

Preface

By Tom Farer

A quarter century ago, when I was elected to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, the human rights institutional landscape had the appearance and analogical character of a largely undeveloped sub-division on the metropolitan fringe. In large part, the land was not even platted. Here and there a few structures poked out of the muddy soil. One, the Human Rights Commission of the United Nations, had the look of a community hall built with little hope and less conviction by largely disinterested city fathers obligated to intimate belief in the sub-division's arresting features and future. Among public buildings, only the European Court and Commission, located in the sub-division's one prosperous quadrant, evidenced a serious commitment to and belief in the area's development. Outside that quadrant, the only official structure exhibiting any sign of purposive activity other than the promulgation of norms was the Inter-American Commission. Overshadowing all these public buildings, even (arguably) the European Institutions, was a single distinguished non-governmental one, Amnesty International.

Today a thriving, richly diverse community occupies that once almost barren landscape. Public and private institutions pack its main streets. Collectively they form a vast network of norm generating, interpreting and enforcing activities that penetrate virtually every other sphere of human activity from diplomacy to international lending to global trade and investment. So abundant is the development that there is much overlap in structure and function and, conversely, there are a few gaps. Still, the community is not quite fully developed.

One gap is in the area of communications. To be sure we have books in a steady stream probing the structures and functions of human rights institutions, construing governing norms, examining the roots of violations, and assessing the quality of enforcement. And we have a number of journals, both in the United States and abroad, engaged in the same activities as well as recording and analyzing contemporary developments. And we have a pulsing river of reports from human rights organizations, governments, and research centers documenting human rights delinquencies and, sometimes, offering detailed diagnosis and prescription.

There lies a problem and an opportunity. The human rights terrain is awash with "texts". Their number should intimidate even the most assiduous of scholars, much less the practitioner much less the student and simply interested observer. Without some synthesizing and evaluative guide through the thicket of possibly useful material, the literature's capacity to illuminate central issues and to facilitate diagnosis and prescription (which is, after all, the notional purpose of all this activity) must fall far short of its potential.

On the one hand, there is more text specifically addressed to human rights than any mind can process. On the other, really important texts may be inaccessible to many readers because they are not available in English. In addition, many texts of great value for understanding the causes of human misery may be overlooked by scholars and practitioners in the human rights field, whether narrowly or broadly conceived, because they do not purport to be about “human rights.” I think in this connection of many reports and monographs and papers generated by the International Financial Institutions and scholars writing about international relations, comparative political economy, and conflict resolution. Just as an interest in human rights implies an interest in poverty and social exclusion, an interest in these other analytic categories of human distress implies an interest in human rights. All stem from the same sense of empathy for those who live in misery, at least the quantum of misery that seems correctable by public policy.

What follows from these commonplace observations is the need for a text that guides the reader through the jungle of texts, that gives every interested person access to texts published in major languages other than English and that encompasses all important texts relating to human misery and injustice regardless of whether they are imputable to behavior generally characterized as a violation of human rights. *Human Rights & Human Welfare* aspires to be that text. Its editors are experts drawn from a still growing consortium of research centers in different parts of the world. Equally global in scope is its International Advisory Board. And we are beginning to accumulate an international list of semi-regular contributors.

Our stylistic guide is the *New York Review of Books*. In other words, we intend to publish essays that take one or a cluster of related texts and use them to focus or frame a relatively wide-ranging exploration of some issue in what for want of a better umbrella term we might call “Human Security.” While we will insist on the epistemological rigor that helps to define good scholarship, we will also insist on the stylistic flair and seek the personal voice that is not an inevitable feature of pieces in traditional scholarly journals. We intend to encourage broadly allusive, synthesizing work with intellectual and narrative drive. We will solicit and encourage submission by scholars, of course, but also by practitioners—whether in the public, private or non-profit sectors—who are able to cerebrated and generalize about their experiences and to discuss theory in light of their work in the trenches of life. Similarly, we expect to have personnel of public, private and non-profit organizations, no less than scholars and students, as readers.

We have chosen the electronic form for reasons that should be obvious. It offers potentially a much larger and more diverse audience than a comparable print journal could hope to find. It allows us to publish more quickly and to accept every piece that satisfies editorial standards we intend to be exacting. It minimizes costs. It eases cooperation among editors scattered around the globe. And it allows us to facilitate real dialogue, however astringent, among authors who have been reviewed, the reviewers and everyone else who wants to pile in. Reviewers will no longer necessarily have the last word, an advantage that has often discouraged non-masochistic authors of reviewed texts and other readers from commenting critically on the reviewer’s exposition.

So the enterprise begins. We solicit your ideas: suggestions about texts, themes and reviewers, including yourself. This is an inclusive adventure for all persons of reasonably good will with a taste for lusty debate and expeditions of the mind.

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