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In the Name of Human Rights

Those who are guided by love and justice, and those who seek power and profit often act in the name of the same ideology: “Rulers have always found it convenient to rule in the name of an abstract idea (i.e. God, Family, Universal Beauty, Justice),” Mihai Spariosu insists.¹ *Humanity* as a concept was created during the time of the worst violence at the beginning of the Roman civil wars, Carlin Barton writes². As Roman territory grew, its population became more diverse and an abstract ideal such as the concept of humanity was needed to integrate the vast Roman expanse. Today, at the time of increasing globalization, the notion of universal human rights plays a similar role that the concept of humanity did during the expansion of the Roman empire. The ideology of Human Rights today is as much a road to economic and cultural expansion and dominance, as Catholicism was a way for the Catholic Kings, for example, to expand the Spanish empire. The 1964 U.S. House Report of the Committee on Foreign Affairs argued that “Through the use of modern instruments and techniques of communication it is possible today to reach large or influential segments of national populations - to inform them, to influence their attitudes, and at times perhaps even to motivate them to a particular course of action. These groups, in turn, are capable of exerting noticeable, even decisive, pressures on their governments.”³ In Eastern Europe Soros-funded human rights movement advocated above all the UNESCO’s designated objective of “the free flow of information,” which clearly addressed the concern of the intelligentsia and local political activists who, in the name of this human right, or “Glaznost”, as it

was called in the Soviet Union, took down their governments. In the case of Eastern Europe it was not necessary to use modern instruments of communication; listeners had a developed trust for radio stations such as “the voice of America” and the “voice of free Europe” because when these sources of information broadcasted liberating news at the end of the Second-World War there was no discrepancy between promises of peace and actual liberation. Unfortunately, fifty years later, the promise of freedom and respect for human rights was not the same. Cuba and the rest of the Latin America, on the other hand, were less gullible because concepts such as freedom and democracy have a different meaning for them. The end of the Second World War and the establishment of the United Nations and its Charter of Rights signified a peaceful future for Europeans; people did not suspect that wars would be fought in Europe because of violation of human rights, nor that Europe would be bombed again in a “humanitarian war” in the name of human rights.

One must agree with John Montgomery that to oppose or criticise the notion of freedom and human rights “would be equivalent of opposing motherhood, or the flag.”⁴ But, as one has to acknowledge that the system in the former Eastern Block was oppressive, not only because it did not allow free expression, but because the general population was almost as poor as the people of Cuba are today, yet party officials had not been sharing this burden equally with their people, it is important not to embrace blindly the politics of human rights, and it is equally important not to believe that state control is necessarily negative. The right to free expression has to be viewed in relation to other human rights, such as the right to food and shelter, the right to medic care and education, the right to cultural orientation, etc. Similarly, one should not assume that if an organization is a Non Governmental Organization that it is necessarily a-political and truly humanistic organization. In fact, I believe that it is

necessary that we begin to deconstruct the ideology and politics of human rights, and to examine the practice of NGOs. This should be done at every level of society, and it should particularly be a subject of study and teaching at all levels of formal education, in the way that theology, Renaissance humanism, philosophy of Enlightenment, or Marxism have been studied. If students were to be encouraged to think critically about human rights, to go beyond the simple policies of political correctness, and to be informed by sources other than TV, the general public may not be as quick then in supporting interventions which supposedly act to prevent violations of human rights. If we are to understand the complexity of the world and to view it in more than black and white manner, then cultural intelligence in the traditional sense of the word must play a more important role than political intelligence.

The fall of the Berlin Wall and the tumbling of the Iron Curtain have produced insufficient reaction from intellectuals on both side of the divide, yet the event marked a major change in the alignment of power. Recognizing that the cultural, sports and art worlds in the West were willing to absorb only the best players, dancers and musicians, those who are not Divac, Shostakovich, Nureyev or Borishnikov, now playing in Moscow subway stations, wonder about their rights to free expression, as they also recognize that the idea of state-sponsored music, dance, sport or education is gone for ever. Found in a new and difficult situation, Eastern Europeans are beginning to recognize their naivete in their struggle for human rights. In fact, it is clear to them that their struggle against communism was NOT at the same time a struggle for true freedom and democracy. For that reason, some former Communist dissidents have been using the Internet to warn against NGOs which are manipulated by strong economic forces. In an article posted on the website “Emperor’s Cloths,” Blagovesta Doncheva, a Bulgarian intellectual, for example, warned the Serbs during the period of the civil war in

the Former Yugoslavia who support the “democratic opposition” that “whatever terrible suffering they have gone through, these are nothing compared to what will befall them if the IMF and the Soros Foundation get hold of them.”⁵

Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s One Hundred Years of Solitude is not a novel that specifically addresses the culture of human rights and the economics of IMF. However, one of its many humorous scenes can be used to illustrate the relationship between economics, law and human rights and dignity. In this novel of Latin American Magical Realism, the uninitiated Aureliano Buendia enters the room and he finds:

the adolescent mulatto girl, with her small bitch’s teats, naked on the bed. Before Aureliano sixty three men had passed through the room that night. From being used so much, kneaded with sweat and sighs, the air in the room had begun to turn to mud. The girl took off the soaked sheet and asked Aureliano to hold it by one side. It was as heavy as a piece of canvas. They squeezed it, twisting it at the ends until it regained its natural weight. They turned over the mat and the sweat came out of the other side....

Two years before, far away from there, the girl had fallen asleep without putting out the candle and had awakened surrounded by flames. The house where she lived with the grandmother who had raised her was reduced to ashes. Since then her grandmother carried her from town to town, putting her to bed for twenty cents in order to make up the value of the burned house. According to the girl’s calculations, she still had ten years of seventy men per night, because she also had to pay the expenses of the trip and food for both of them as well as the pay of the Indians who carried the rocking

chair.... Aureliano felt an irresistible need to love her and protect her. At dawn, worn out by insomnia and fever, he made the calm decision to marry her in order to free her from the despotism of her grandmother and to enjoy all the nights of satisfaction that she would give the seventy men. But at ten o'clock in the morning, when he reached Catarino's store, the girl had left town.⁶

In this travelling sweatshop the girl's labour rights are clearly violated, and her human dignity is not respected. However, the only thing that she as a debtor is concerned about is how long it will take her and how many men per night she will have to sleep with to repay the money for the house. For the grandmother, who is in the position comparable to that of IMF and is driven by calculative reason and economics, the situation is quite clear: the girl burn down the house, and to raise money to repay it, the mathematics show that it will take sixty three men a night, twenty cents for each man, for the next ten years. The girl would also be legally bound to pay for the interest and expenses, such as food for everyone and carrying charges for the Indians. Thus, according to the dictates of reason, mathematics, and legal contracts, there is little room for the girl's rights. Subsequently, Joel Feinber's pronouncement that "Rights are not mere gifts or favours, motivated by love or pity.... [but] something a man can stand on, something that can be demanded or insisted upon without embarrassment or shame"⁷ is noble in spirit but not easy to implement, particularly if the ideology of Human Rights has insisted on the rights of the individual where there is not a strong community to assist the one who might gather the courage to demand.

If the girl were to appeal to article XXII of the American Bill of Rights which mandates that "Every person has the right to associate with others to promote, exercise and protect his legitimate

interests of a political, economic, religious, social, cultural, professional, labour and union” rights, she would have suffered even more disastrous consequences. In the following quote García Márquez presents a child’s dream which is based on a 1928 real incident which Columbian official history had failed to record:

Macondo had been a prosperous place and well on its way until it was disordered and corrupted and suppressed by the banana company, whose engineers brought on the deluge as a pretext to avoid promises made to the workers.... The child described with precise and convincing details how the army had machine-gunned more than three thousand workers penned up by the station and how they loaded the bodies onto a two-hundred-car train and threw them into the sea. Convinced as most people were by the official version that nothing had happened, Fernanda was scandalized with the idea that the child had inherited the anarchist ideas of colonel Aureliano Buendía, and told him to be quiet (354).

To protect the faceless foreign employer, in this case the United Fruit Company, and to avoid possible retribution, the International Corporation’s lawyers create a paper trail to show that the company had closed down before the incident took place. According to documents, workers were contracted by local subcontractors, not by the powerful firm. Consequently, the distant boss is not obliged to pay compensation or pensions to worker’s relatives, or to the surviving employees, because although they worked on the banana plantations and the company collected the profit, they did not work for the United Fruit Company. Regina Janes explains that “the system of contract labour allowed both native growers and United Fruit to evade the provision of Columbian law intended to protect workers.”⁸

García Márquez uses the wording “the workers did not exist”(234) to try and portray to the reader how obscene it must have been to the employees of the banana company to be faced with the fact that they were not actually employees at all. An extra element of ridicule is added with the description that this preposterous statement was put down in “solemn decrees” (324), conveying how seriously the powerful vindicated such an obvious charade. Being the ultimate authority, the law is able to manipulate and exploit the people under the very rights meant to protect them.

In his mode of writing known as Magical Realism, García Márquez either takes real incidents and transferred them into a dream, or he presents imagined situations as if they were visible reality. His characters and his readers act as if this transformation from the visible to the imagined and vice versa were their common experience. And perhaps it is. Fiction and reality are frequently intertwined.

