The Universal Declaration of Human Rights at 60: A Bridge to Which Future?

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Abstract
The article evaluates the progress of human rights over the past six decades since the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights. Key points are examine to note the continuing expansion of human rights, as well as the continuing barriers and challenges faced, each in their historic context. These pivotal moments are recorded as 1948, 1968 and 1988/9 and act as touchstone markers for the issues examine in this article.

Keywords
human rights, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 60th anniversary, history, Cold War, social movements, internationalism

Introduction
The Declaration of Human Rights recently celebrated its sixtieth anniversary. What can we learn from the past decades of human rights struggle? How can the past inform future actions? The pivotal years of 1948, 1968, and 1988/89 represent moments of dramatic affirmation in the struggle for human rights. At each of those points, daunting challenges generated new human rights responses, responses which deepened and broadened the meaning of universal human rights.

In sharp contrast to those milestone anniversaries of the Universal Declaration, the sixtieth anniversary has not witnessed the same vitality of the human rights movement. Instead, the celebration this year has been muted by mixed feelings, blending a resurgence of cultural, parochial, and nationalist pride with a sense of uncertainty and yearnings for a better future. At this critical historical junction, two paths can be taken. One is a dark path, already charted by the war against terror, economic recession, the rise of belligerent
fundamentalism, and the impotence of international governance to prevent war and atrocities or promote human rights—a path reminiscent of the post-World War I period. A second path promises to avert this dark future, by revisiting and expanding the vision of world order born out of World War II: i.e., a vision of development and nation building, a comprehensive human rights policy, and effective international governance. This article explores the past in order to envision a bright and attainable future.

During the summer of 2008, while walking through Ben Gurion Airport in Tel Aviv to catch a plane, I stopped near the gates to view an exhibit of posters celebrating the sixtieth anniversary of the State of Israel. There were seven posters, starting with one representing the year 1948, and continuing at ten-year intervals until 2008. Each poster was designed to capture essential features of Israel’s experience, so that scanning them, one could get a sense of Israel’s struggle to be born, its agonizing childhood, its swings as it matured between hopes for peace and renewed conflict, and finally, at sixty years, the feeling that the pioneering vision of a democratic state in the Middle East had become aged and imperiled.

Soon after my arrival in New York I strolled eastward along 42nd Street until I came upon a familiar building, standing aging but proud at the edge of the East River. The entrance to the United Nations was adorned with banners interspersed among the multi-colored flags of the world, announcing the celebration of its sixtieth birthday. Two sixtieth birthdays at the same time? My first unreflective thought was that this was a coincidence. But of course, it was not.

The State of Israel and the United Nations both grew out of World War II, both became viable possibilities at the moment of Nazi Germany’s defeat in 1945, and both came fully to life in 1948. Dramatizing the connection between these two births is the fact that the first human rights document adopted by the UN members was not the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, but the Convention on Genocide, which they voted on one day before the December 10, 1948 passage of the Universal Declaration. In the shadow of the horrors of World War II, the goals of preserving interstate peace and preventing genocide seemed inseparable—the unprecedented carnage, after all, had included both international aggression and the Holocaust.

In the words of the Polish Jewish linguist and human rights activist Raphael Lemkin, the man who coined the term ‘genocide’: “Never again would the horrors of the Holocaust be repeated while the world stood by, never again would the world be unprepared to halt aggression before it was too late.” The linked goals of international order and justice would be backed by a robust international organization, guided by the highest principles of rights, monitor-