

BRUNCH
“Are Human Rights Universal Values?”
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The speaker, former UNCTAD staff member and President of the Scientific Committee of the Geneva International Academic Network, related that, faced with this question, he asked around to a range of persons what to them was a universal value – for a Hindu swami it was “love”, for a Muslim “mercy”, for a UNDP employee “work”, for an Anglican canon “adultery” (in a negative sense), and for a Baha’i “do unto others as you would have them do unto you”. One answer of particular interest which the same Baha’i had raised was that universal values are a result of a process of consensus, and he elaborated on this idea, noting that at the time of the adoption of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights (UDHR), there were only 56 voting countries, most of the territories in the world then being under colonization; there were 8 abstentions –Saudi Arabia and the then socialist states.

All that brings into question the universality of this declaration. He quoted the Anglican canon who described the UDHR as a triumph of Judeo-Christian values. In particular it does not address the tension between individualism and collectivism, which are viewed differently in other traditions, including Christian ones such as Catholicism or Calvinism. The African (Banjul) Charter on Human and People’s Rights of 1981 attempted to tackle that problem.

In contrast, the concept of sustainable development was adopted by a UNGA counting a much larger number of States, and with no abstentions – is this thus a universal value? This concept turns on the principle of responsibility for human existence on earth, which may again come back to the value of love.

The follow-up discussion covered the following areas:

- On the tensions between individualism and collectivism, it was proposed that there could be no pure individualism or collectivism but that there needed to be a balance based on awareness of other perspectives
- Regarding the emphasis on needs in development as opposed to entitlements in human rights, the speaker proposed that they could be bridged by viewing the persons concerned as determining their own needs e.g. future generations should be free to determine their own lifestyles. It is overbearing of the current generation to try to impose its own lifestyle on its successors
- With respect to the implications of these questions for international civil servants, the speaker emphasised alertness to other persons’ different cultural backgrounds, discovering and using complementarities. Other participants asserted that it was precisely the role of the UN official to find and represent the universal beyond the cultural, and to represent also non-mainstream views, being aware of one’s own cultural limitations and the cultural biases of mainstream thinking such as neo-

liberal fundamentalism. This was especially relevant for work on indigenous issues. In practical terms, this may require creativity, making use of opportunities and alliances in unconventional ways, and also humour, in conveying otherwise unpalatable perspectives. It was perhaps also important to devote energy “for” a cause rather than losing energy fighting “against” it.