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Demand tolerance, not love

A shift in the demands and objectives of the human rights project has led activists to adopt a sanctimonious tone — fuelling the anti-rights backlash

What a difference eight years can make. Or not. When Trump was re-elected in 2024, human rights circles didn't react with the same indignation as in 2016. People get used to anything — or develop the ability to numb themselves. But then, as now, human rights folks tried to make sense of what had happened in similar ways. They passed harsh judgement on voters ('how stupid can they be?'), resorted to lazy racism- and sexism-based explanations (despite Trump's gains across all demographic segments) and fell back on a rhetoric of 'resistance'. Emphatically, their S.O.P. did not include introspection.

But their inability to understand populist wins and the anti-rights backlash is closely linked to their inability to understand why progressive rhetoric turns off so many people. Just as left-wing parties have turned elitist and lost the working class, human rights folks are bleeding popular support.

This isn't because people have stopped believing in human dignity or universal values — few people would grant the government the right to torture its citizens or seize their homes without due process. The decline in the appeal of human rights is the result of the sanctimonious tone that activism has adopted. This, in turn, results from a shift in human rights demands — from mere tolerance (based on a pragmatic approach to living together) to unqualified love (the corollary of blind acceptance of activists' demands).

The end of history and the last activist

The end of the Cold War brought about prophecies of liberal democracy being 'the final form of human government'. It also gave rise to a class of activists who, encouraged by the professionalisation of the human rights field, thought history was over. Liberal values were spreading, the era of peace and justice was to come, and human rights were to be preached.

They were on the 'right side of history'.

With this mindset came a specific moral stance. From rules designed to limit state power and protect individuals from abuse, human rights gradually turned into a moral crusade. The human rights discourse moved from a modest project (regulating relations between individuals and the state) to a more ambitious one: regulating all aspects of social relations, dismantling all systems of oppression and demanding that people don't just tolerate – but love – others.

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To be sure, the original human rights project was guided by moral goals (minimising suffering and injustice). But it wasn't defined by moralistic rhetoric. New forms of activism, however, involve judgements about people's morality. They use a priggish rhetoric that seeks to hold people (more than governments) accountable by entering – and altering – their *forum internum* (conscience).

With the 'woke' turn of the 2010s, things got worse. As activists endeavoured to protect people from any kind of offence and radicalised around identity markers, moral and societal issues came to dominate the human rights landscape. Economic inequality or class issues were marginalised. As 'lived experience' became a dogma, ethnicity, sexuality and gender markers took centre stage. And it became taboo to challenge the excesses of identity politics by, say, questioning the overly ideological approach of DEI programmes. Doing so meant being 'old school', an obstacle to the brave new world that was being ushered in.

Love- vs. tolerance-based advocacy

Let's go back a few decades. The fight to decriminalise homosexuality in Britain was successful not because activists asked people to express their views on homosexuality, but precisely because they argued that the state had no role in anybody's morality or immorality. Activists didn't demand blind acceptance or unconditional love. They were demanding tolerance (toleration).

For tolerance-based advocates, the conscience of the people remains closed. It's irrelevant. Rather, the objective is 'live and let live': don't bother me, I won't bother you. Or: don't ask me to love you unconditionally; just show me how we can live side by side. Toleration is a pragmatic *modus vivendi*. It's the essence of liberal thought: drawing a distinction between one's private moral views and one's political views.

Certainly, self-interest and reciprocity are at play: you refrain from trying to impose your way of life on others; in return, others refrain from imposing their way of life on you.

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It's a more modest project than love. It's even compatible with an absence of love. No one is asked to endorse the moral views of others — that is, to tell them that they're right to think the way they think, to speak the way they speak or to live the way they live.

Conversely, love-based advocates demand access to people's consciences. The focus isn't on 'live and let live' but on ushering in a new era, devoid not just of state violations but of all prejudice.

That's the direction the human rights movement has taken — it pushed the accelerator in the 2010s with the rise of social media and identity-focused activism (from third-wave anti-racism to gender). The problem is that this kind of activism inevitably turns moralistic. From 'We demand love', the line of thought moves to 'If you don't love the way we want you to (if you don't blindly accept everything we claim), then you're not just wrong: you're a bad person.'

One constant in human interaction is that people don't like being told what to think, how to speak or how to live. Thus, the hyper-moralism of new forms of activism is counterproductive: as moralising involves value judgements, lecturing and speech policing, it's an ineffective advocacy technique.

Settle for tolerance

The worst mistakes are made in the name of love. It's a Catch-22 situation: human rights folks have lost support because of sanctimonious rhetoric and unrealistic demands for love that can only be fulfilled by altering people's consciences. Since the people's *forum internum* is by definition inaccessible, love-based advocates only get frustrated — and their frustration, with its corollary of name-calling, feeds the backlash. People turn away from human rights.

So, what's the solution?

First, activists should stop policing people's thoughts and speech. They should listen to them: people can raise legitimate concerns about activists' rhetoric or demands without being enemies. And they're more

likely to support human rights if they see it as a tolerance-based project, rather than an attempt at social engineering that involves judgement and condescension.

Second, activists should hold states, more than fellow citizens, accountable. This doesn't mean that cultural norms or traditions are off limits (protecting women's rights, for instance, requires addressing gender stereotypes). But human rights are first and foremost about reining in those who control state power and institutions. The politics of name-calling should end: people aren't automatically racist if they want to regulate immigration; they aren't automatically transphobic if they disapprove of the participation of athletes with a high testosterone level in female sports competitions.

Finally, activists shouldn't ask the state to regulate what are essentially moral issues. They should return to liberal thinking and settle for tolerance: it creates space for debate and for people to be lukewarm (or critical) of progressive causes, rhetoric and demands. It's healthy, and it's the first step towards regaining popular support.



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