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Indignation, or, Reconsidering the Place of Dignity in Human Rights Theory and Practice (abstract)

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The Social Practice of Human Rights: Charting the Frontiers of Research and Advocacy

2015 Conference of the University of Dayton Human Rights Center

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Research Panel: Rethinking Rights

Presenter: Michael Goodhart, University of Pittsburgh

Title: Indignation, or, Reconsidering the place of dignity in human rights theory and practice

Abstract: Human rights scholars have recently seized on the concept of human dignity as a possible ground or justification for human rights. For various reasons, this is a mistake: it gets the role of dignity in human rights theory wrong, and it distorts our understanding of human rights politics. In this paper I develop the concept of *indignation*, arguing that it accounts for the place of dignity in human rights theory more accurately than do foundational approaches and that it provides useful insight into the actual dynamics of human rights movements. Specifically, I argue that human dignity is likely to prove as controversial and problematic as other candidate concepts for grounding human rights (such as autonomy or capabilities), mainly because, like those other concepts, it necessarily takes the form of an ideal theory.

I suggest that *indignation* might prove to be a more useful concept because it refers not to an ideal but rather to a feeling or perception of affront, denial, or violation that helps to explain (motivationally, concretely) what triggers human rights protests and movements. Indignation thus provides a useful analytic lens for gaining clarity on recent human rights movements and political uprisings around the world. I propose that greater empirical study of indignation in various contexts can do much more to promote our understanding of contemporary human rights theory and practice than might further philosophical reflection on abstract notions like dignity.

Keywords: human rights, human dignity, indignation, social movements

Biography: Michael Goodhart is Associate Professor of Political Science, University of Pittsburgh; he holds secondary appointments in Philosophy and in Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies. He is Interim Director of the Global Studies Center at Pitt and a University Honors College Faculty Fellow. His current research focuses on problems of global injustice; he is also interested in challenges to the theory and practice of democracy and human rights in the context of globalization and in related questions concerning democratic governance and accountability at the international and transnational levels and has published widely on these topics. He is author of *Democracy as Human Rights: Freedom and Equality in the Age of Globalization* (Routledge, 2005), contributing editor of *Human Rights: Politics and Practice* (Oxford University Press, 2009, 2012), and contributing co-editor of *Human Rights in the 21st Century: Continuity and Change since 9/11* (Palgrave, 2011). Dr. Goodhart chaired the recent APSA Presidential Task Force on Democracy, Economic Security, and Social Justice in a Volatile world. He is an affiliate of the Human Rights Institute at the University of Connecticut, a member of the Center for Ethics and Policy at Carnegie Mellon University, and sits on several editorial boards. Contact: goodhart@pitt.edu.