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Speaking Rights To Power

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In troubled times, the role of a political scientist should be as it has always been: to speak rights to power. Knowledge is power and an antidote to the politics of fear. The social responsibility of the academy—especially in public institutions—meets our duties as citizens to protect and empower our civil society and to safeguard democratic institutions and freedoms. Human rights are nonpartisan but not apolitical; they mandate that power holders respect, protect, and fulfill the liberties, enabling life conditions, and identity of all members of society. Human rights are at the same time an ethos of governance, an international regime, a toolbox of political strategies, a worldwide social movement, and an academic field of inquiry.

This article outlines how lessons drawn from a generation of human-rights scholarship can inform policy guidance, social-movement campaigns, and civic education in an increasingly illiberal and conflicted world. There are three ways that scholars of social science can and must speak: analyzing and disseminating the lessons of global history, fostering communicative action by and for democratic movements, and deepening civic education—within and beyond the academy.

We are all dual citizens—of our country and of the republic of letters. As such, we stand on the shoulders of a historic global community of engaged social scientists who analyzed the requisites and meaning of political action to resist tyranny—from Hannah Arendt to Zygmunt Bauman. We face now the specter of a populist leader who seeks to curtail the rights of refugees, racial and religious minorities, women, terrorism suspects, and poor people. Trump's systematic attacks on America's international commitments, constitutional norms, and political culture are characterized by the flagship organization Human Rights Watch as illustrative of a "profound threat to human rights" in the rise of demagogues across powerful and conflicted democracies (Human Rights Watch 2017).

Scholars of political communications and social psychology point to the power of narrative and framing to foster political mobilization: on one side, hegemonic suppression of class consciousness through appeals to nativism; on the other, collective action overcoming coordination problems with "rights talk." Communication theorist Manuel Castells (2009), a survivor of Spain's Franco dictatorship, outlined the dynamics of "communication power" to reconstruct interests and identities in "the information society." Cognitive scientist George Lakoff (2016) emphasized the importance of frames, metaphors, and moral appeals. In *Speaking Rights to Power* (2013), I applied these insights to human-rights campaigns across a wide variety of eras and societies and constructed a narrative framework that traces the impact of the voice, frame, performance, media, and audience of "rights talk" in securing rights recognition, solidarity, and reform.

Speaking rights to power means using our voice as citizens and scholars to ask the right questions: Who is human? What is right? Who is responsible? (Brysk 2005). Historical, comparative, and theoretical understandings of human rights converge around the communicative agenda of contesting dehumanization as a barrier to voice, asserting the interdependence and indivisibility of rights as a frame for what is right and documenting the interaction between global and national citizenship rights and responsibilities.

WHO IS HUMAN?

The historic progress of human rights has been an uneven, contested expansion of the reach of rights toward universal inclusion across all categories of identity: race, religion, gender, class, ethnicity, descent, and sexual orientation. All forms of dominance and dictatorship thrive by impeding or reversing this dynamic of defining who is human. Historical studies show how dehumanization is exercised through denigration and labeling, physical segregation, and triggering ideologies such as racism and xenophobia. Whether assigning numbers to prisoners in Nazi concentration camps, inciting attacks on Rwandan Tutsi as "cockroaches," systematic segregation in the United States and South Africa, forced disappearance of dissidents in Latin American dictatorships, or labeling Muslims as terrorists and Mexicans as rapists, dehumanizing strategies facilitate human-rights abuse by triggering public fear and disabling bystander empathy.

Defense against these forms of dehumanization comes through representation, solidarity, and inclusion. Humanizing representation involves projecting an individualized voice that evokes universal themes of agency, dignity, and vulnerability to promote recognition. All movements must cultivate "poster children" to personalize appeals and must not rely solely on abstract statistics or slogans. Solidarity is built by cross-cutting coalitions, which often are based on bridging narratives of common plight; "We are all ___" (Brysk 2013). An outstanding recent example is the B'nai B'rith Anti-Defamation League pledging that if Muslims are required to register, its Jewish members would symbolically join them. Inclusion requires explicit redefinition of invisible or stigmatized groups as worthy citizens and legitimate members of the body politic, which was brilliantly exercised by Khizr Khan, father of a slain Muslim soldier, who spoke at the Democratic Convention. One measure of the strength of this strategy was the subsequent surge of citizens and volunteer lawyers who appeared at American airports to defend immigrants

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from seven Muslim countries in the wake of Donald Trump's attempted refugee ban.

WHAT IS RIGHT?

Human rights also rise or falter with social contests over what is right—and why. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights and numerous associated treaties that the United States endorsed summarize the doctrine of human rights as "free and equal in rights and dignity" and specify a wide range of universal civil, social, physical integrity, and cultural entitlements. The United States also is bound by human-rights commitments under the social contract of international society to collective protection of refugees; accountability for war crimes; and standards against genocide, torture, and discrimination. These commitments have been translated to the American experience when water activists in Flint, Michigan, appealed to the United Nations; UN bodies condemned US police violence against minorities; and Native Americans received support from global treaties and transnational solidarity (Warikoo 2016).

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What is right is universal, constantly struggling with a historic tendency for American exceptionalism (Forsythe and McMahon 2016). The case for cosmopolitanism—the construction of a liberal world order and global governance for common problems—has been sidelined in American discourse, but it rests on an ethos of reciprocity. Social science has demonstrated the efficacy of reciprocity in theories and history of the evolution of cooperation—especially collaboration to face transnational threats such as terrorism (Brysk and Shafir 2007). Robust peer-reviewed research shows that a country's use of torture increases the incidence and severity of terrorism; conversely, better respect for rights improves a country's long-term security (Murdie 2017). We must redeploy this evidence in the halls of power and educate unschooled policy makers.

