
ANNALS OF DISCOURSE

Economics Against Human Rights: The Conflicting Languages of Economics and Human Rights

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For many of the planet's poor and oppressed, human rights appear as a panacea bringing justice and dignity to their earthly existence. There is a widespread assumption that economic "progress" is closely linked to this, as the means of overcoming scarcity and thus providing the basis for the development of human rights. There are many associations between these discourses inasmuch as asserting human rights demands economic means, while efficacy of economic decisions presupposes a certain degree of liberties. An economic dimension to human rights is assumed, therefore, as much as a human rights dimension to economics is.

Yet in the real world these assumptions do not hold, and major conflicts emerge between the practices of economics and human rights. Why should this be so, and how are these conflicts to be understood?

First of all, what are we talking about when we talk about economics? A rapid overview can identify at least twenty schools of economic thought, from neoclassic to evolutionary, from Marxist to post-Keynesian. To be comprehensive, then, an article on the interaction of economics on human rights would have to be divided in at least twenty chapters. The sort of economics I will be referring to in this paper results from a considerably narrower point of view, that of mainstream economics. This is the school of thought that dominates the real economy, and therefore not only academia, but also government cabinets and the media. Although one could easily mistake mainstream economics with neoclassicism, and therefore call this essay "neoclassical economics against human rights," we should resist such hasty identification. What characterizes mainstream economics, then?

Mainstream economics, like any other school of thought, is characterized by its particular methodology, its particular rationality, and its particular analytical weaponry. Mainstream economics is, therefore, individualistic, utilitarian and equilibrium driven, and, finally, obsessed with mathematical formalization. Being individualistic, mainstream economics defines its goals in terms of the pursuit of personal interest by isolated individuals; thus social welfare becomes the sum of each