

Who wrote the Liberal International Order script? Contributions from the Global South to the international human rights architecture

The aim of this short-term project is to map the state of the art and ongoing scholarly controversies surrounding the emergence of the international human rights regime. In particular, the project focusses on the contributions of actors from the Global South to the emergence of international human rights.

The historiography of human rights has become a contested scholarly terrain over the past decade. Starting point for the burgeoning field of human rights historiography is the critical scrutiny of the canonical according to which human rights emerged in the immediate post-war period with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and with pre-eminent support of the United States.

On the one hand, a line of revisionist scholarship has questioned this narrative and dated the “breakthrough” (Eckel and Moyn, eds. 2014) of international human rights to the 1970s rather than the 1940s. These “new revisionists” (Alston 2013) explain the ascendance of international human rights with the decline of competing ideologies with more egalitarian ambition (e.g. Moyn 2012); they also emphasise the pivotal role of international Non-Governmental Organizations and in particular Human Rights Watch in the globalization of human rights (e.g. Hopgood 2013) and point to the simultaneity of the global rise of human rights and neoliberalism (whereby the causal relationship between the two remains disputed among the new revisionists).

On the other hand, a line of scholarship that emerged in reaction to the new revisionists (“post-revisionists”) has questioned the implicit equation of human rights and (neo-)liberalism, highlighting the historical polyphony of human rights discourses.

The project aims to create a consolidated literature review by mapping the competing answers given to these questions:

- 1) When did human rights become a global script?
- 2) Where did this script originate, i.e. who wrote this script?
- 3) How have human rights related to other (liberal and non-liberal) scripts?