Is there still a role for human rights in the 21st Century?

Human rights, as comprehensively put by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, are ‘the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family’. They have played a considerable role in the development of modern human civilisation, from the Magna Carta in 1215 – arguably the first document to give individual rights to the population and instrumental in the formation living under constitutional law – to the aforementioned Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, the single document which both unified and codified the thirty Articles of human rights for the first time, and was essential in the establishment of the human rights laws of democratic nations. Thus, clearly human rights have been high on the global agenda for centuries. But, are they still relevant today, in the 21st Century? This essay will examine whether human rights have a contemporary role, and will do so by looking at their historical capacity, their historical importance and, in my view, the need for their sustained continuation.

Initially, in order to evaluate whether there is still a role for human rights in the 21st Century, we must first examine the role that human rights have played in the past. It could be argued that human rights have achieved such a great deal that they have done everything that they could have done, in other words that their duty is fulfilled and thus they no longer have a role. This can be argued due to the massive strides undertaken in the field of human rights over the course of the last two and a half thousand years.

It is thought such success began in 539 B.C, after the ancient Persian armies of King Cyrus the Great had conquered the city of Babylon, and Cyrus engaged in a revolutionary humanitarian act by freeing the slaves and declaring that everyone could choose their own religion and establishing racial equality, all written in Akkadian on a baked clay cylinder. This was arguably the first charter of human rights in the world, and provided the basis for freedom and human rights for the rest of the globe-first India, then Greece and Rome. From here, civilisation was born through the concept of ‘natural law’, defined by the Oxford Dictionary as ‘a body of unchanging moral principles regarded as a basis for all human conduct’. Thus, human rights came into verifiable existence thousands of years ago, and so are they still relevant and contemporary in the 21st Century, after centuries? Or more pertinently, do human rights have to play such an active role in society and do they need to be so forcibly publicised, after having such time to, arguably, become commonplace and globally accepted?

From their inception in 539, other than aiding in the creation of modern human civilisation, an arguably ultimate achievement in itself, human rights have played a large role in human history. In terms of legislation, it is in the 20th Century where human rights have had a noticeable place. Since 1948, 60 human rights treaties and declarations have been negotiated by the United Nations, having serious effects in the real world in terms of being accepted and implemented by law. For example the 1965 International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination which has gained virtually universal acceptance from the international community and has had an impact on legislation in many states, and with the Race Relations Act 1976(UK).

Perhaps the best example of the role of human rights in history is the aforementioned Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted in 1948 and an unequivocal global success, as despite the fact it is not legally binding, it has been adopted into, or had influence in most national constitutions since its inception, and demonstrated as the underpinning for a number of national laws, international laws and treaties which promote human rights. One lateral way that the Declaration’s worldwide success can be exhibited is through its title, given by the Guinness World Records, of being the ‘most translated document’ in the world. This is testimony to its absolute achievement, with human rights being, in essence, a universal language. From Akkadian script on a baked clay cylinder to a multi-lingual document in books, constitutions and on computer screens, human rights have spread and achieved success throughout the world, and so have disputably fulfilled their role.

Page 2

On the other hand, it can be more strongly argued that human rights still have a colossal role to play in the 21st Century. Under closer scrutiny, the aforementioned viewpoint concerning human rights having achieved everything it could have done due to the numerous declarations, most notably the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, is brought into question. Whilst these declarations represent considerable and meritorious achievements in the history of human rights, declaration and implementation are extremely different things.

There are countless examples of human rights being contravened in the 21st Century, most recently in the Syrian conflict, where there has been a multitude of human rights violations from both the opposition rebels, and the Assad government, importantly on a much larger and graver scale. The UN has reported human rights violations on a terrible scale by the Assad regime, with the official document giving accounts of such atrocities as soldiers being shot for refusing to fire into peaceful crowds, brutal interrogations including accounts of sexual abuse of men and gang rape of young boys, hundreds of peaceful activists being unlawfully detained without trial and likely subject to torture for months, and perhaps most shockingly, the use of young children as human shields in armed combat. These actions, all breaking Articles of the Declaration, have all taken place during the 21st Century, and in one of the 48 original countries to sign the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Syria. These violations are just a few examples of such contravention of human rights from one country out of 194, and yet they illustrate the need for the role of human rights to continue into this century. If such terrible events are occurring to this day, and the fundamental rights of human beings are still being abused, then surely now, as ever, it is crucial that human rights play an integral role in forming and enforcing national and international legislature, thus meaning such outrages come to an end?

Moreover, it may be easy to dismiss the abovementioned transgression as atypical and unique to certain countries in certain conditions, such as Syria in a state of civil war. However, it is conservatively estimated that there are more than 1000 slaves in the UK today, according to government figures, representing a rise of 25% in the last year. It is also important to note that this is solely based on the number of cases discovered, raising the question how many undiscovered victims are there of ‘modern day slavery’? Clearly, human rights are still not adhered to globally, despite the fact they have been widely declared. Therefore, after the century of declaration in the 20th Century, there needs to be a focus on implementation in the 21st Century. The response to violations must not be to disregard human rights altogether, but for there to be swift sanctions from world bodies such as the UN, and a greater emphasis placed on the implementing of human rights in legislation worldwide.

To conclude, the role of human rights is ever changing. Over the last two and a half thousand years, human rights have played an influential role in the development of human civilisation and democracy. Whilst it is important to recognise the achievements of the human rights movement, success is not a reason to discontinue their role. Indeed, now is an equally important time for these fundamental liberties to be universally accepted and implemented in law. In the face of appalling violence and complete disregard for human rights, as has been seen throughout the 21st Century from Iraq to Guantanamo bay, it is immensely important for human rights to be continued, so that, now and in the future, such inhumanity does not occur. Organisations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch are continually fighting to protect human rights, and this fight must be maintained. The high memberships of these organisations, with Amnesty having more than 3 million members around the world, represents the global desire for the role of human rights to endure in preventing abuse and seeking justice. To do so is right, and in the words of Martin Luther King ‘The time is always right to do what is right’. Thus, now, in the 21st Century, to promote human rights is to do what is right, and it must be done.

Page 3

Bibliography

<http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/>

<http://www.humanrights.com/what-are-human-rights/brief-history/declaration-of-human-rights.html>

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-24560937>

<http://www.hrw.org/middle-eastn-africa/syria>

Jackson Whitton

Copyright © 2013 Jackson Whitton