Our Common Humanity: Reflections of a Human Practitioner

Christophe Peschoux*

Introduction

This article is a reflection on human rights based on my professional experience. I have worked in this field for the past thirty years in different organisations, different countries and several regions of the world. It has been a very enriching experience, personally and professionally—a continuous school of life. I will thus try to share some of what I have learnt during these years, the understanding of human rights that I have acquired and developed through this experience, and how it has been nurturing and guiding my thinking, action and life, since I believe that human rights start at home. Not being a lawyer, I have worked more on the basis of human rights principles than human rights norms¹, since I have soon realized that when the principles are understood and integrated, the adoption of their normative formulation becomes a technical question. In these pages, I will seek to respond the following questions from a practical point of view: What are human rights? What values and principles underpin them? What is their relevance to our lives, individually and collectively? To what extent do they reflect norms of behaviour that are universally applicable? Do we share a common humanity that human rights may be the guardians? How do human rights relate to the notion of the rule of law, and, in China, but also elsewhere, to the construction of a just and “harmonious society”²?

* Christophe Peschoux is a staff member of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights based in Geneva. This article reflects his views and not those of the United Nations.

¹ By human rights norms, I mean the legal norms and standards which have been developed by States, through the United Nations, into international conventions and bodies of principles and other soft law instruments.

² The notion of a “harmonious society” was introduced by Hu Jintao, a former President of the People’s Republic of China (2002–2012) as a vision and objective of China’s socioeconomic development. Harmony is a central concept in traditional Chinese philosophy—particularly in Confucianism—as a hierarchical model of organisation that governs all relations—family, interpersonal and relations between citizens and state. This model assigns a fixed place and
I have observed that general discussions about human rights and their universality often drive away points of view, as the discussion evolves into an ideological debate. I also observed that what binds together human rights practitioners, besides the bonds of fraternal solidarity that are forged through common sympathy and action, is the common challenge to look for solutions to concrete human rights issues. Whilst there may be different roads leading to the protection of individuals and society from abuses of power by the State—which is, historically how human rights came about—the challenge remains the same: how to define the practical rules that will ensure the protection of the exercise and enjoyment of human rights, and to reduce the risks that conflicts in society turn into violence. I will thus try to bring the discussion “down to earth”—where human rights matter; for human rights are alive to the extent that they are rooted in, inspire and guide everyday life. It is when they forget their earthy roots that they, like life itself, become abstractions, and run the risk of turning into ideology.

This article is not about human rights in China; it will not prescribe anything. It is an invitation to think and reflect. As a foreigner, and, if I travel to China, as a guest in a host country, I do not have lessons to give, but experience to share and exchange, so that I can learn in turn, and my solidarity to express with all those who are engaged in action to promote and protect human dignity. Having reached the afternoon of my life, I have acquired a certain experience and learnt certain lessons that may be useful to others and that I would like here to share (although I am aware of the Chinese proverb that says that experience is a lantern that we carry in our back...).

These reflections touch upon the value of human rights in social organisation—family, interpersonal relationships, professional environment, community, and society at large. They may be of interest to teachers, students, citizens, civil servants, civil society actors, leaders, politicians, social scientists, academics—all those who are engaged in the common effort, intellectual, moral and practical, to construct a society where everyone has his or her place, enjoys equal rights in the role to everyone, which determine his/her relations with others: subordinates, peers and superiors. It is also a vision of society as a whole, stressing the importance of the community. After decades of anti-colonial, civil war and revolutionary transformation, during which Confucianism was questioned, it would seem that the current search for a Chinese model of development oscillate between these two polarities: Confucian social order and modern political thinking and practice inherited from the revolution, hence the ambiguous notions of “market socialism”—which seeks to balance and reconcile the forces of free enterprise and market economy, with the requirements of inclusiveness, social cohesion and justice, to avoid the social upheavals usually associated with unequal development. This vision would seem to inspire the “China dream.”