



Human rights in the age of neoliberalism: Legitimizing domination or fostering transformation?

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Abstract

This paper examines the role of human rights in a world shaped by sovereign states and global capitalism, focusing on the inherent tensions between political power, economic domination, and rights claims. The transformative potential of human rights is questioned within the context of neoliberal economic policies and governance structures that often perpetuate, rather than challenge, existing social hierarchies and inequalities. By analysing how rights codified in international law are both a product of the post war order and a tool of neoliberal governance, this paper explores whether human rights practices can genuinely dismantle oppressive systems or whether they serve as mechanisms to legitimize domination. Drawing on international human rights law, neoliberal economic reforms, and grassroots movements, this paper assesses the capacity of human rights to serve as a tool for social justice, particularly in addressing class, geography, legal status, and intersectional inequalities of gender, race, and sexuality. The conclusion posits a reimagining of human rights frameworks as a potential counterbalance to the social hierarchies entrenched by global capitalism, while acknowledging the risks of co-optation.

Keywords: Human rights, neoliberalism, economic domination, social justice, international law

Introduction

Human rights, as we know them today, are largely a product of the post-World War II global order, enshrined in key legal frameworks such as the United Nations Charter of 1945, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 (UDHR), and subsequent treaties like the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) of 1966 and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) of 1966. These instruments aimed to universalize inalienable rights, holding states accountable for their protection. However, these frameworks emerged in a world marked by the geopolitical realities of the Cold War and the lingering legacies of colonialism. Scholars like Mutua have critiqued this Universalist project as Eurocentric, often ignoring the postcolonial realities and ongoing struggles in the Global South ^[1].

The post-war context positioned human rights as not only legal norms but also as tools of diplomacy, influenced by competing models of governance—liberal democracy and capitalism versus socialist states prioritizing collective rights. Despite these ideological battles, human rights became central to the international order, framing them both as moral imperatives and as political instruments.

In the latter half of the 20th century, the rise of neoliberal economic thought, led by economists like Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman, transformed the relationship between states and markets. Neoliberalism promotes deregulation, privatization, and free trade, advocating minimal state intervention. By the 1980s, these policies dominated global economic governance, particularly through institutions like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, which imposed structural adjustment programs (SAPs) in many developing countries. These programs often exacerbated social inequalities and eroded state capacities to provide social welfare, leading to the commodification of essential services such as healthcare, education, and housing.

The neoliberal turn raises critical questions about the compatibility of human rights and market-driven governance. While advocates argue that market freedom enhances individual liberty, critics like Harvey suggest that neoliberalism prioritizes capital accumulation over social welfare, undermining the rights that international law seeks to protect ^[2]. This tension is most evident in the realm of social and economic rights, such as access to education, healthcare, and housing, which have been weakened under neoliberal regimes favouring market-driven solutions.

This research seeks to explore the contradiction between human rights law, which promises universal protection, and neoliberal policies that often undermine these rights by limiting the state's capacity to fulfil its obligations. In particular, it examines whether human rights frameworks can effectively challenge the neoliberal order or whether they serve to legitimize its structures of power. This question is critical in understanding how marginalized groups—disproportionately affected by austerity, privatization, and labour deregulation—navigate the tension between rights claims and neoliberal governance.

A growing body of scholarship, led by thinkers like Wendy Brown, critiques how neoliberalism transforms human rights into technocratic instruments, stripping them of their emancipatory potential and reducing them to individual claims that fail to challenge systemic injustice ^[3]. Similarly, David Harvey argues that neoliberal policies, while purporting to promote liberty, ultimately serve the interests of capital at the expense of social justice ^[4].

This paper seeks to examine whether human rights can still act as transformative tools in the neoliberal age. Through an analysis of international human rights law and its relationship with neoliberal economic policies, the study will assess the impact on marginalized populations and explore how grassroots movements, labour struggles, and legal battles might reimagine human rights as a force for social justice and resistance against neoliberal domination.

Methodology

This study employs a multi-faceted methodology, integrating doctrinal legal analysis and critical theory approaches to investigate the interplay between human rights frameworks and neoliberal policies. The doctrinal analysis examines core international human rights instruments evaluating their effectiveness in safeguarding social and economic rights against market-driven reforms. Utilizing critical theory, particularly the works of Wendy Brown, David Harvey, and Upendra Baxi, the research critically assesses the neoliberal transformation of rights into individualistic claims that often depoliticize systemic inequalities. Together, these methodological approaches offer a comprehensive framework for analysing the dual role of human rights as both potential tools for social justice and, conversely, as mechanisms that can legitimize neoliberal structures, with particular attention to class, gender, race, and intersectional inequalities.

