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Addressing the Gaps—Promise and Performance, Synthesis and Purity, Large-N and Small-N: A Response to Moore

By Todd Landman

In his recent Review Essay, “Synthesis v. Purity and Large-N Studies: How Might We Assess the Gap between Promise and Performance?,” Will Moore explores the large issues concerning the gap between the promise and performance of international human rights norms and institutions, the trade-offs between theoretical synthesis and purity, and the utility of large-N statistical analysis. I am naturally flattered and honored that my new book, Protecting Human Rights (2005a), features as a lens through which Moore centers his examination. And, I am in agreement with most of what Moore has to say with direct reference to the book. Indeed, who could possibly object to having his or her book described as a landmark study, as having high quality statistical work that sets a new standard, and as having a model specification that cannot be ignored in future research in this field?

Moore also appears convinced by the general inference that international human rights instruments have a significant but limited impact on the actual human rights practices of states—a finding which is conditioned by larger processes of democratization, development, and global interdependence. Where Moore and I do differ, however, is on the degree to which different theories at the domestic and international level can be synthesized and on the overall utility of large-N statistical analysis for establishing substantive inferences that may be useful for policy advice and action to be taken by human rights practitioners. My brief response to Moore’s essay addresses these two concerns in turn.

My own intellectual formation was borne of a quest to move beyond what Gabriel Almond (1990) called the “separate tables” of political science and to confront political puzzles using the insights provided by different theories. I have thus been heavily influenced by Mark Lichbach’s (1997) attempt to unify rational, structural, and cultural perspectives at the domestic level through Talcott Parson’s idea of the “socially embedded unit act,” where any understanding of individual choice must take into account the social structures and ideational environment in which individuals make such choices. Having been engaged in comparative research for many years, Protecting Human Rights provided an extra theoretical challenge in looking at state action in a similar fashion. Indeed, it seemed largely unhelpful to view state action in some kind of vacuum, where ideas and structures had no bearing. In this way, Wendt’s (1999) attempt to unify the material and ideational theories of international relations and Ruggie’s (1982) notion of “embedded liberalism” proved particularly attractive in trying to explain the overall growth and effectiveness of the international human rights regime.

The international human rights regime presents a significant puzzle for political science, since the human rights community has “constructed” the regime through the vehicle of inter-state treaty instruments in order to constrain the actions of states towards their own citizens (Donnelly 1999). This notion of *constrained state action* applies to the international and national levels of analysis since norms articulated at the international level and their accompanying (albeit weak) structures for enforcement are meant to limit state action at the domestic level. Moore claims that my attempt to

synthesize large theoretical literatures from comparative politics, international relations, and international law to address this puzzle ultimately fails to specify the causal mechanisms at work that may explain the exact ways in which state action is constrained. He claims further that, at best, my attempt is a useful *insight* for why we might expect the international human rights regime to matter for the actual protection of human rights.

He is correct in identifying the absence of causal mechanisms, which in part is a function of the nature of the analysis (and the way in which I circumscribe the study so as to make it manageable). These are decisions that confront all researchers interested in providing incremental gains to knowledge. My initial hunch when thinking about embarking on the study was that the international human rights regime would not matter, but that I needed to understand why it might matter and then to design my research strategy around providing a reasonably fair test for whether or not it does matter. Positivistic lawyers were claiming that all human rights had been realized and that international law had an independent effect on state action. Hardcore realists were claiming that the international human rights regime does not matter (or it may only matter when great powers decide it matters). The comparativist in me kept thinking that the only way to really know was to test the question directly. In this sense, my theoretical insight led to the research design and construction of the large-N data set on treaties, rights, and other variables.

It is important to note that a greater specificity of causal mechanisms is in many ways a function of the research design and highlights the classic trade-off in comparative politics between the level of abstraction in our theoretical concepts and the scope of countries that feature in the comparison. My attempt to synthesize large bodies of theory led to a general set of claims about the possible effects of the international human rights regime that could then be tested. I thus sacrificed theoretical specificity for empirical generalization. More careful specification of the causal mechanisms in this instance would not have changed the research design greatly, nor would it have changed the findings in any great degree. Indeed, Gurr's seminal book *Why Men Rebel* (1970) develops the theory of relative deprivation that is quite precise in specifying causal mechanisms, and yet his statistical tests are conducted at the macro-level in similar fashion to my own, leaving open the possibility of other causal mechanisms at work (i.e., structural and/or rational mechanisms). Moore notes that I am unusually self-conscious about the limits of large-N statistical analysis. He is correct. It is borne of my other work on the trade-offs associated with different comparative methods for general issues in comparative politics (Landman 2000, 2003, and Forthcoming), as well as for specific issue area of human rights (Landman 2000 and 2006). I therefore explained carefully in the methods section and in the conclusion what the study cannot do and the kinds of questions it cannot address.

