

RESPONSES TO TRACK SIX

Who are we?

In thinking about whether we in the Global North can critique other places for their human rights violations, many of you rightly ended up reflecting on who 'we' are.

Paul Bernal began this, raising the question of the sins of our fathers and whether these require us to be silent now.

Are we our forefathers for these purposes?

I agree with Zoe Fiander when she says:

'Incidentally, I don't think past history of imperialism or atrocities has much bearing on respecting human rights in the present. For sure, these things are regrettable and deserve to be acknowledged, but they can't be changed and it would stifle progress if every state (that is, probably all of them) that had been responsible for human rights violations felt themselves unable to promote human rights on that basis.'

But nor are 'we' George Bush justifying water-boarding (Paul and Zoe again, agreeing on this).

'We' are ourselves, 'you' and 'I' and the groups to which we belong. Yes we are 'complicit' (Zoe's word) in the abuses of human rights for which our democratic society is currently responsible. If we did not think that, a read of Christina's moving post would make it crystal clear. It is in this sense that Paul is absolutely right when he says 'We should be brave enough to admit our own failings'.

Admit – and then work to change. Alex notes that 'Somebody high up in world politics needs to go first'. Well in order to make such action possible, we need first to be as Zoe says (returning to the language of earlier tracks) 'brave takers'.

SPREADING EMPATHY IS HARD TO DO

Favio Farinella reminds us that 'universal solidarity' is very difficult and Favio is right to do so. The government here in the UK has just agreed to compensate Guantanamo detainees for the damage done to them by alleged torture and the apparent involvement of our intelligence services in this, but all the talk in this country is of the [cost and need to preserve state secrets](#), not the horror that the cases might have revealed. Creating the political space for what Alex calls for is not easy.

HIERARCHIES OF HORRIBLE WRONGS

A few of you, Paul and Zoe particularly, tip-toed into this delicate world by raising the issue of proportionality. It surely matters that what happens in Burma/Myanmar and China is so much worse in human rights terms than what happens here.

Yes it does matter. Once we are clear about what human rights means and what are the values behind the term then we can not only spot its universal application but also credibly discriminate as between violations.

In the human rights activist community there is sometimes a tendency to reach for the most dramatic and extreme language when lesser words will do. Fine for that day's story – less fine when something worse comes along the next day. Literally words will fail. But they will fail because they have been too easily used earlier.

Proportionality is part of being careful about what we say and respecting language even at a price of what we think of as immediate impact.

SPEAKING TRUTH TO POWER?

Alex suggests it would be 'ludicrous' to think that 'our nagging about their human rights record' will cause North Korea or 'even somewhere such as China' to listen to us.

I applaud Alex's realism about UK power and also his end point (picked up by one or two of you) that the UK would do much better were it to work with the EU and even the UN in this field.

But even on our own we should nag, just as we should have nagged Mao, Pol Pot and Hitler (and many less malevolent but still abusive past governments).

Nagging is about standing by truth.

It might also work. Just because we know that Britain is not the imperial power it used to be doesn't mean that we now rush to the opposite extreme and castigate it as impotent. The UK is a big place, a strong one culturally, not a country that states just thoughtlessly offend. It's views on human rights matter even if it no longer has the imperial power to go with them (and a good thing too!).

DOUBLE-STANDARDS

This is an important sub theme in your responses, as Zoe says it is damaging if a country 'talks the talk but it doesn't walk the walk.' Wenwen Lu also alludes to this. I think this is an important issue and I do devote an entire track to it, under Manifesto Pledge Two (provocatively called 'Don't be too hard on hypocrisy').

In the course of his wide-ranging and thoughtful post, Joe Hoover comes to the key question of enforcement, which is so often tied up with this issue of double standards. I think it is absolutely key and we return to it again, just as we have discussed it in the past: see [track two](#) as well as other points across this project.

THE POWER OF UNIVERSALITY

Favio notes that while 'power is a deviation from human rights' on the one hand, on the other 'human rights need power to become effective'. I think we need to embrace this tension rather than run from it. Favio's post is a wonderful summary of how these tracks have been trying to work through this core insight.

Wenwen shows us what is at stake here. We learn that China fears a 'marriage between manifestos and the masses' – this lovely phrase captures exactly what we are about here. The 'China' in Wenwen's formulation is the China of the ruling party, not the China of indigenous protest, of brave takers like Liu Xiaobo. In an idea with which all human rights thinker-activists will identify, Wewen

admits to 'genuine faith in the State's future'. This is the 'beautiful revolutionary dream that motivates many cosmopolitan thinkers' as Joe so elegantly puts it (albeit Joe worries about its unrealism, but tomorrow's common sense is always yesterday's irrational idealism).

I don't think, incidentally, that Wenwen would agree with Joe that 'human rights will necessarily be reduced to the most minimal standards agreeable to powerful actors that dominate the cultural and political environment in which discussion happens' – and nor would I. I think that once human rights lose their idealistic streak and because just another way of doing international politics they lose much of their soul, and therefore their attractiveness.

Where Joe and I are in agreement though is on how we view human rights. Joe ends his post with his view of

'human rights as a universal politics, or a universal political ethos. Universalism doesn't require the same ideals/rules/laws enacted everywhere and always, but could point to a universalization of concern, solidarity and struggle for the values at the heart of the human rights movement.'

I think I can agree with every word of that.

AND WOMEN.....

Christina laments the lack of women in the responses to my tracks. I am not sure about how divided you all are on gender – but if there is a disparity – it is over to you my readers and correspondents to provide your own corrective – I hope by women joining rather than men desisting!