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978-0-521-85724-6 - The Work of Global Justice: Human Rights as Practices

Fuyuki Kurasawa

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The Work of Global Justice

Human rights have been generally understood as juridical products, organizational outcomes or abstract principles that are realized through formal means such as passing laws, creating institutions or formulating ideals. In this book, Fuyuki Kurasawa argues that we must reverse this 'top-down' focus by examining how groups and persons struggling against global injustices construct and enact human rights through five transnational forms of ethico-political practice: bearing witness, forgiveness, foresight, aid and solidarity. From these, he develops a new perspective highlighting the difficult social labour that constitutes the substance of what global justice is and ought to be, thereby reframing the terms of debates about human rights and providing the outlines of a critical cosmopolitanism centred around emancipatory struggles for an alternative globalization.

FUYUKI KURASAWA is Associate Professor of Sociology and Social and Political Thought at York University in Toronto; Faculty Fellow of the Center for Cultural Sociology at Yale University; and Co-President of the International Sociological Association's Research Committee on Sociological Theory. He is the author of *The Ethnological Imagination: A Cross-Cultural Critique of Modernity* (2004).

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To Toronto and New York City,
urban muses and arenas of a cosmopolitanism
of the everyday

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Preface

This book, like many others I suppose, was born out of a false start of sorts. A few years ago, wrestling with the legacy of the twentieth century after reading Eric Hobsbawm's *Age of Extremes* and Paul Ricoeur's *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*, I began researching the aftermath of the atomic bomb blasts in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. While initially interested in what occurred in Japan itself, I rapidly became engrossed in the Faustian tale of some of the US-based physicists who had participated in the Manhattan Project out of which the atomic bomb was invented. Having come to realize the fearsome powers they had unleashed as well as the appropriation of the use of such powers by military and political leaders, brilliant and often mercurial figures such as J. Robert Oppenheimer, Hans Bethe and Leo Szilard felt a sense of responsibility, in differing ways and degrees, for what transpired on those fateful days in August 1945 and for the implications of the existence of atomic weapons for the future of humankind. Remorse was a common reaction, politicization was another – the latter leading to the establishment of what became known as the scientists' movement in the postwar United States and the founding of the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, among other initiatives. Although the following pages carry few traces of this initial project, I discovered the book's themes through it. In retrospect, what fascinated me was how the scientists' movement grappled with, and eventually developed, a set of public and transnational strategies to respond to the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings: bearing witness to the victims' and survivors' suffering, seeking forgiveness, advocating foresight to prevent nuclear warfare, assisting survivors and cultivating a sense of planetary solidarity.

Regardless of how productive a starting-point the scientists' movement may have been, the issues it raised required dramatically recasting the project. Indeed, what came to the fore were questions about the cultivation of a sense of concern for temporally or spatially distant others that, when connected to contemporary struggles for an alternative world order, frame one of the central dynamics of our age: the project of global justice.

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However, upon researching this topic, I was struck by the formalist, top-down bias that pervades its scholarly treatment; more often than not, global justice is reduced to a normative endeavour (discovering universal ethical principles), a juridical construct (legally entrenching human rights) or an institutional outcome (designing a new infrastructure of global governance). All of these initiatives are necessary, of course, but their vantage-points from above do not, to my mind, capture the substantive core of what constitutes global justice. For their part, empirical studies of the numerous progressive actors that compose the nascent sphere of global civil society tend to exist in a descriptive register, examining the organizational and strategic dimensions of campaigns and civic associations dedicated to global justice without adequately accounting for the webs of social relations that underlie it.

To address these limitations, I contemplated the idea of conceptualizing global justice as social labour, that is to say, as a reality substantively made up of ethical and political tasks that actors strive to accomplish by confronting difficulties and obstacles. In this manner, the crucial question becomes less the specification of norms, rules and institutional configurations, or the description of progressive forces, than the interpretation of how global justice is enacted – the ways in which groups and persons produce it by engaging in patterns of intersubjective, public and transnational social action that can be transposed across different historical and geographical settings. Hitherto neglected, it is the arduous, contingent and perpetual processes of making and doing of global justice that I want to highlight. Accordingly, the book discusses the work of global justice, and hones in on five modes of human rights practice (bearing witness, forgiveness, foresight, aid and solidarity) in order to grasp how the building of an alternative globalization can proceed. Ultimately, I would argue, we can gain significant insights into struggles to end structural and situational injustices in the world by viewing them as ethico-political practices. Moreover, the critical and substantive approach advanced here supplies widely discussed cosmopolitan ideas with an action-theoretical grounding, one that studies how they are being put into practice from below. The work of global justice, then, represents a manifestation of critical cosmopolitanism.

Despite being wary of self-aggrandizing confessions seeking to generate a facile and clichéd pathos, I must admit that this has not been an easy book to write. The choice of subject ensured that this would be the case, since it required that I devote the last few years to immersing myself in some of the most horrific events and manifestations of structural and situational violence in human history, by whatever means were at my disposal: official reports and first-person accounts, art exhibitions and

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plays, documentary films and still photographs, among others. That the task has been all-consuming, and at times draining, is clearly insignificant when compared to the experiences of those who perished or survived such circumstances. None the less, the suffering that lies at the heart of this book is haunting in both its intensity and scale. There is little solace, only the appeal to scholars and citizens to relentlessly confront global injustices until they are overcome. What, indeed, could be more pressing for the human sciences today?

