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Rahina Zarma

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BOOK REVIEW: *NOT ENOUGH: HUMAN RIGHTS IN AN UNEQUAL WORLD*, BY SAMUEL MOYN

RAHINA ZARMA

Samuel Moyn's *Not Enough: Human Rights in an Unequal World*, provides a critical take on contemporary human rights, specifically in the context of its simultaneous ascendancy in popularity with the ascendancy of neoliberal capitalism. In this book, Moyn's "goal is to stake out a moderate position between those who claim that human rights are unrelated to political economy and distributive injustice (except of course as an essential tool for reining them in) and those who think the human rights revolution has been a mere sham masking inhumane domination."¹ The book, therefore, attempts to do two things: first, provide a historical explanation for why human rights, even with its great strides and growing popularity over the years, has been unable to adequately respond to the problems of material inequality and distributive justice; and second, distinguish the book's critique of human rights from that of Marxists, who have accused human rights of being a "sham" and an "apology" for a pernicious neoliberal system.

Moyn argues that human rights suffered from a "crisis of ambition" in its quest for global justice because it tended to focus increasingly towards minimum provisions for the indigent rather than distributive justice. As a result, it became hostage to rising inequality and the neoliberal system. The book develops this and other arguments by historicising the discussion on rights, commencing from the French Revolution, which, the book claims, had historically centred on social justice (economic and social rights) in addition to civil and political rights. According to Moyn, advocates of justice, or the human right cause, during the French revolution framed the debate on two key terms, namely, sufficiency and equality. Sufficiency meant, "how far an individual is from having nothing..." while equality supposed, "how far individuals were from one another in the portion of things they get".²

Therefore, historically, Moyn argues, sufficiency and equality were understood to be "interdependent," *both* being necessary if we were to have a just society. How these two elements were viewed over the years, however, began to change, with a notable shift towards the prioritization of sufficiency over equality. A classic illustration of the prioritization of sufficiency

¹ Samuel Moyn, *Not Enough: Human Rights in an Unequal World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018) at xi.

² *Ibid* at 3.

over equality, Moyn observes, is the work of Paine who famously stated, “I care not how affluent some may be, so long as none are miserable in consequence of it”.³ Moyn concludes that this prioritization of sufficiency over equality best explains the relationship between human rights and rising inequality, and human rights’ preoccupation with minimum provision. Moyn does not see a narrowing of the gap between sufficiency and equality soon because, he writes, “though one might hope that sufficiency (especially if defined upward) might lead to equality, it is equally possible that the poor will come closer to sufficient provision as the rich reap greater gains for themselves.”⁴

Moyn’s central thesis is that the ascendancy of human rights to the centre stage of the discourse on global justice came at the price of the abandonment of the goal of equality. He argues that the response of the human rights movement to the rise of neoliberalism and inequality focused on the minimum provision (sufficiency) for the most disadvantaged peoples of the world. Moyn further argues that human rights have become hostage to a political economy that continues to widen the gap between the haves and have-nots because its incremental shriveling of ambition of “the wretched of the Earth” (by focusing only on minimum provisions and sufficiency), has made it non-threatening to neoliberalism. Moyn shows that early advocates of justice, such as Rousseau, saw the risks of separating sufficiency from equality; indeed, Rousseau had written, “no citizen should be so very rich that he can buy another, and none so poor that he is compelled to sell himself”.⁵ Distilling Rousseau, Moyn notes that “extremes of wealth were self-defeating because they would lead the rich to opt out of necessary political equality and the poor to follow suit to survive.”⁶

Moyn accuses the human rights movement of buying into the rhetoric that human suffering can be divorced from inequality, and thus solving the problems of extreme poverty, could inadvertently solves the problem of human suffering. His book illustrates that the treatment of extreme poverty and inequality as mutually exclusive allowed the prioritization of the provision of minimum basic requirements to the “wretched of the earth” and this in turn removed the language of equality in human rights engagements with socio-economic development. His description of human rights’ preoccupation with minimum provision to alleviate human suffering

³ *Ibid* at 4.

⁴ *Ibid* at 5.

⁵ *Ibid*.

⁶ *Ibid* at 20.

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can be likened to an individual using a small pail bucket to remove the water on a sinking ship which has several holes in it – it is simply not enough.

