

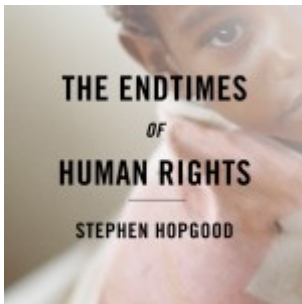


(SLOW) Food for Thought: End of an Era?

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Are we approaching the end of an era? A few prominent voices around us certainly seem to think so. In a recent interview in the [Humanité summer series](#) [Slavoj Žižek](#) argued that the historic era alliance of democracy and capitalism is drawing to a close. Given what the same thinker has earlier written on the need to be '[against human rights](#)' (Žizek 2005)', we suspect that he would be sympathetic of claims according to which we are also approaching the '[Endtimes of Human Rights](#)' as [Stephen Hopgood](#) argues in his forthcoming book (Hopgood 2013). [Lori Allen](#) has explored the similar theme in her recent publication [The Rise and Fall of Human Rights Cynicism and Politics in Occupied Palestine](#), 2013. Yet, if we believed [Costas Douzinas](#), this '[Last Utopia](#)' as famously phrased by [Samuel Moyn](#) (Moyn 2012) was already [over a decade ago](#) (Douzinas 2000).



[Hopgood, Stephen: The Endtimes of Human Rights](#). Forthcoming in October 2013

“We are living through the endtimes of the civilizing mission. The ineffectual International Criminal Court and its disastrous first prosecutor, Luis Moreno-Ocampo, along with the failure in Syria of the Responsibility to Protect are the latest pieces of evidence not of transient misfortunes but of fatal structural defects in international humanism. Whether it is the increase in deadly attacks on aid workers, the torture and ‘disappearing’ of al-Qaeda suspects by American officials, the flouting of international law by states such as Sri Lanka and Sudan, or the shambles of the Khmer Rouge tribunal in Phnom Penh, the prospect of one world under secular human rights law is receding. What seemed like a dawn is in fact a sunset. The foundations of universal liberal norms and global governance are crumbling.”—from *The Endtimes of Human Rights*

In a book that is at once passionate and provocative, Stephen Hopgood argues, against the conventional wisdom, that the idea of universal human rights has become not only ill adapted to current realities but also overambitious and unresponsive. A shift in the global balance of power away from the United States further undermines the foundations on which the global human rights regime is based. American decline exposes the contradictions, hypocrisies and weaknesses behind the attempt to enforce this regime around the world and opens the way for resurgent religious and sovereign actors to challenge human rights.

Historically, Hopgood writes, universal humanist norms inspired a sense of secular religiosity among the new middle classes of a rapidly modernizing Europe. Human rights were the product of a particular worldview (Western European and Christian) and specific historical moments (humanitarianism in the nineteenth century, the aftermath of the Holocaust). They were an antidote to a troubling



contradiction—the coexistence of a belief in progress with horrifying violence and growing inequality. The obsolescence of that founding purpose in the modern globalized world has, Hopgood asserts, transformed the institutions created to perform it, such as the International Committee of the Red Cross and recently the International Criminal Court, into self-perpetuating structures of intermittent power and authority that mask their lack of democratic legitimacy and systematic ineffectiveness. At their best, they provide relief in extraordinary situations of great distress; otherwise they are serving up a mixture of false hope and unaccountability sustained by “human rights” as a global brand.

The Endtimes of Human Rights is sure to be controversial. Hopgood makes a plea for a new understanding of where hope lies for human rights, a plea that mourns the promise but rejects the reality of universalism in favor of a less predictable encounter with the diverse realities of today’s multipolar world.

See discussion on book at [Open Democracy: Free Thinking for the World](#)

[Allen, Lori: The Rise and Fall of Human Rights Cynicism and Politics in Occupied Palestine, Stanford of University Press, Stanford, 2013](#)

The Rise and Fall of Human Rights provides a groundbreaking ethnographic investigation of the Palestinian human rights world—its NGOs, activists, and “victims,” as well as their politics, training, and discourse—since 1979. Though human rights activity began as a means of struggle against the Israeli occupation, it has since been professionalized and politicized, transformed into a public relations tool for political legitimization and state-making.

In failing to end the Israeli occupation, protect basic human rights, or establish an accountable Palestinian government, the human rights industry has become the



object of cynicism for many Palestinians. Lori Allen contends, however, that far from indicating apathy, such cynicism generates a productive critique of domestic politics and Western interventionism. The book's broad appeal lies in illuminating the successes and failures of Palestinians' varied engagements with human rights in their quest for independence.

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