Literature Review

1. The origins of human rights in the post-war order

The contemporary framework of human rights emerged as a key element of the post-World War II global order. This period saw the establishment of international legal instruments designed to guarantee fundamental freedoms and protections for individuals, which were codified in documents such as the UDHR, the ICCPR, and ICESCR. These treaties were part of a broader effort to create a normative structure capable of addressing the atrocities of the war and preventing future conflicts.

However, the creation of these frameworks was deeply embedded in the geopolitical realities of the time, particularly the ideological struggle between liberal democracies and socialist states during the Cold War. Scholars like Moyn argue that the birth of modern human rights discourse was shaped by these political dynamics, with Western powers promoting individual rights as a tool to counter the collective rights-based rhetoric of socialist states^[5]. In this context, human rights became both a moral imperative and a strategic instrument for ideological dominance.

Critiques of the post-war human rights framework also highlight its Eurocentric foundations. The UDHR, while presented as a universal document, was heavily influenced by Western legal traditions and philosophies, which often failed to account for the specific social, economic, and political contexts of the Global South. This has led to persistent questions about the legitimacy of human rights law as truly universal, especially when considering the postcolonial realities of many developing countries. Mutua criticizes the human rights project as a continuation of colonial domination, whereby the West imposes its legal norms and values on non-Western societies under the guise of universalism^[6].

The development of international human rights law thus reflected the broader post-war balance of power, positioning human rights as both a product of global diplomacy and an emerging legal norm. These foundational critiques are crucial for understanding the subsequent interaction between human rights and the rise of neoliberalism in the late 20th century.

2. Neoliberalism and the globalization of capitalism

The late 20th century saw the emergence of neoliberalism as the dominant ideology in global governance and economic policy. Neoliberalism, which prioritizes market freedom, privatization, deregulation, and limited state intervention, fundamentally transformed the relationship between states and markets. Key proponents of neoliberalism, such as Hayek and Friedman, advocated for a model of governance that reduced the role of the state in favour of market-based solutions, arguing that this would lead to greater individual freedom and economic prosperity^[7].

By the 1980s, neoliberalism had become the guiding principle of economic policy in many Western nations, particularly under the leadership of figures like Ronald Reagan in the United States and Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom. Through institutions like the IMF and the World Bank, neoliberal policies were exported to developing countries, often through SAPs that imposed fiscal austerity, privatization, and deregulation as conditions for receiving financial aid.

David Harvey characterizes neoliberalism as a "class project," arguing that its primary function is to restore and consolidate the power of economic elites by dismantling the social protections established in the post-war period^[8]. Harvey's analysis suggests that neoliberalism is not simply an economic theory, but a political project aimed at reshaping the state and society in ways that benefit capital accumulation at the expense of social welfare and equity.

In the context of neoliberal globalization, human rights have often been invoked as a counterbalance to the excesses of free-market policies. However, this relationship is fraught with contradictions. While neoliberalism emphasizes individual liberty and market freedoms, it often undermines social and economic rights by weakening the state's capacity to provide public goods such as healthcare, education, and housing. Brown argues that neoliberalism reconfigures rights into market-driven, individualistic claims, which depoliticize social justice struggles and obscure the structural inequalities created by capitalist accumulation^[9].

This raises fundamental questions about the role of human rights in a neoliberal world: do they serve as a tool for resisting neoliberal domination, or have they been co-opted by neoliberal ideologies to legitimize the market's primacy over social justice?

3. Human Rights and neoliberalism: Tensions and contradictions

The relationship between human rights and neoliberalism is characterized by deep tensions. Neoliberalism, with its emphasis on market freedom and limited state intervention, often conflicts with the obligations of states to uphold social and economic rights as enshrined in international law. Human rights law demands that states guarantee not only civil and political rights but also social and economic rights, such as the right to health, education, and adequate living standards.

