

## **MAKING TRUTH : HUMAN RIGHTS ARE UNIVERSAL ONLY IF WE MAKE THEM SO**

In 1776, the creators of the American republic gathered at Philadelphia to issue their famed [Declaration of Independence](#) of the thirteen states of the United States of America. Early on in this now famous and historic statement, they declared that they 'hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.'

*What does this claim mean?*

All 56 of the signatories were indeed men, so maybe this is an example of that gendered term doing gender work. They were white settlers whose imagination did not seem to extend to the native Americans all around them. Nor to their slaves, as Carl reminded us in his comment on [Track two](#) last week. The equality that the document conjured up produced a Republic with the blind spots of its founders, a vision of humanity that has required decades of struggle to render less inhumane, and one that still requires great work to make itself a better place.

And yet, as revolutionaries have long understood - declaring something to be the case is a way of making it so.

The United States of America was even more of a figment of its declarers' dreams than were the human rights they said underpinned it. But it now undeniably, truly exists as the United States of America, as does the Republic of Ireland (more or less) [proclaimed](#) by Padraig Pearse and his cohort of desperate fighters on the steps of the Dublin's General Post Office on Easter Monday 1916.

*Proclaiming something is not enough to make it true, but it is a necessary preliminary in the struggle for its realisation.*

### **HELP FROM GOD**

The revolutionaries of 1776 were enlightenment men but even so they thought that it was the 'Creator' who had 'endowed' us with our rights. Thirteen years later, the French found it convenient to [declare](#) their 'sacred' rights of man 'in the presence and under the auspices of the Supreme Being.' True they weren't as sure as Padraig Pearse who declared his truths 'in the name of God,' but neither were they ruling Him out completely.

The 18<sup>th</sup> century rights revolutionaries might have been squeamish about the 'God' word but they were very serious about what underlay it. Their talk of a creator and a supreme being was not the irony of early secularists; it was the insecurity of a group of radicals still caught up in cultural theism.

Neither 'God' nor 'God-lite' can do this work today: *surely we are too clever, too happy with the power of our own brains to be lured into this short-cut?*

## TRUTH-MAKING WITHOUT GOD

The [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) of 1948 falls back on 'brotherhood'. Its first article declares that being 'endowed with reason and conscience,' we should 'act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood'.

I have already examined the shortcomings of the whole UN settlement in two common tracks, [one](#) and three. But there is nothing much wrong with this idea of 'brotherhood' apart perhaps from its dated language. Today we might say solidarity, and solidarity – old fashioned fraternity – conjures up the image of struggle.

*And it is struggle – if we are being precise, successful struggle – that turns truth in theory into truth in practice, potential truth into 'real' truth.*

Jefferson's truths were made real by Washington's guns; the rights of 1789 by the revolution that its fine words helped ignite. Even Pearse's 'blood sacrifice' was partly redeemed by Collins's mastery of guerrilla warfare. In contrast there are many rights claims that have long been forgotten: words without action to support them cannot last, no matter how fine they are. By definition I cannot give examples – lost truths do not come readily to mind.

## GROWING TRUTH

We are what we are today because in the generations that preceded us enough brave people took their cue from the revolutionaries of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and through their common action made talk of rights real. They did this often at a high price in terms of personal freedom and material convenience.

- The rejection of slavery epitomised by the resistance shown by Haiti to French colonialism and its [Declaration of Independence](#) of 1804.
- development of the idea of duties of humanity owed even to enemies in war-time: the Red Cross and the Laws of war
- The fight for the right to participate in government without regard to property ownership and education
- The imposition as obvious of the once extraordinary notion of universal education
- The emergence of the societal commitment to universal benefits
- The extension to the many of the civil liberties enjoyed in the past only by the select few.

Not all of these advances presented themselves in rights terms on their emergence, and none of them has ever been perfectly realised. But viewed cumulatively they reflect a culture that is well set on a human rights trajectory.

As beneficiaries of past struggles, these gains represent for those of us lucky enough to enjoy them a precious inheritance. *They are our universal human rights, made so by the battles of others.* If that universalism is incomplete then this is because the struggle which has got us this far is not at an end.

## DEFENDING TRUTH

Some scholars see human rights as real because of the consensus as to their truth that occurs across cultures, one culture overlapping with the other. On this account the test of an idea's truth is how natural it seems in how many places.

But what goes in can come out again. Truths may become obvious but then fall away, back into the obscurity from whence they came.

Human rights activists are so sure of themselves and the rightness of their cause that they have especial difficulty dealing with impermanence. Having won our victories surely we can relax and enjoy the fruits of the culture we have helped create?

*One truth never changes: making truth is hard, but keeping it is harder.*

Today's struggle is not only about extending our truths to others, it is hanging on to the truth we have.

On the plus side there are the advances that have been made in equality, dignity and accountability. These affect our schools, our media, our arts, the way we represent the world to ourselves. They are seemingly seamlessly integrated into the way most people feel and how they think. In many countries, these human rights gains are solidified in legal form, in written constitutions, bills of rights and domestic laws, rendering them still more firmly imprinted in how we think and what we do. The United Nations has its own human rights bodies seeking to do across the world (albeit imperfectly: common track three) what these many human rights actors do in their own domestic spheres.

On the other hand,

- The return of strong nationalist feelings is seriously eroding international ideals of universal entitlement
- The UN's inability to reach past nation states (see common track three again) is leaving it ill-equipped to challenge this rise in national chauvinism; indeed the structure of the UN partly encourages it

- An old idea about people being different and about this difference warranting differential treatment is beginning to seem sensible once again, starting with asylum seekers, and the Roma, moving across to refugees and then to immigrants and from there to ... *where?*

#### SOLIDARITY IS A FICKLE FRIEND

If we see the *truth* of human rights as rooted solely in struggle and solidarity and deny any deeper meaning, we have the advantage of not being lured into some kind of old fashioned philosophy, the embarrassment of seeking 'real truth' (in God? in the soul? where exactly?) in a way that we are told all rational people now know is quite impossible.

*But without real truth what can we do if solidarity and struggle turn against us, if new overlapping consensuses suggest a different, more brutal brand of 'common sense'?*

I have long thought we do indeed need more than what I have laid out here, that truth is reflected in solidarity rather than composed of it.

That is the subject of Track Eleven, 'Doing what comes naturally?' – a short preview: this deeper truth is essential even if we have to make it up. *Any early thoughts on where we can find truth if we push beyond what I have discussed here?*