

Universal human rights, cultural relativism and the Asian values debate

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The issue of implementing universal human rights (specifically Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which articulates the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion) continues to be a sensitive and ongoing issue between various Western and Asian governments. While most of these issues have been concerned with empirical developments regarding human rights abuses, the conceptual underpinnings that inform this debate are less often analysed. In particular, how do cultural relativism and Asian values, as posited against universal values, help legitimise repressive policies and actions through various conceptual manoeuvres.

Cultural relativism is the position to which local cultural traditions (religious, political and legal practices included) properly determine the existence and scope of civil and political rights enjoyed by individuals in a given society. It is premised on the idea that all cultures are equally valid and that standards of evaluation are internal to traditions. It sees that values emerge in the context of particular social, cultural, economic and political conditions and therefore vary enormously between different communities. However, the language of cultural relativism is often exploited by various state leaders and high officials to justify and rationalise repressive policies, despite such policies having no philosophical or cultural justification. The paradox of cultural relativism is that participation is necessary to understand what values are legitimate within a society, but that the rhetoric associated with cultural relativism helps effectively hinder any participation or freedom of thought within a given society. This lies at the heart of the problem of effectively implementing universal human rights.

A paradigm for understanding how this occurs is the idea of Asian values, which is posited against Western values. Within this construct, values such as privileging the community over the individual, respect for authority and filial duty are dichotomised against Western values such as individualism and materialism. By extension, Lee Kuan Yew argues that such Western values have led to the proliferation of 'guns, drugs, violent crimes and vagrancy...in sum the breakdown of civil society.' The dichotomy between Asian values and Western values therefore frames Asian values in a positive light and perpetuates the idea that a distinct set of Asian values is important. By implication, this means that Asian societies have their own way of doing things and that Western ideas are invalid and illegitimate within Asian societies. Moreover, because a binary logic exists where Asia is dichotomised against the West, many of the values associated with the West are also demonised. This establishes a precedent for legitimising repressive policies and actions that can be passed off under the guise of Asian values.

Community values are also consistently highlighted as a typical Asian value and are posited against the Western value of individualism. However, there are ambiguities about the definition of community. In political discourses, one often sees the community collapse into the state and the state collapse into the regime. When equations are drawn between the community, state and the regime, criticisms of the regime become crimes against the nation-state, the community and the people. This conceptual manoeuvre allows the dismissal of individual rights that conflict with the regime's interests. At the same time, this view denies the existence of conflicting interests between the state and communities in an Asian nation or society. Thus, what begins as an endorsement of the community and society in harmony ends in an assertion of the supreme status of the regime and its leaders. Draconian and repressive policies are therefore concealed in the name of the community interest.

The concept of self-Orientalism can also be used as a defence against implementing universal human rights. Self-Orientalism can be defined as the uncritical acceptance of a foreign negative description of oneself or one's people. By framing Asian people and societies within this pejorative light, one can understand Western values as a repressive strategy or elitist notion that considers values as inappropriate for Asian people at this point in time. Moreover, self-Orientalism and 'Right side up' Orientalism are not contradictory ideas, but rather complementary as they both present Asian values as distinct from Western values. Whether they are framed in a positive or negative light is less important than the fact that they serve to distance Asian values from Western values. Once this distance is created, it legitimises certain values based on the notion that they are suited to Asian societies.

The language of cultural relativism therefore can construct false dichotomies that posit Western and Asian values as irreconcilable opposites. By critically analysing the conceptual underpinnings of such discourses, it is hoped that the premise for many policies will be removed, and thus gradually change.

Patrick Chin-Dahler is currently studying a Bachelor of Asia-Pacific Studies (Honours) at the Australian National University.

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