The arguments made in this book can be described as an extension of the arguments in his earlier book, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* published in 2010.⁷ *Not Enough* (much like *the Last Utopia*), provides a riveting but highly critical account of the history of contemporary international human rights law and politics, especially its relationship to “political economy and distributive justice”. The book (*Not Enough*) is divided into seven chapters, not including its introductory and concluding chapters. The first three chapters introduce the subject, providing a history of social justice, specifically economic and social rights, from the French Revolution, to the 1940’s during the rise of the Welfare States and the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UDHR). Much like his earlier work in *the Last Utopia*, Moyn problematizes the ideation of the UDHR as a global symbol for the birth of human rights in the 1940’s, arguing instead that human rights in the context that it is understood today can only be traced to the 1970’s. In similar vein, Moyn argues in *Not Enough*, that the UDHR was largely ignored following its adoption in 1948, and the “most decisive explanation” for the neglect and marginality of the UDHR following its adoption in 1948 was the “larger political language and rights that it tried to consecrate”.⁸ The second chapter suggests that the lack of reference to distributive equality which the UDHR expressed, especially in a post-war period where there was “a strong contemporary impulse to social equality... is critical to the account of why it was ignored in its time.”⁹ In the fourth chapter he discusses Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR)’s New Deal, attempting to entrench new rights in the United States of America, including a “freedom from want”. This chapter attempts to illustrate that there was a wave of sentiments around social welfare in the 1940’s, while providing reasons for the resistance of such sentiments in the United States, especially the country’s involvement in the Second World War.

The last four chapters of the book cover a significant scope and time span, from the 1940s to the 1980s when human rights ascendancy took shape in the way it is understood today. They map a history where welfare ideals were transported to scales beyond state responsibility; decolonization was on the rise; insistent calls were being made for the establishment of a New

⁷ Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2010).

⁸ See S Moyn, *surpa* note 1 at 44.

⁹ *Ibid* at 60.

International Economic Order (NEIO); and a clamouring for global equality. These chapters explicitly draw a link between the rise of human rights and neoliberalism, paying particular attention to post-colonial states, the fall of the Soviet States, the Global North/South divide, and the demonstration of the ways in which discussions around the prioritization of material equality, as well as sufficiency were obscured in the ascendancy of human rights in 1970s and 80s.

In the fourth and fifth chapters, Moyn discusses globalizing welfare after Empire and the move towards defining basic needs as human rights. He accuses post-colonial states, particularly in the NEIO, of prioritizing equality over sufficiency, preoccupying themselves with “correcting inequalities and redress in existing injustices, making it possible to eliminate the widening gap between all developed and the developing countries”.¹⁰ Moyn argues that the untimely demise of the NEIO was partly because of this short-sightedness, and partly a result of “Northern responses that ranged from ambivalent to the oppositional.”¹¹ Essentially, the NEIO demise was a result of an opposite approach to prioritization of two elements of justice - equality over sufficiency, as well as a lack of support from the Global North. The claim regarding the failure of the NEIO partly as a result of the Northern opposition is quite significant to scholarship on the book as it is the first time Moyn acknowledges the existence of power relations in accounting for the prominence or demise of a project that prioritizes one element of justice over the other - either sufficiency over equality, or equality over sufficiency.

In his description of the events that led to the definition of basic needs as human rights, Moyn argues that this was not without territorial contest, describing a “territorialism” between development economists at the World Bank and ILO, and human rights advocates. He argued that development economists were struck by the hopelessness of a struggle for reducing inequality, and thus became committed to the more “realistic goal” of providing basic needs and ending poverty. Those goals, Moyn argues, overlapped significantly with the ambitions of human rights advocates, but there was a hesitation on the part of development economists to describe “needs as rights”. Moyn argues that development economists were reluctant to concede authority over the explosion of the concept, to another group of experts (human rights advocates), other than development

¹⁰ *Ibid* at 116

¹¹ *Ibid* at 117.

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economists themselves.¹² As such, the description of basic needs as human rights did not happen immediately.

Moyn argues that there were a number of arguments for the consolidation of basic needs and human rights, however, the catalyst for the consolidation was the U.S. policy denying foreign assistance to states that unjustly imprisoned political enemies. Moyn argues that this move drew the criticism of intellectuals who saw the promotion of civil and political rights by the U.S. as being at the expense of the provision of basic needs, thus inadvertently making the argument for basic needs as human rights. Moyn argues however, that a significant motivation for the move towards basic needs was the vanquishing of the egalitarian ambitions of the NEIO with a focus instead on “global misery”. He concludes that chapter with the claim that, “human rights might have survived that period... but they lost their association with the national welfare state and became much more familiar in arguments about... global anti-poverty”.¹³

In the later chapters of the book, Moyn makes his best case for human rights against the critiques of Marxists, illustrating his argument for a “moderate position” in viewing the role of human rights in the rise of market fundamentalism. He dismisses the arguments of Marxists who claim that human rights amount to merely an apology for market fundamentalism, taking on authors like Naomi Klein, who has argued that human rights movements willfully neglected the correlation between neoliberalism and terror.¹⁴ He argues that these “conspirational accounts...are unconvincing, but the simple failures of human rights in the face of material unfairness are no less disturbing for it”.¹⁵ In critiquing human rights, Moyn argues that human rights was unfortunately slow to respond to issues of inequality in this century, only realising the desperate need to address inequality when it became linked to rising populism. He argues that the work of Thomas Piketty on rising inequality in Anglo-American countries, and rising populism, centered inequality in national discourses in the Global North, thus causing human rights advocates to demand that human rights be used as a means to provide a response to poverty, “at least when it reached “extreme” form.”¹⁶

¹² *Ibid* at 135.

