

Political Economy and Human Rights Engaging in Conversation

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Abstract : This paper argues that mainstream economics is one of the reasons that can explain the difficulty in fully realizing human rights because its logic is intrinsically contradictory to human rights, most especially economic, social and cultural rights. First, its utilitarianism, both in its cardinal and ordinal understanding, contradicts human rights principles. Maximizing aggregate utility along the lines of cardinal utility is a theoretical exercise that consists in ensuring as much as possible that gains outweigh losses in society. In this process an individual may get worse off, though. If mainstream logic is comfortable with this, human rights' logic does not. Indeed, universality is a key principle in human rights and for this reason the maximization exercise should aim at satisfying all citizens' requests when goods and services necessary to secure human rights are at stake. The ordinal version of utilitarianism, in turn, contradicts the human rights principle of indivisibility. Contrary to ordinal utility theory that ranks baskets of goods, human rights do not accept ranking when these goods and services are necessary to secure human rights. Second, by relying preferably on market logic to allocate goods and services, mainstream economics contradicts human rights because the intermediation of money prices and the purpose of profit may cause exclusion, thus compromising the principle of universality. Finally, mainstream economics sees human rights mainly as constraints to the development of its logic. According to this view securing human rights would, then, be considered a cost weighing on economic efficiency and, therefore, something to be minimized. Fully realizing human rights needs, therefore, a different approach. This paper discusses a human rights-based political economy. This political economy, among other characteristics should give up mainstream economics narrow utilitarian approach, give up its belief that market logic should guide all exchanges of goods and services between human beings, and finally give up its view of human rights as constraints on rational choice and consequently on good economic performance. Giving up mainstream's narrow utilitarian approach means, first embracing procedural utility and human rights-aimed consequentialism. Second, a more radical break can be imagined; non-utilitarian, or even anti-utilitarian, approaches may emerge, then, as alternatives, these two standpoints being not necessarily mutually exclusive, though. Giving up market exclusivity means embracing decommodification. More specifically, this means an approach that takes into consideration the value produced outside the market and an allocation process no longer necessarily centered on money prices. Giving up the view of human rights as constraints means, finally, to consider human rights as an expression of wellbeing and a manifestation of choice. This means, in turn, an approach that uses indicators of economic performance other than growth at the macro level and profit at the micro level, because what we measure affects what we do.

Keywords : economic and social rights, political economy, economic theory, markets

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