The fact that lives could be destroyed with such impunity and that human dignity could be trampled upon so desultorily, not to mention that unjust situations and systemic factors are neither natural nor necessary, is dispiriting and infuriating in equal doses. At the same time, this realization need not, and ought not, result in believing in the metaphysical inevitability of crimes against humanity and instances of structural violence – a view all-too-often shared by stoic fatalists and despondent determinists alike. We need to explain why grave human rights violations continue to occur and reoccur (design, neglect, denial, indifference, etc.), but simultaneously to think about how they could be halted or prevented altogether. Neither great optimism nor pessimism about our current and future state of affairs animates me, although I do want to insistently claim that a just world order exists as a viable project in our age, that is to say, as no more and no less than a historical possibility on the terrain of socio-political struggle.

On another note, while striving to maintain a certain analytical distance from progressive social forces involved in attempting to create an alternative globalization, I must admit being largely sympathetic to the causes they defend and the criticisms they mount about the existing global system. For this, I make no apologies, yet it should not be taken to mean that this book represents a paean to these groups' status as the new emancipatory agents of history, nor even that I am taking at face value their effectiveness or self-understandings as disinterested guardians of human rights; for example, even the most commendable humanitarian non-governmental organizations provide emergency relief to needy populations while keeping one eye on their institutional interests (fundraising, public relations, stature with governments, etc.). To recognize such facts requires a dose of realism, albeit stripped of the *prima-facie* dismissiveness or utter cynicism that passes for critical thinking in some quarters of academia.

I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the numerous persons who have played a role in the writing of this book. Jeffrey C. Alexander supported the project unstintingly from its inception, with his vast doses of constructive criticism and spirited intellectual engagement. At

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Yale University more generally, I have learned much from the community of scholars clustered around the Center for Cultural Sociology; aside from Alexander, thanks are due to Philip Smith and Ron Eyerman, as well as the graduate students there, all of whom have made my stays at the Center stimulating and enjoyable. At New York University and the Social Science Research Council, Craig Calhoun has made his theoretical nous and his vast knowledge of global affairs and the human sciences available to me, while offering encouragement and advice at several stages. I attended Nancy Fraser's graduate course on 'Postnational Democratic Justice' at the New School for Social Research during a crucial period of gestation for the ideas found herein. For their interest in the project and their assistance at various points, I would also like to acknowledge Feyzi Baban, Lucy Baker, Amy Bartholomew, Ulrich Beck, Seyla Benhabib, Bruce Curtis, Peter Dews, Alessandro Ferrara, Roger Friedland, Neil Gross, Sheryl Hamilton, Michael Hardt, Geoffrey Hartman, Morgan Holmes, Axel Honneth, Fuat Keyman, Will Kymlicka, Michèle Lamont, Steven Lukes, Bryan Massam, Abdul Karim Mustapha, Maria Pia Lara, Graça Almeida Rodrigues, Cristina Rojas, Patrick Savidan, Lesley Sparks, Frédéric Vandenberghe, Charles Weiner, Michel Wieviorka and Anthony Woodiwiss. Obviously, none of them can be held responsible for the book's shortcomings. I am grateful to the audiences at lectures and presentations where parts of the argument were first introduced: the American Sociological Association (including its Junior Theorists' Symposium), the Canadian Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences, Carleton University, the Institute of Philosophy of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic, the International Social Theory Consortium, Koc University, the New University of Lisbon, Wilfrid Laurier University, the World Congress of Sociology and Yale University.

At York University, which remains a rather unique site of interdisciplinarity and theoretically robust critical scholarship, I am grateful to Debi Brock, Gordon Darroch, Lorna Erwin, Ratiba Hadj-Moussa, Gerald Kernerman, Janine Marchessault, Brian Singer, Leah Vosko, Lorna Weir and the outstanding group of graduate students whom I have taught and am supervising. Dean Robert Drummond of the Faculty of Arts provided financial support and research leave. I wrote the bulk of an early version of the manuscript while holding a Fulbright Fellowship at Yale University and New York University in 2003–4, and am grateful to the Canada-US Fulbright Program Foundation and the US Institute of International Education for the opportunity. Through a Standard Research Grant, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada made the entire project possible.

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An earlier version of Chapter 3 appeared as ‘The Global Culture of Prevention and the Work of Foresight’ in *Constellations* 11, 4 (2004), pp. 453–75. Similarly, an earlier version of Chapter 5 was published as ‘A Cosmopolitanism from Below: Alternative Globalization and the Creation of a Solidarity Without Bounds’ in the *Archives européennes de sociologie* 45, 2 (2004), pp. 233–55. I thank both publishers for permission to reprint portions of these articles.

The book is dedicated to the two cities where I wrote it. There is much talk of cosmopolitanism today, but to witness it being negotiated more mundanely on the streets and in daily life is a source of political hope, and of theoretical humility. As always, I owe my family and friends eternal gratitude for their unflagging support and understanding. And a final dedication goes to Gloria Kim; she knows why.