

SIDE-TRACK ONE

A few weeks ago I launched an unusual book at my university in London, LSE: not a word of it had yet been written. When it is finished, *The Rights Future* will track the history, politics and various possible futures that lies in store for that most dynamic of contemporary notions, human rights.

No subject is more topical – the decline in the credibility of religious and socialist perspectives has left a large gap in our ethical engagement with the world, one that this human rights idea has the potential to fill in a way that no other term can quite manage to the same degree. Human rights appeal across the spectrum of politics, and to the religious and the secularists alike. Trade unionists like human rights but then so do humane industrialists, lawyers and ethically-inclined entrepreneurs. Of course the phrase pays a price in terms of vagueness for all this cross-community appeal. This is what makes the field necessary to study and understand as well as to practice and defend.

A WORK IN PROGRESS

How then could an unwritten book be launched before an audience of some 250 at LSE? The answer can be found at <http://www.therightsfuture.com> The book is being released on the web week by week. Instead of chapters there are twenty main tracks, with one appearing every Monday morning between the book launch and the end of the project, at LSE's Festival of Ideas in February next year. (Four such tracks are now on the site.) In addition to these main tracks there are a number of common tracks, longer essays where I discuss issues in greater detail – already there are reflections of this sort on the origins of human rights, their relationship with protest and violence, and the role of the UN in the protection of human rights. Finally there are to be 'side-tracks', more whimsical reflections which I shall be writing from time to time.

The essays are all intended to support my 'rights manifesto,' a set of propositions about the subject about which I spoke at the launch. (The whole launch event and the manifesto are on the site as well, as a video.)

USING THE WEB

This aspect of the book is one of its original features for sure – I introduce each essay with an embedded You Tube recording and include speaking events on the site from time to time. But the beauty of this technology is that it also allows me to involve my readers in the writing of the book. Every essay invites comment, and then each week I reflect on what has been said and set out my views as they have developed in light of the interventions that have come in.

So the essays are provisional not final, growing in light of the comments they attract.

At the end, we will have not a single-authored manuscript in the usual way but an author-led collaborative writing project, producing what I hope will be readable and reflective essays which combine together to offer a lively, accessible and engaging account of its subject.

I think that as academics many of us have been slow to realise quite how vast is the web's potential for global learning. I read the other day that Socrates used to wander up and down the street being questioned by all and sundry. Well none of us can be Socrates but we can all be questioned – and by a far larger range of people than was possible in the Athens of old. The most magical aspect of this new world is how cheap it is – you don't need to pay lavish overseas fees to join in. There are no journeys to navigate or books to buy. True there is no degree at the end of a project like *The Rights Future* but not all learning needs to be about seeking recognition via exams or progressing career ambitions.

A NEW WAY OF LEARNING?

The universities in Britain and Ireland face enormous challenges if they are to preserve even an inkling of an opening for anyone other than the brighter offspring of the already privileged. On the whole academics did not enter their professions in order to be private school teachers – they know that brains are no respecters of family background.

The web can be a way of fighting back against the reassertion of elitism that is being forced through into the university sector off the back of the banker-generated economic emergency.

GET STUCK IN!

The project stands or falls by the extent to which it attracts readers and (especially) contributors. So far the signs are good: we have had large traffic onto the site and plenty of people willing to throw their comments into the mix. All have been of outstanding quality – I have not had to remove a single intervention for any reason. But we have a long way to go –there is still plenty of time to get involved in this degree-less university in the ether!