Moore's solution is to abandon the attempt at synthesis, provide greater specificity of concepts and causal mechanisms, and then provide tests using a smaller sample of countries, or engage in single-case analysis. He advocates raising the number of observations by engaging in complex statistical analysis at the country-level of the kind carried out to examine political violence in Peru (Ball *et al.* 2003) in order to test such a model. But even the very sophisticated "who did what to whom" data model for the quantitative deconstruction of human rights narratives combined with the equally sophisticated multiple systems estimation (MSE) of the kind used in Guatemala, Peru, and East Timor (Landman 2006: 107-125), can only tell us who the perpetrators were, who the victims were, and what the patterns of violations were. Patrick Ball, the main architect of this

method of statistical estimation would be the first to admit that statistics do not answer the “why” question. For that, we need theory.

So, the methodological discussion necessarily returns to the theoretical discussion. For human rights research, it seems that at present there remains a dearth of theorizing on the motivation for rights violations, the environment in which they are made possible, and the conditions under which they can be prevented (see Landman 2005b). But there are some notable exceptions. Poe (2004) has begun to develop an explanatory model of human rights violations based on the Most-Starr decision-making model, which could then be tested through large-N statistical analysis. Mitchell (2004) bemoans the knowledge gap from large-N statistical work on human rights, despite being a pioneer in the field, and develops a principal-agent account of large-scale human rights violations that he then tests across the case studies of the English Civil War, the Russian Civil War, and the Arab-Israeli conflict. Wantchekon and Healy (1999) develop a game-theoretic model of torture that has yet to be tested empirically. Risse, Ropp, and Sikkink (1999) develop a “spiral model” to explain how transnational advocacy networks have led to varying degrees of change in the human rights practices of states.

Would Poe’s model provide insight for understanding rights abuses in single cases? Can Mitchell’s model apply beyond the confines of his extreme examples? How can the parameters of a game theoretic account of torture be operationalized for empirical analysis? Can the “spiral model” be tested in other countries? These are questions that continue to drive the human rights research agenda, which I believe must begin to design research that triangulates evidence in new and imaginative ways. Can we “travel” along this continuum between the general and specific to build stronger theories of rights abuse? Paige’s *Agrarian Revolution* (1975) specified a structural model of peasant revolution that was tested using both large-N and small-N statistical analyses. I believe this can and should be done for human rights. In *Citizenship Rights and Social Movements* (1997), Joe Foweraker and I compared the relationship between social mobilization and the protection of individual rights across the cases of Brazil, Chile, Mexico, and Spain, and *Protecting Human Rights* was in many ways inspired by what we did in that earlier study, where the gap between “rights in principle” and “rights in practice” was operationalized for a global sample (although finding global data on social mobilization has thus far proved elusive). So too, it seems we must begin to specify theories and design our research to compare findings from one level of analysis to those conducted at another level.

I believe that *Protecting Human Rights* is one attempt to identify a set of problems in this general area of research, where I begin to specify a set of explanations for why human rights norms and institutions might matter for actual human rights practices of states and develop a statistical protocol for testing these explanations. The data analysis supports the general expectations revealed through a consideration of dominant theories. In this sense, the “observable implications” (King, Keohane, and Verba 1994) of the theoretical considerations were by and large supported by the data. Where I could have done more was to say why human rights protection is better under democratic polities and why human rights protection is better in those states that are more engaged internationally. For example, democracies generally have better mechanisms for giving voice, stronger institutions for horizontal and vertical accountability, and a general set of value orientations that favor rights over tyranny. An individual actor embedded in such an environment, despite his or her true beliefs, will find it difficult to violate human rights in any systematic fashion. Such

argumentation is analogous to Sen's reasoning in explaining why no democracy in the world has ever experienced famine. Does he provide a causal mechanism for his claim? No. He provides a theoretical insight to explain his empirical generalization. At the international level, states that are democratic, that have been open to the activities of international organizations, and that engage with other states across a range of other issue areas and policy communities, will find it difficult to violate human rights in any systematic fashion. Does this mean that some individuals will violate human rights? Of course. Does this mean that some states will continue to violate human rights? Of course. Does it mean that international norms and mechanisms for the protection of human rights do not matter? The answer provided in Protecting Human Rights is "of course not."

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