¹³ *Ibid* at 145

¹⁴ *Ibid* at 174.

¹⁵ *Ibid*.

¹⁶ *Ibid* at 210.

Moyn's book, *Not Enough*, undoubtedly provides an interesting historical account of the relationship between the human rights movement and neoliberalism and how issues of equality were divorced from mainstream conversations about human rights and socio-economic development. Some of the arguments presented in the book, from this reviewer's view, however, invite some critical observations. For one, Moyn's claim that human rights have become hostage to a political economy that continues to widen inequality because human rights overly focuses on only minimum provisions, ignores the inherent fundamental flaws of neoliberalism, such as neoliberalism's economic orthodoxy and preoccupation with civil and political rights while discounting socio-economic rights. Moyn admits the existence of tensions between sufficiency and equality which were exposed during the cold war and contributing to the collapse of the Soviet Union in late 1980s. His work reveals that there was a strong link between the fall of the Soviet states, and the language of human rights being recast in a way that saw its detachment from social rights, and from the welfare state that birthed them.¹⁷ Neoliberalism had focused on civil and political rights as the real human rights, and considered questions of economic equality and inequality as forms of socialism and Marxism, while human rights at the same time had recast itself to be detached from social rights originally contemplated by its initial advocates. If these two occurrences were unrelated, as Moyn's work seems to suggest, it is surprising that the book would acknowledge the role of Northern states and Northern-dominated institutions (such as the U.S. and the World Bank) in defining basic needs as a human right, or the convenience in the ILO recasting itself as a pro-rights outfit only after 1989 and never once before then.

The book seems to acknowledge the existence of international politics in influencing what ideas would enjoy ascendancy, however it dismisses the significance of power asymmetries, and the ideological cleavages that animate or influence debates on human rights and economic development. For example, Moyn acknowledges the World Bank's role in facilitating the disbursement of loans to states in the Global South, increasing their national debts by staggering amounts, and later administering the structural adjustment programmes that created further hardship and indigence in these countries. It was also the same institution that led the charge for the consolidation of basic needs as human rights, and set the global agenda that human rights subscribed to in its focus on minimum provision. This Reviewer's reading of Moyn suggests that

¹⁷ *Ibid* at 193.

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the suspicions of Marxists who characterize human rights as an apology for the system are less than “implausible” (as Moyn characterizes them), but rather quite persuasive.

Secondly, *Not Enough*, also claims that conditions around the rise of human rights in prominence, as well as the conduct of human rights are a consequence of time and chance. Moyn had made this claim in his earlier work, *the Last Utopia*. In *The Last Utopia*, Moyn argues that the rise of human rights in the 1970’s and 80s was a fortunate result of the failure of other “utopias” such as the collapse of the Soviet Union, the disastrous consequences of the Vietnam War, the end of formal colonialism, and the crises of post colonial states,¹⁸ culminating in the need for a new “utopia” that was human rights. In *Not Enough*, he suggests that the failure of human rights to tame rising inequality is not a consequence of any deliberateness in the design of human rights, but instead a result of an ill-informed preoccupation with minimum provision which is simply – not enough. He is thus convinced of the good intentions of human rights, deriding critics accusing it of “complicity,” when it only sought to “humanize” the neoliberal circumstance. Moyn’s commitment to human rights (while being undoubtedly aware of all its shortfalls), is indicative of a strong conviction that the problem is not human rights itself, but its priorities. He seems to suggest that once human rights revises its priorities, extolling *both* sufficiency and equality, human rights would produce justice. This claim reads as truly utopian, failing to acknowledge the existence of power, and neoliberal systems that compel human rights to favor sufficiency over equality. This is especially so given the book’s claim that coalitions such as the NEIO were vanquished for reasons including their prioritization of equality over sufficiency. It thus stands to reason that the formula favourable to neoliberal capitalism is one that extols sufficiency over equality, and the decision of human rights to extol one over the other is far more deliberate than Moyn suggests.

Save for this Reviewer’s two observations above, Moyn’s work provides essential reading for historians, scholars, practitioners, advocates, activists and skeptics of contemporary human rights.

¹⁸ Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History*, reprint edition ed (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2012) at 8.