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To Err is Human Rights: Toward a Pragmatist Activism (abstract)

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

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Research Panel: Rethinking Rights

Presenter: Geoff Dancy, Tulane University

Title: To Err is Human Rights: Toward a Pragmatist Activism

Abstract: Human rights activists have often been criticized by political scientists for being “principled” rather than “pragmatic” actors. Rarely, though, is this criticism accompanied by a discussion of what pragmatism means, or what pragmatic action looks like. In this article, I conceptually trace and define three aspects of pragmatism: philosophical, methodological, and political. I then consider how these aspects of pragmatist thought can be applied in the world of human rights activism.

Among other things, I argue that pragmatic activism should remain flexible about the foundations of human rights ideals, that it should accept and even encourage local bad-mouthing of global organizations, that it should embrace imperfect vernacularization of rights laws, that it should endorse activism through trial and error, and that it should move away from linking impact evaluation to funding. The paper then argues through examples that many human rights activists are already pragmatic political actors. The conclusion of this analysis is that the “pragmatist” critique deployed against human rights activists is at minimum underdeveloped, and at maximum coded discourse harboring conservative, anti-rights positions.

Keywords: human rights; pragmatism; transnational activist; critique; new tactics

Biography: Geoff Dancy is an Assistant Professor of Political Science at Tulane University. He studies international human rights law, transitional justice, repression, civil war, and resistance. Geoff’s working book project criticizes the ways in which International human rights law is often disparaged either for having no positive impact on government repression or for having negative unintended consequences that lead to even worse repressive violence. Most empirical scholarship on human rights indicates that the root causes of widespread repression—authoritarianism, democratic instability, and civil war—are beyond the reach of legal rules. The contribution of this project is to demonstrate that human rights law in fact has an important role to play in addressing these root causes. From 2010-2013, Geoff served as a director for a National Science Foundation Project called “The Impact of Transitional Justice on Human Rights and Democracy” under the supervision of Kathryn Sikkink (Harvard) and Leigh Payne (Oxford). This project, for which Geoff remains a consultant, collects data and analyzes the effects of transitional justice efforts from around the world.