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Ignatieff Symposium

Human Rights and the Ordinary Virtues

Michael Ignatieff*

In my book, *The Ordinary Virtues: Moral Order in a Divided World*, I set out to explore what impact human rights have had upon the ordinary virtues. By these virtues, I mean the default moral operating system of ordinary people in real empirical settings at a specific moment in history, that is, since 1945. The question I asked was whether human rights has become a global ethic, a standard reference point for moral judgment in ordinary life in cultures around the world. To evaluate this question, I led a small team, sponsored by the Carnegie Council on Ethics in International Affairs in New York, on a journey to seven specific sites in search of answers.

Jackson Heights, New York, was chosen as the first site because it includes the most ethnically diverse census tract of any county in the United States. This allowed us to ask what value systems, specifically what role human rights might play, in sustaining the complex network of inter-ethnic accommodation and bargaining that underpins a hyper-diverse inner city neighbourhood.

In the second site visit, to the diverse neighbourhoods in Los Angeles, we continued to explore the same question—what moral operating systems sustain hyper diverse inter ethnic co-operation—but we did so with the recent violent history of Los Angeles in mind. In 1992, it had been torn apart by racial violence, and so in this context, the question became how city and neighbourhood leaders repair the moral codes of cooperation and toleration that were fractured by a civic insurrection.

In the third journey, to Rio De Janiero, we continued our exploration of the moral operating systems that bring order to the poorest neighbourhoods of the city, the favelas, in a context of significant political corruption, police violence and high levels of inequality.

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In these three urban sites, we found many commonalities, among them, the decisive importance of decent policing if local communities are to sustain and renew their moral operating systems. What we did not find was any evident recourse to human rights as a language of responsibility or obligation among and between people. Instead, we found a language of ordinary virtue: local, contextual, anti-theoretical, anti-ideological, uninterested in generalizing universal obligations from local settings.

In two other settings on our journey—Bosnia and Myanmar—our focus shifted from the moral operating systems that sustain moral life within urban communities to the impact that external human rights scrutiny has upon the moral life of those living inside divided societies. We chose Bosnia because it has been a ward of the international community, with sustained efforts by NGO's, the European Union, the US to promote reconciliation and trust among ethnic groups who had slaughtered each other between 1992 and 1995. We found that these efforts at external human rights invigilation had limited impact in overcoming the fractures of hatred and violence. Memories of hurt are strong. External human rights advocacy of tolerance and reconciliation turned out to be weak by comparison.

In Myanmar, the question was why domestic opinion in the Burman majority remained so hostile to external human rights actors criticizing the regime for its violence against the Rohingya. Here ordinary virtues—loyalty to Burmese national traditions—and human rights found themselves on opposing sides, with the result that human rights activists, most of them outside the country, lost standing with the local population.

In South Africa, the sixth destination in our journey, human rights played a different role. Here, thanks to Nelson Mandela, the ANC and several generations of courageous activists, human rights had been integrated into the new post-apartheid constitution of 1994. This document set out the terms of political competition and interracial co-operation and also defined the social aspirations of the black South African majority in rights language, promising them housing, jobs, land and prosperity. Twenty-five years on, the human rights revolution promised in 1994 remains cruelly distant. We found a South Africa struggling with the question of whether to jettison the rights framework in which its original dream had been framed in favour of a more radical language of forcible redistribution of land and property from the white minority.

The final journey in the book took us to Japan, to explore the moral lives of survivors of the earthquake, tsunami and radiation that devastated the Fukushima region in 2011. We were in search of what resilience means when all is lost, and we found, once again, that the virtues that did the work were not those of an abstract human obligation, as framed in the language of human rights, but a more contextual virtue, framed by local memory and historical tradition.

We drew two distinct conclusions from these journeys. First of all, human rights remains an elite discourse of human rights practitioners; it is not anchored in the daily practice and speech of the people we interviewed around the world. Far more

important were the local virtues: contextual, locally meaningful definitions of virtues of tolerance, forbearance, live and let live. These were the values that sustained the moral operating system of ordinary lives in normal times and helped maintain resilience in times of disaster. Our second conclusion, and here the impact of human rights was discernible, everyone we spoke to took their own moral significance for granted, their right to speak and their right to be heard. In this more oblique way, we concluded, the rights revolution initiated in 1945 has helped to foster a revolution in moral expectation.