Thus, the case for rights is also the case for community, solidarity, and interdependence. The 1993 Vienna Conference on Human Rights endorsed by most of the world's states concluded that rights are "universal, indivisible, and interdependent," echoing Martin Luther King's American ethos that "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere" (1963). This means that solidarity is not (only) altruism—it is enlightened self-interest. Because worldwide comparisons show that higher-quality democracies are more peaceful and prosperous and they assure greater well-being for their citizens, civic education should remind mass publics that rights are not only what make countries good—they are part of what make countries great (Landman 2013).

Interdependence also means that rights at home are linked to rights abroad and that acting globally is in the national interest. As a constructivist approach reminds us, power is legitimated by purpose, and world order helps to construct sustainable influence—that is, we can help to make rights make sense (Brysk 2009). Moral and material interests are intertwined, and both isolationism and unprincipled intervention generate global commons problems including refugee surges, public health crises, and transnational crime emanating from failed and postconflict states. Concerned policy makers must be reminded that carefully designed international institutions, democracy assistance, civil-society promotion, and multilateral humanitarian intervention are an investment in US security. Perhaps one of the best supported worldwide patterns is the connection among each state's respect for women's rights, contribution to international peace and security, and global good citizenship (Brysk and Mehta 2014; Hudson et al. 2012).

Another aspect of thinking globally falls on the civil-society side. US activists must move beyond artificial separation of international human rights from civil and constitutional rights, and they must engage the lessons and networks of international partners and global trends to confront worldwide illiberal populisms (Rodriguez-Garavito 2016). Just as the global circulation of Gandhian modalities empowered the US civil-rights movement, in the current era, we can learn new repertoires of contention and frames from comparative studies of our peers. For example, the struggle to defend health rights as human rights in the United States may be informed by AIDS activists' worldwide struggle to define access to essential medicines as a human right. A key constituent of the Los Angeles Women's March, attended by more than 700,000 citizens, was Planned Parenthood—which marched and chanted under the banner of "health rights as human rights."

WHO IS RESPONSIBLE?

Human-rights scholarship also broadens the question of who is responsible—the fundamental question of governance. Institutions matter—from international treaties to the worldwide "justice cascade" of human-rights trials to national institutions such as Ombudsman and civil-rights agencies (Cardenas 2014; Sikkink 2011; Simmons 2009). We must bring this knowledge back to defend against "electoralist" regressions and backlash in institutional guarantees, as outlined by Nexon (2016). Another cautionary note is the emerging human-rights scholarship that claims that weak states and institutional power vacuums may worsen the level of violations (Englehart 2009). This means that along with guarding against state overreach, we also must be vigilant regarding the haphazard dismantling of rights-protective institutions and the privatization of legally accountable, state-based coercive institutions (e.g., prisons and police forces). The majority

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of immigration detainees are held in private prisons, which have been sued for sexual abuse, medical neglect, and forced labor—and the stock prices of these companies have risen sharply since the inception of Trump's expansion of immigration enforcement (Picchi 2017; Tchekmedyian 2017).

However, human-rights scholarship also shows how law and national institutions are necessary but not sufficient.

These pathways to rights are especially salient when threats to them come from above and below the state—such as displacement of labor rights by globalization and women's protection against violence, which are at issue in the Trump presidency.

We can expand the rights repertoire by crafting new frames, vernacularizing global norms, building horizontal transnational networks, granting standing to new stakeholders, and installing "sticky" rights benchmarks in both law and policy standards. Studies of the politics of rights show that institutional-reform efforts must be complemented by rights-based public policy, socially responsible business and economic development, rights education, and norm promotion (Brysk 2002; Brysk and Stohl 2017). These pathways to rights are especially salient when threats to them come from above and below the state—such as displacement of labor rights by globalization and women's protection against violence within society, which are at issue in the Trump presidency. As the director of an international network of 270 social-change movements recently affirmed, a wide range of social-justice campaigns worldwide are using the human-rights framework to build broad coalitions against inequality and illiberalism that touch these issues—including campaigns in the United States (Grove 2017).

Reconstructing an American human-rights movement is our work as citizens of both republics. The January 21 wave of Women's Marches, the growth of a grassroots democracy movement called "Indivisible," solidarity movements for undocumented migrants such as "United We Dream," and the April March for Science defending academic freedom—all rights-based citizen action beyond traditional political-party structures—suggest that communicative action is beginning to reconstitute rights norms, bridge constituencies, and deepen democracy. At the institutional level, an energized American Civil Liberties Union and associated rising community-of-"cause lawyering" defeated the Muslim travel ban, defended voting rights against racially discriminatory restrictions, and protected women's access to reproductive rights in several jurisdictions. Human-rights education projects are flourishing, building on K-12 Holocaust and tolerance education requisites in key states and the growth of human-rights majors, minors, and masters' programs in universities (University of Connecticut Human Rights Institute, available at http://humanrights.uconn.edu/teaching-human-rights-database). In the years to come, human-rights scholarship must guide this burgeoning mobilization along the path "from moment to movement"—thinking globally and bringing to bear the lessons of history. Our vocation is to stand with our students, our communities, our democracy, and global civil society, speaking rights to power. ■

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