

## TRACK FIVE: HATRED CAN BE PROGRESS

### IF HUMAN RIGHTS ARE NOT DESPISED BY THE POWERFUL THEY ARE NOT HUMAN RIGHTS

In responding to my last Track on the foundations of human rights, [Favio Farinella](#) makes a valuable point about the purpose of 'our human rights project' being 'the positive transformation of the world', a goal which can be 'defended simply because we believe that it is superior to any other form of relationship to our fellow human beings.' As Favio says – the question is about empathy or indifference: which one is going to prevail?

And in the same place, [Joe Hoover](#) makes the vital point that (I summarise here) without political action human rights won't just happen, however wonderful the reasoning that lies behind them.

The last two essays in this project have been about rooting empathy, sympathy and active compassion in persuasive stories about ourselves which we can see as (or at least take to be) true and the success of which can then equip us with convincing answers, for our doubting selves as much as for others, about why we believe in equality and universal dignity, in human rights in other words.

I yield to none in the importance I give this kind of philosophical (or feelings-based) underpinning for human rights.

But clearly there is something missing here – or rather some persons: the victims of human rights abuses, the beneficiaries of human rights protection, the kind of people that I was thinking about when I was writing on Track Two about [taking to the streets](#)

*If 'our human rights project' is to be truly about 'the positive transformation of the world' then it must be about taking as well as giving.*

This is the vital contribution that the language of rights makes to discussion about empathy and compassion: it takes these essentially conservative virtues, these attributes that all (rich, successful, powerful) people merely ought to have and turns the fact of their existence into a moral system enabling others to insist on them.

So not only is it *right* to care for others; others have a *right* that you care for them. Not only ought you to feel well-disposed towards your fellow men and women and act when you can to help them get on and flourish in their lives, but they can *demand* that you do this, and not

only a little bit here and there whenever it works for you but *to the extent that justice requires*.

Equality of esteem and dignity are happily conceded by the decent rich and forced out of the selfish by being determinedly seized by the imaginative poor.

The human rights project must always be composed of *good givers* and *brave takers*. Without the first it cannot succeed, since the powerful must be made to doubt their selfish certainties, but without the second it is merely compassionate conservatism, a big society in which the rich applaud themselves for throwing a few morsels more than usual in the direction of the poor they judge deserving.

*A human rights movement composed merely of decent people acting out their sympathies in generous acts of giving supports rather than subverts the status quo, making a human rights transformation less rather than more likely.*

*Human rights must be feared by the powerful and hated for the changes they threaten.*

## LIVING IN LIES

This tension between givers and takers has been evident through history. [Jose-Manuel Barreto](#) wrote in his response to the last essay about the work of, among others, Las Casas and Vitoria in seeking 'to oppose and to defend the appropriation of the land, torture and genocide' in Spanish America. In trying to force selflessness on the rich, an ethic of giving on the takers, these two great men played the best card they had, faith – Heaven and (more to the point perhaps) Hell. But just like international lawyers today, you could always find an apologist for invasion, [Sepúlveda](#) is a good example from those days. (I'll leave it to you to come up with some contemporary names!)

Even armed with faith, the humanism of Las Casas, Vitoria and their supporters was not strong enough to break into the vicious cycle of exploitation to which Catholic Spain had committed itself. Standing up for the Native Americans was eccentric, off-the-wall, not so much virtuous as really quite odd.

Power seeks to command not just material resources but right and wrong as well. And as I have just suggested, power can always find support for the characterisation of its selfishness as morally necessary and good. My colleague [Stan Cohen](#) has written a brilliant book about the way we can easily make sure we miss the obviousness of human rights violations, even when these are happening right under our noses.

- The favourite trick in religious days was to dehumanise the victims as infidels. Even Las Casas tried this, pointing out the Native Americans knew no better and could not be blamed for their lack of faith (unlike the Jews, Las Casas could not help saying...).
- These so-called victims are not people at all but property, their human capacities being useful attributes, the way wheels are on a cart, or a roof on a house. The founders of the US Republic were, famously, deniers in this vein, and the Supreme Court they created for their new country was afterwards solemnly to proclaim slaves to be property under the US bill of rights, in the infamous [Dred Scott case](#).
- Everybody can be very happy as long as they are allowed (encouraged? compelled?) to develop in their own way, along racial/ethnic lines rather than mixed in some unnatural melting pot. The US Supreme Court hit on [this ruse](#) when the civil war got in the way of their earlier certainty. Apartheid South Africa tried to make it work when raw white supremacism was proving a little unpopular even among apartheid's more sympathetic foreign supporters(all those disinvestment campaigns and human rights protests).
- They are people for sure, but – poor lambs – not ready (yet... ever?) for the awesome responsibility of being well... human. This is a favourite trick of colonial powers that have a self-image of being benign, those too squeamish to acknowledge to themselves the extent of their plundering. 'We must educate the native to be ready eventually to be ... human... but above all humans *like us*.'

And taking things up-to-date

- They are not people but terrorists – a kind of animal-human lobbing bombs into *our* land – and they would kill us all if they got half a chance.
- They may be people but they are unworthy, desperate and probably criminal seeking a chance to put one over us by using our liberalism against us to seize what is rightfully ours or to force us to share a life-style and life opportunities that rightfully belong to us not them (asylum seekers; refugees; migrants:[common track four](#) )
- They are, well, different, so different we really think (and sometimes now say) that ordinary rules of humanity do not apply (the Roma: [common track four](#) again).
- They are human and yes they are poor but they are undeserving of our support – they are wasters, hangers-on, parasites on the labours of the rest of us (the language

of many UK government ministers when justifying current proposals for forced labour and the removal of living support for many of the sick).

## INSPIRING ANGER

If the colonies had quietly waited to be ready, freedom would never have come.

If the US Supreme Court was given the last word, US African-Americans would still be enslaved.

South Africa would still have separate beaches, parliaments and ways of life, one very prosperous the others mired in poverty

If the Palestinians accept that they are a 'terrorist' people.....

If the poor buy into the deserving/undeserving distinction...

Some emancipatory movements use or have used the language of human rights, others do not – I considered the reasons for this in my first [common track](#). But they are all in practical terms human rights movements. The vision driving them is one of equality of esteem and respect for the dignity of all. They fight or have fought against the instrumentalisation of their peoples, whether on account of their race, their national origin, their ethnicity or their poverty.

Of course these radical movements are very pleased to have support from within the powerful blocs that they oppose but they cannot rely on it, knowing that – caring, generous, empathetic as such support is – it is bound to be a minority interest, marginalised, perhaps even deplored within its own culture (think [Helen Suzman](#) or the [Richard Goldstone](#) of the angry imagination of [Melanie Phillips](#)).

Asserting their human rights means imposing their vision of humanity (Anthony from the [last track](#)) on those reluctant to accept it. Taking if not given.

## SEIZING RIGHTS

- Build links with the decent and empathetic among the powerful communities but do not depend on them;
- Use law, religious sensibility, the constitution and the 'international community' to insist on your humanity and the rightness of your human goals, but do not rely on them;

- Create sectors of solidarity across the communities of disempowerment that exist in all cultures: be sure to see each other even if power claims to see none of you;
- Deploy culture and art to force the fact of your people on those trying to look the other way.
- Foster a sense of solidarity which subjugates difference to the common human struggle (easier for some than others I know: asylum seekers have not got the same strengths as the ANC had at the time of Apartheid or even the Palestinians today)

And then, with this new-found ethical solidarity, confident fraternity and empowered sense of communal self, challenge, confront, destabilise, if necessary fight for your interests which - being rooted in your humanity - are truly the interests of all.