This tension is particularly evident in the Global South, where neoliberal economic policies have exacerbated inequalities and weakened state institutions. SAPs implemented by the IMF and the World Bank in the 1980s and 1990s often required developing countries to cut public spending, deregulate industries, and privatize public services. These policies, while intended to promote economic growth, frequently resulted in the erosion of

social protections, leaving vulnerable populations without access to essential services.

Scholars like Upendra Baxi argue that neoliberalism has commodified human rights, turning them into transactional goods that can be bought and sold in the marketplace ^[10]. This commodification aligns with the broader logic of neoliberalism, which frames rights as individual responsibilities rather than collective entitlements. For example, under neoliberal regimes, access to healthcare or education is often seen as a matter of personal financial capacity rather than a universal right guaranteed by the state.

Susan Marks extends this critique by highlighting how human rights law, particularly in its economic and social dimensions, often reinforces existing power structures rather than challenging them ^[11]. Marks argues that human rights discourse can be co-opted by neoliberal governance, providing a veneer of legitimacy to policies that exacerbate inequality and exploitation ^[12]. By focusing on individual rights rather than collective justice, human rights law may inadvertently reinforce the very hierarchies it seeks to dismantle.

4. Intersectionality and the human rights framework

The critiques of neoliberalism's impact on human rights are further complicated by the intersectional nature of oppression in the modern world. Human rights law, as currently formulated, has often failed to adequately address the overlapping forms of discrimination and exclusion faced by marginalized groups, including women, racial minorities, indigenous peoples, and LGBTQ+ communities.

Feminist and postcolonial scholars have long criticized the mainstream human rights framework for its failure to account for the ways in which gender, race, class, and other identity markers intersect to produce unique forms of marginalization. Kimberlé Crenshaw, who coined the term "intersectionality," argues that human rights law's focus on universal rights can obscure the specific needs of marginalized groups, whose experiences of oppression are shaped by multiple, overlapping systems of power ^[13].

In the context of neoliberalism, these intersectional inequalities are often exacerbated. Neoliberal policies disproportionately impact women, racial minorities, and other marginalized groups, who are more likely to be employed in precarious labour markets, lack access to social protections, and bear the brunt of austerity measures. This raises important questions about the adequacy of human rights frameworks in addressing the structural violence perpetuated by neoliberal economic policies.

By failing to fully engage with intersectional forms of oppression, human rights law may inadvertently reproduce the social hierarchies of class, gender, race, and sexuality that it seeks to challenge. Scholars like Ratna Kapur argue that a more intersectional approach to human rights is necessary to ensure that rights claims do not reinforce the very systems of domination they aim to dismantle ^[14].

5. Reimagining human rights in the age of neoliberalism

Despite the critiques of neoliberalism's impact on human rights, there is also potential for human rights frameworks to be reimagined as tools of resistance against neoliberal domination. Grassroots movements, labour unions, indigenous rights activists, and environmental justice groups

have all mobilized human rights discourse to challenge neoliberal policies and advocate for more equitable and just societies.

For instance, indigenous movements in Latin America have successfully used human rights frameworks to resist neoliberal development projects that threaten their land and resources. Similarly, labour rights movements in both the Global North and South have invoked human rights principles to challenge exploitative working conditions and demand fair wages and safe working environments.

Nancy Fraser argues that human rights can serve as a "counter-hegemonic" force when mobilized by social movements that challenge the neoliberal logic of commodification and individualism ^[15]. Fraser calls for a "triple movement" that seeks to balance market forces with both social protections and democratic participation ^[16]. In this vision, human rights frameworks could be expanded and reimagined to provide a more robust defence against the excesses of global capitalism.

The transformative potential of human rights lies in their ability to serve as a rallying point for collective struggles against neoliberalism. However, for this potential to be realized, human rights must be reframed in ways that center collective justice and intersectional equity, rather than individual liberty and market-based solutions.

Results and discussion

1. Political power and human rights: State Sovereignty vs. Global capitalism

A central tension in the human rights discourse lies in the relationship between state sovereignty and the growing influence of global capitalism. International human rights law traditionally places obligations on sovereign states to protect and promote the rights of their citizens. However, as neoliberalism continues to expand, state sovereignty is increasingly undermined by the power of global financial institutions, multinational corporations, and international trade agreements.