Prior to the foreign military intervention in the Bosnian Civil war, women across the globe stood up and demonstrated for the two hundred thousand raped Muslim women. They demanded that the violation of women be stopped and that those responsible be brought to justice. This healthy attitude and important international solidarity have to be commended. However, if international human rights and humanist movements are to be successful, they cannot be sentimental or naive. When the number of raped Muslim women dropped from two hundred thousand to twenty thousand, most of the women in the West had another cause to follow. There is no doubt that it is a horrible crime to rape even two women, not two hundred or twenty thousand, but it must be equally wrong to drop 6,000 tons of bombs on innocent people whose compatriot soldiers allegedly raped Muslim women. Most of the people who were protesting to defend the human rights of Bosnian Muslim women hardly noticed that in 1995 the greatest might of Earth waged an undeclared war against 850,000 Serbian men, women

and children in Bosnia (this took place four years prior to the bombing of Kosovo and Serbia in 1999). The decision to bomb the Serbs in Bosnia was based on the rape reports and on the *Markale* marketplace massacre which were blamed on the Serbs. When Deutsch Presse-Agentur reported in June of 1996 that “For the first time, a senior UN official has admitted the existence of a secret UN report that blames the Bosnian Moslems for the February 1994 *Markale* massacre”⁹ it became clear only to some that Magical Realism, or integration of magical reality and (killing)reality extend beyond Latin American experience. Equally marvellously real is Maj.-Gen. Lewis MacKenzie question in 2004 “Did we bomb the wrong side [in Kosovo]?”. Now retired commander of UN troops write: “Since the NATO/UN intervention in 1999, Kosovo has become the crime capital of Europe. The sex slave trade is flourishing. The province has become an invaluable transit point for drugs en route to Europe and North America. Ironically, the majority of the drugs come from another state “liberated” by the West, Afghanistan. Members of the demobilized, but not eliminated, KLA are intimately involved in organized crime and the government.” MacKenzie then explains that KLA gained sympathy in the West when their attacks on Serbain security forces in the early 1990s were met with Milosevic’s heavy-handed response. However, “There was no genocide as claimed by the West—the 100,000 allegedly buried in mass graves turned out to be around 2, 000, of all ethnic origins, including those killed in combat during the war itself.” Hence, Major-General concludes: “The Kosovo-Albanians have played us like a Stradivarius.”¹⁰

John Montgomery is absolutely right that “to oppose human right is equivalent of opposing motherhood.” Yet it is also not difficult to show that just as major conquests have taken place in the name of God, major questionable wars are being won in the name of Human and Minority Rights.

Mihai Spariosu is also right that rulers will always rule in the name of some noble ideal, but if our academies teach theories of deconstruction, they should also be applied, and we should be deconstructing not only the ideologies of the past, but also the ideologies of the present. We must also keep in mind that while it is easy for the powerful and the privileged to demand that rights be respected, the power to make such demands and to acquire what is demanded is not available to those who are less fortunate. For them the concept of *individual* rights is almost meaningless. Gabriel Garcia Marquez and other Latin American writers of the famous literary Boom wrote at the time of the worst violations of human rights in their part of the world, yet, they did not use the language or advocate notions presented by the ideology and politics of Rights. We should ask ourselves why did they not write withing the ideology of Rights?

Endnotes

1. Mihai Spariosu, *Literature, Mimesis and Play*, Tübingen: NARR, 1982, 17.
2. Carlin A. Barton, *Roman Honour: The Fire in the Bones* (Berkeley: U of California P, 2001) 272.
3. 88th Congress, House Report No. 1352, 27 April 1964, 7.
4. John Warwick Montgomery, Human Rights and Human Dignity (Dallas, Texas: Probe Books, 1986) 17.
5. <http://www.emperors-clothes.com/articles/doncheva/donch3.htm>
6. Gabriel Garcia Marquez, One Hundred Years of Solitude, trans. Gregory Rabassa (New York: Harper Perennial, 1991) 53-4.
7. Joel Feinberg, “Duties, Rights and Claims,” American Philosophical Quarterly, 3:2 (1966): 8.
8. Regina Janes, “Liberals, Conservatives and Bananas: Columbian Politics in the Fictions of Gabriel García Márquez,” Modern Critical Views–Gabriel García Márquez, ed. Harold Bloom (New York:

Chelsea House Publishers, 1989) 141.

9. Stella L. Jatrass, Washington Post, 10-25-98.

10.Maj.-Gen. Lewis MacKenzie, "We bombed the wrong side?" National Post, 04-08-2004.