

## Why Should Human Rights be Important to Sociologists?

In a world of exacerbated inequalities, runaway markets, and the merciless disregard of human dignity and security, sociologists will discover that a human rights perspective is useful if they are concerned about social, racial, gender and environmental justice, economic fairness, and equitable nation-states. This perspective holds that all humans are entitled to social, economic, housing, healthcare and political rights; to a cultural, racial, ethnic and sexual identity; and opposes discrimination against minorities and women. It is a subversive perspective, advocating deep forms of democracy and suspicious of capitalism that, by definition, exploits workers.

Sociologists have every reason to embrace human rights since human rights are realized (or not) in societies and communities, and they are advanced by civil society actors and in political and social movements. The extent to which the state recognizes human rights in its constitution and laws plays the decisive role in the wellbeing of its citizens. The Constitution of the United States is exceptional for not recognizing the economic, social, and cultural rights of citizens, which helps to account for why the US, compared with other highly industrialized countries, has high rates of homelessness and poverty, and high percentages of the population without adequate healthcare and with food insecurity. Globalization has unleashed two forces that have contradictory consequences for fundamental human rights. The first is neoliberalism, which is destructive of the environment, human societies, and social institutions. Second, because peoples are more interconnected than ever before, there is a growing consciousness of peoples' fundamental rights and demands that these rights be recognized. Particularly frightening is that the world's leading superpower has launched two wars, by some accounts religious wars, bullies other countries, and flaunts human rights.

However, the international community continues to expand human rights, recently by developing treaties on the rights of the disabled and the rights of migrants, and a convention on cultural rights. Humanitarian law is also evolving with the new International Criminal Court and states that include international humanitarian law in their constitutions or penal laws can try cases involving genocide and crimes against humanity.

Human rights provide sociologists with the authority to assert that homelessness is *wrong*, racism is *wrong*, poverty is *wrong* (and, yes, even, capitalism is wrong, if you are so inclined). For too long sociologists have equivocated about whether or not their personal values can intrude into their work. Human rights law is the expression of humanistic values that are embraced around the world and provides the ethical framework that makes the idea of a "neutral" social science look pretty silly. Besides, the global human rights revolution (as it is sometimes called) engages activists in all countries, giving sociologists plenty of opportunities to map social and political movements, and giving public sociologists plenty of opportunities to become engaged themselves.

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