The COVID-19 pandemic vividly demonstrated this tension, particularly in countries like Brazil. Both nations were pressured to adopt austerity measures as conditions for financial assistance from institutions like the International Monetary Fund (IMF). In Brazil, the government implemented severe cuts to healthcare and social welfare services during the pandemic, disproportionately affecting vulnerable populations, particularly in impoverished urban areas ^[17]. Similarly, in Argentina, austerity measures led to reductions in public spending on healthcare and welfare at a time when these services were critically needed ^[18]. These actions violated the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), which guarantees the right to healthcare ^[19] and an adequate standard of living ^[20]. The pandemic highlighted the limits of state sovereignty, as global financial governance restricted the ability of governments to fulfil their human rights obligations.

Moreover, the influence of multinational corporations during the pandemic further eroded state sovereignty in protecting labour rights. The global garment industry, especially in countries like Bangladesh and India, saw major international brands cancel orders and delay payments, leading to mass layoffs and leaving thousands of workers without income ^[21]. These actions exposed the vulnerability of labour rights in the Global South, where governments are often pressured to prioritize corporate interests over worker

protections. Despite the existence of international labour rights norms set by the International Labour Organization (ILO), local governments were hesitant to enforce them, fearing the loss of foreign investment and market competitiveness.

These examples illustrate how state-centric human rights frameworks are challenged by the realities of a globalized economy. As state sovereignty is weakened by the influence of global financial institutions and multinational corporations, the enforcement of human rights becomes increasingly difficult. This raises a critical question: can human rights frameworks be effective in a world where economic governance is largely dictated by global capitalism, or do they require reform to address the complexities of a neoliberal global order?

The pandemic has made clear that in times of crisis, the protection of human rights often conflicts with the imperatives of global financial governance, revealing the need for a re-evaluation of how human rights are safeguarded in the face of powerful global economic forces.

2. Economic power and human rights: The role of neoliberal institutions

Neoliberalism's emphasis on deregulation, privatization, and free markets often conflicts with the realization of social and economic rights. Institutions like the IMF, World Bank, and World Trade Organization (WTO) promote economic policies that prioritize market efficiency over social welfare, often resulting in the commodification of essential public goods.

The case of SAPs in Sub-Saharan Africa provides a stark illustration of the impact of neoliberal policies on human rights. In countries like Nigeria, Zambia and Ghana, SAPs imposed by the IMF and World Bank in the 1980s and 1990s led to widespread privatization of state-owned enterprises, including healthcare, education, and utilities [22]. These policies exacerbated poverty and inequality, as access to basic services became contingent on market participation, violating the right to health, education, and an adequate standard of living [23].

The privatization of healthcare in Zambia following SAPs, for example, led to reduced access to medical services, particularly for rural and low-income populations [24]. The commodification of healthcare, where services are available only to those who can afford them, directly contradicts the principles of human rights, which view access to healthcare as a universal entitlement rather than a market commodity.

These examples demonstrate how neoliberal institutions, through their promotion of market-driven solutions, undermine the realization of human rights. The prioritization of profit over people in sectors such as healthcare, education, and housing transforms essential services into commodities, making them inaccessible to large segments of the population. This raises the question of whether human rights can be fully realized in a neoliberal context where economic power is concentrated in the hands of multinational corporations and international financial institutions.

3. Human rights as legitimizers or resisters of neoliberal domination

A key debate surrounding the intersection of human rights and neoliberalism revolves around whether human rights

frameworks legitimize neoliberal domination or serve as tools of resistance. Critics argue that neoliberalism co-opts the universal human rights discourse, transforming it into an ideology that emphasizes individualistic claims while obscuring deeper systemic inequalities. This criticism is most forcefully articulated by scholars like Brown, who contends that under neoliberalism, rights such as freedom of speech or property rights are framed as individual entitlements that align with market values [25]. This reconfiguration of rights prioritizes personal liberty and market participation over collective welfare and social justice.

This critique is particularly evident in the realm of labour rights, where neoliberal policies have weakened collective bargaining and deregulated labour markets. In many countries, labour rights have been recast as individual freedoms, such as the right to work or enter into contracts, rather than collective rights to unionize or strike. This individualization of labour rights aligns with neoliberalism's emphasis on personal responsibility and market participation, diminishing workers' ability to organize and demand better wages, working conditions, or job security. The result is a weakening of labour protections, where rights that should empower workers to collectively resist exploitation are reframed to serve the interests of the market.

