

Book Review: Dignity in Adversity: Human Rights in Troubled Times

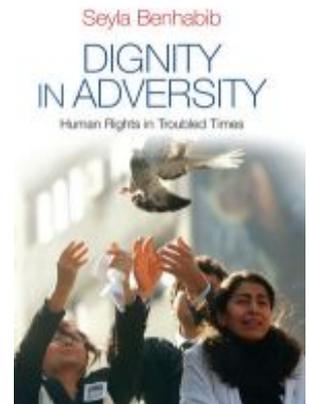
Ramona Wadi reviews Seyla Benhabib's important new treatise on human rights discourse.

Dignity in Adversity: Human Rights in Troubled Times. Seyla Benhabib. [Polity](#). September 2011.

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A reference to Immanuel Kant provides the background for Yale Professor [Seyla Benhabib](#)'s new treatise on human rights discourse. Kant's redefining of cosmopolitanism transforms the term from 'citizenship denial' to 'citizenship of the world'. Through a discussion of topics such as genocide, citizenship, the nation state, anti-Semitism and the hijab controversy, Benhabib demonstrates how an approach from this new definition of cosmopolitanism enables human rights discourse to move beyond the state, creating a realm encompassing unity and diversity across political borders.

Human rights reveal a discrepancy within various perspectives – justification, philosophy, legality, law and declarations. Benhabib argues that cosmopolitanism reconstructs the definition of citizenship and rights by defining human beings as moral persons who are entitled to legal protection by right of their identity as human beings, as opposed to citizenship and rights based on nationality or ethnicity. This position entails recognising freedom of expression as a necessity instead of a mere political right.



Two main frameworks emerge from cosmopolitanism as expounded by Benhabib. *Democratic iterations* are defined as "how the unity and diversity of human rights is enacted and re-enacted in strong and weak public spheres, not only in legislatures and courts, but often more effectively by social movements, civil society actors, and transnational organisations working across borders." *Jurisgenerative power* allows "new actors, such as women and ethnic, linguistic and religious minorities – to enter the public sphere, to develop new vocabularies of public claim making and to anticipate new forms of justice to come in process of cascading democratic iterations."

Major outcomes of history have defined and brought forth the existence of the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#), the Geneva Convention and other treaties. However this discourse has been narrowed to an interpretation of what should constitute human rights. The categorisation of human rights into treaties and conventions may be perceived as a manipulation of the West's perception of human rights transformed into an obligatory adherence upon the rest of the world.

The events of September 11, 2001 have also exposed the corrosion of human rights conduct. The US Patriot Act signed by George W Bush authorised pre-emptive strikes on suspicion of terrorism. The incongruence of the War on Terror has resulted in wars with no apparent conclusion, as well as a blatant violation of the Geneva Convention with regard to prisoner abuse in Guantanamo (Cuba), Abu Ghraib (Iraq) and Bagram Airbase (Afghanistan).

Human rights have also been compromised in order to sustain a nation's identity. Hence, in liberal democracies religious expression is marginalised while, at the same time bolstering, especially in Europe and the US, the preservation of the white and Christian identity. In a manifestation of past prejudice, when anti-Semitism was rampant, it is now Muslims who are targeted by racism and religious prejudice. The West's identity has experienced an evolution through secular ideology as well as the spread and effect of conflicts around the world. While resistance against a new concept of identity and citizenship may occur, creating a dystopia, the expansion of human rights definition due to societal change also destabilizes the power held by authorities.

Cosmopolitanism, Benhabib states, encompasses the relevance of moral sympathy and aids in demolishing the abstraction of humanity into 'concrete others', thus enabling society to expand its struggle for human rights. Visualising 'the other' as a human being prevents society from the alienation – unlike the elite in every country in the world who have disassociated themselves from the reality of the majority.

Benhabib also demonstrates the analogous, as opposed to contradictory, human rights discourse in migration. While host nations may define migrants as having crossed the borders, the same expression of border crossing can be utilized by migrants as the reason why they had to seek asylum in the first place. Decades of colonialism, usurping of natural resources particularly in Third World countries, political conflict, civil wars and the ramifications of poverty, displacement and persecution have portrayed the merging of reasons why a person flees the home country. There is no longer a discrepancy between the political and economic migration. As Benhabib states, "Political persecution, economic marginalisation and discrimination are interdependent."

Ramona Wadi is a freelance writer. Read more about Ramona on our [reviewers page](#).