthropological Association famously asked how the proposed UDHR can be applicable to all human beings and not be a “statement of rights conceived only in terms of values prevalent in the countries of Western Europe and America?” (AAA, 1947). Others have pointed to the deep skepticism which greeted the adoption of the UDHR in the colonized “Third World”—the sense that it “took the suffering of Whites to force the powers that be into action. . . [whereas] slavery and colonialism [had] left the world largely indifferent” (Dembour, 2010a; Slater, 1994; Bonabom, 2012). To begin the history of human rights with the adoption of the UDHR in 1948 is to relegate to obscurity other defining moments that have shaped the human rights idea particularly in non-Western contexts. These include historical struggles against slavery and anticolonial struggles against imperial domination.

The difficulty with beginning the story of universal human rights with the UDHR is that its presumed epochal significance remains open to question. A global public history of human rights should consider the ground-breaking elements of the UDHR, but it must also be alert to historical and contemporary contestations of its claim to universality. A global human rights story that begins with the UDHR invariably privileges one narrative out of many on the origins of human rights. Perhaps a West-centric, UDHR-centered human rights story can be balanced by focusing also on anticolonialism—a movement which developed contemporaneously with the UDHR but which, unlike the UDHR, involved many peoples and societies in the global South.

Anticolonialism

Anticolonial struggles for self-determination had a significant impact on the development of the idea of universal human rights. Colonized people drew on the language of rights emerging in the West in their ideological struggles against imperial powers and their demands for national self-government. Anticolonial movements in Asia, Africa, and elsewhere in the colonized world were among the first mass movements to draw on the universal language of human rights of the post-Second World War era. The adoption of the UDHR and the signing of the Euro-

pean Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) in 1950 lent the moral legitimacy of human rights to longstanding anticolonial struggles for self-determination (Burke, 2010). Anticolonial nationalists demanded that the ideals of freedom and self-determination advanced as the basis of Allied military campaigns against Nazism in Europe and Japanese imperialism in Asia be also extended to them.

For the public historian seeking to balance a Eurocentric UDHR-inspired human rights narrative with one that engages perspectives from the global South, reconstructing anticolonial history as human rights history holds interesting possibilities. But even this approach runs into difficulties. Some scholars insist that anticolonialism wasn't a human rights movement because it was already fully formed before human rights rhetoric after Second World War had a chance to impact it seriously (Moyn, 2010). Others argue that anticolonialism was not in essence a human rights movement because its primary aim was not to reduce the power of the state over the individual which is "the defining character of all human rights activism" (Simpson, 2004, p. 301). Concern over the unfettered power of the state over the individual led to pressure for international mechanisms of human rights protection, for states cannot be trusted themselves to respect limitations to their power unless there exist external controls of one kind or another (Simpson, 2004). This argument is premised on the rather contentious assumption that human rights apply primarily to individuals rather than groups or collectives. Self-determination, as a collective entitlement and a core feature of the broader struggle for decolonization, should therefore not be considered part of the human rights movement (Goedde, 2011).

There are significant limitations with these arguments. The assumption that sociopolitical struggles are "human rights" struggles only when they focus explicitly on reducing state power over the individual privileges particular ideological strands in the conceptualization of human rights. The problem with excluding anticolonialism from the human rights story is that it treats classical individual-centered, state-centric civil and political rights as paradigmatic and overlooks the tensions and complementarities with other understandings of human rights—communal, collective, shared, economic and social rights.

Human rights are not just individual rights, they are also people's rights; they are not just entitlements that individuals hold against the state, they are also entitlements that individuals and communities hold in relations with each other. As Hanna Arendt famously argued, the rights of man are indistinguishable from the rights of peoples (Arendt, 1973). In the context of anticolonialism, emancipation meant that not only individuals, but also peoples, were free to determine their own fate. The question of human rights blended with the question of national emancipation; only the emancipated sovereignty of peoples seemed to be able to ensure them. The realization and import of this identification of the rights of man with the rights of people came to light only with the rise of rightsless peoples, comprising those who were deprived *en masse* of human rights (Berkowitz, 2011). Moreover, human rights claims and struggles do not always take the form of organized political or social movements. Long before the first anticolonial and nationalist political organizations were formed, individuals and groups articulated rights claims and undertook actions aimed at fulfilling their rights as humans, as indigenous peoples, and as colonial subjects and "protected persons." These nonformal and nonstructured struggles for freedom, equity, and justice are no less struggles for human rights.

In constructing a global public history of human rights, the question is not so much whether the story should begin with anticolonialism as whether it should be included at all. At a theoretical level, the argument against reading anticolonialism as a human rights movement is unconvincing; at a practical level it is untenable. Anticolonialism did not develop in isolation from the universal human rights discourse. Rather, it was integral to the development, translation, and vernacularization of the postwar universal human rights language to colonial and postcolonial context.

The Universalizing Agenda of the 1970s

More recently, some scholars have made arguments for placing the defining locus of human rights not in the developments of the 1940s or the UDHR but in the universalizing impulses of the 1970s onward. The argument runs thus: Contemporary human rights may have been ar-

tulated at the United Nations in the 1940s, but it only became truly universal in the 1970s as it captured the global imagination. During this period, human rights activism experienced a dramatic boom, reaching into the very areas where human rights infractions occurred most frequently and violently (Goedde, 2011). This accordingly is what allowed it to evolve into a global movement, becoming the standard discourse for engaging with situation of systematic injustice.