However, there are also prominent examples where human rights frameworks have been mobilized to resist neoliberal policies and the commodification of resources. Indigenous rights movements in Latin America are a powerful illustration of how human rights can be used to challenge neoliberal development projects that threaten indigenous land and resources. In countries like Brazil and Ecuador, indigenous communities have invoked international human rights norms, particularly the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, to resist the privatization and exploitation of their lands by multinational corporations engaged in resource extraction [226]. These movements successfully use human rights as a tool to demand environmental justice and protect their sovereignty.

The resistance of indigenous groups highlights the transformative potential of human rights when grassroots organizations mobilize them to challenge the commodification of land, labour, and natural resources. In this context, human rights serve as a counterbalance to the profit-driven motives of neoliberal capitalism, offering marginalized groups a framework through which they can articulate their demands for justice, equity, and sustainability.

These examples demonstrate that while human rights frameworks can be co-opted by neoliberal ideologies to legitimize exploitation and market-driven solutions, they also retain the capacity to resist such forces. The key lies in how human rights are mobilized—whether as tools for individual entitlement aligned with market participation or as collective claims for justice that challenge the commodification of essential rights and resources. The indigenous movements in Latin America show that human rights can still serve as powerful instruments of resistance when used to advocate for the protection of communities and the environment against neoliberal encroachment.

4. Transformative potential of human rights in a neoliberal world

Despite the challenges posed by neoliberalism, there is evidence that human rights frameworks can be reimagined as transformative tools for social justice. Key to this transformation is the recognition that human rights must be framed not only as individual entitlements but also as collective claims for justice that address the structural inequalities perpetuated by global capitalism.

In the realm of environmental justice, human rights have been increasingly used to challenge the neoliberal exploitation of natural resources. The Ogoni people's struggle against oil extraction in Nigeria, for instance, demonstrates how human rights can be mobilized to resist corporate exploitation and demand environmental protections^[27]. The Ogoni have invoked international human rights norms, including the right to a healthy environment and the right to self-determination, to challenge the activities of multinational oil companies like Shell, which have caused widespread environmental degradation in the Niger Delta^[28].

Similarly, the global climate justice movement has increasingly framed environmental protection as a human rights issue, demanding that states and corporations be held accountable for their role in climate change^[1]. By linking environmental justice to human rights, activists argue that the right to a healthy environment is inseparable from the right to life, health, and development. This framing challenges the neoliberal logic that treats the environment as a resource to be exploited for profit, highlighting the transformative potential of human rights in addressing global environmental challenges.

5. Reimagining human rights for the 21st century

The results of this analysis suggest that while human rights frameworks are often constrained by neoliberal policies, they also retain the potential to challenge global capitalism and promote social justice. However, for human rights to fulfil this transformative role, they must be reimagined in ways that address the structural inequalities of class, race, gender, and geography.

A more intersectional approach to human rights, as advocated by scholars like Crenshaw^[31] and Fraser,^[30] is essential for ensuring that human rights frameworks are capable of addressing the multiple, overlapping forms of oppression faced by marginalized groups in a neoliberal world. This approach would involve moving beyond the individualistic, market-based conception of rights and embracing a more collective, justice-oriented framework that centers the experiences of the most vulnerable populations.

By reimagining human rights in this way, there is potential for these frameworks to serve as powerful tools for resisting neoliberal domination and promoting social justice. However, this will require significant shifts in both international law and global governance, as well as the mobilization of grassroots movements that challenge the commodification of rights under neoliberalism.

Conclusion

This article has explored the complex relationship between human rights frameworks and neoliberal governance, revealing both the limitations and potential of human rights as tools for social justice. While neoliberal policies have

often undermined social and economic rights by prioritizing market-driven solutions, these frameworks retain the capacity for resistance when mobilized to protect marginalized groups and uphold collective justice. The analysis suggests that a transformative approach to human rights is essential—one that shifts from individualistic claims to a collective, intersectional framework capable of addressing the structural inequalities exacerbated by global capitalism. Reimagining human rights in this way may empower communities and movements to challenge neoliberal domination and advocate for a more equitable global order, thereby realigning human rights with their original emancipatory promise. To achieve this, human rights frameworks must be adapted to confront the evolving socio-economic dynamics of the 21st century, emphasizing solidarity, justice, and the protection of our shared environment.

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