Arguments have also been made for a conceptual distinction between pre-1970s discourses that espoused citizenship rights under the state and post-1970s discourses about paradigmatic rights-holders—rights that people have simply by virtue of being human. The precursors represent a “politics of citizenship at home” whereas the 1970s represent the “politics of suffering abroad,” in which the state is also the source of the abuses. One has a domestic scope with a discourse of justice whereas the other is universal in latitude, international in outlook with a connection with the UN human rights idea (Moyn, 2010, p. 12).

The argument for privileging the 1970s as a defining epoch of universalization in the human rights story may be contested on two grounds. First, the distinction made between the “politics of citizenship at home” and “politics of suffering abroad” creates a conceptual dichotomy, another of those Manichean taxonomies in which human rights scholarship now seems so inextricably trapped. One of the problems with these kinds of dualities is that they create a false, even if tidy, dichotomy in which two alternatives are considered, when in fact there are many shades of gray between the extremes. Second, inherent in this dichotomy is a conflation of internationalism and universalism. As has been noted in relation to the UDHR, the so-called “universalizing impulses” of the 1970s were not always universally shared. The projection of ideas from powerful and influential centers to diverse locales may indeed internationalize these ideas and foster certain cosmopolitanisms, but that alone does not make them universal. If by “universal” we mean that which affects, concerns, and involves *all*, then claims to universality must continually be measured by the extent to which they aggregate local perspectives and experiences.

The decade of the 1970s indeed ushered an era in which the focus of human rights discourse in the West shifted from infractions at home to violations abroad. These shifts were symbolized by the decision of the Jimmy Carter administration in the late 1970s to make human rights the centerpiece of US foreign policy and by the establishment of organizations such as Helsinki Watch (now Human Rights Watch) in 1975 to monitor human rights violations in the Soviet bloc. However, these developments must be read within the context of the international ideological politics of the Cold War. One of the Cold War legacies for human rights was the creation and intensification of the boundaries between civil/political rights and economic/social rights, between domestic “civil rights” infractions and foreign “human rights” violations. These boundaries reflect the East versus West polarization in international relations, which reduced human rights to a weapon of propaganda and political ideology in a bipolar struggle. Cold war politics therefore shaped the way human rights was understood and talked about in different countries, creating new epistemological fault lines.

The contested interpretations of the foundations of universal human rights show that far from being settled history, our understanding of human rights history remains patently a work in progress. Longstanding debates over the meaning, origins, and development of human rights make constructing a “global” public history of human rights an inherently challenging exercise. Apart from the disagreement over which defining episodes constitute the locus of the human rights story, the public historian must also grapple with contentious questions of ordering and prioritizing human rights ideas, events and personalities. Key questions remain: Does the public historian adopt a simple chronological approach or a selective thematic approach, taking account of the generations of rights schema that is widely adopted in human rights scholarship? How does the public historian deal with concerns that such ordering privileges a particular ideological and epistemological construct of human rights?

For museum projects, these questions have practical implications. They hold implications for the relative prominence and scope of exhibits and displays; what to emphasize or deemphasize, and what to include or exclude. With

the Canadian Museum of Human rights these questions generated interesting, and sometimes, polarizing public debates. Should the Holocaust exhibits be accorded more prominence than others given its presumed centrality to the origin and development of the contemporary human rights movement? Should aboriginal rights exhibits take prominence over others given the Canadian historical experience? Do these choices amount to privileging particular human rights narratives? How can gay and women rights material be included in ways that reflect an objective human rights agenda rather than an ideological one? (Jalsevac, 2005). My goal here has not been to engage these questions dealing specifically with the museum. The task here has been to explore broader conceptual debates about meanings and origins, and their implications for constructing a global public history of human rights.

Conclusion

The goal of public history should not simply be to bring academic debates to a wider public. Rather, it should be to inform and engage the public in the very process of historical construction. For museums in particular, the goal should not be to remake them in the image of the academy but to come up with ways to combine the strengths of the history profession in the museum and the academy (Woods, 1995). Visitors who walk into the halls of a human rights museum should feel a sense of ownership of, and engagement with, the histories represented within its walls. A public history of human rights should therefore be able to engage yet transcend polemical academic debates about the meaning and origins of human rights. Such histories should be able to draw links between earlier notions of human dignity or distributive justice and modern ideas of “human rights,” which are in many ways contextual reinterpretations of age-long notions of defining human worth and value. The concern should be less about placing the “true” origins of human rights than drawing connections between the historic epoch and episodes that have shaped the human rights idea.

A public history of human rights should be able to convey the multiple strands in the evolving human rights story—how the idea of human rights is at once an historical product of the

modern age and the outcome of cumulative human experiences; an assertion of individual liberties but also an affirmation of collective entitlements; a means of breaking down the impunity of rulers but also a way of forging relationships; a resource for civil repair but also a transcendent norm of resistance; an effect of power and resistance but also a form of freedom and discipline. The complexity of the human rights idea is that it can play all these roles. A public history of human rights should aspire to capture and reflect these complexities.

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