Anthropology and Social Transformation: Universal Human Rights

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**Introduction**

According to Ellen Messer, there has been a general point of view that anthropologists have been uninterested in the study of human rights (Messer, 2008). This is quite untrue as there have been considerable contributions by Durkheim and Boas regarding the social transformations of human beings in the society concerning their cultural identities. This has made the discipline of sociology and anthropology to continuously strive for a better understanding of the multiple human rights standards that are present across many cultures in the world. This has also made them shape a general rhetoric where cross-cultural studies are concerned. This mean that the anthropologists have been more active in the study of human rights, yet they should have been more active, especially to ascertain and establish a set of universal human rights that would offer aid in clarifying the universal rights of land, water, health, food, and freedom from all types of violence, which may include torture, g4enocide, and slavery. In this paper, we will be putting the possibility of making a universal set of human rights under the scope.

**Discussion**

The latest aid in the drive for universal rights, we all refer to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and the Economic Social and Cultural Rights (1966). However, we can be seen asking a question that whether the rights are presented in the UN Charter bear resemblance of all the human rights of different cultures. The American Anthropologists that there may be a common root where the human rights laws of different cultures are concerned. They have arrived at this conclusion as they cited an argument that there is a concept of a supernatural being that is considered as the highest authority in every religion. Nevertheless, the American Association of Anthropologists, or AAA, gives an opposing view on official grounds. The AAA insists that human rights vary across cultures, citing the example of the indigenous people. They criticize the implementation of the universal set of human rights because these laws will affect the cultural practices of the indigenous people and their way of life will be lost form the chapters of history. In short, there were three basic demands or findings of the AAA: the respect for cultural differences, the lack of qualitative measures for the measurement of the cultural differences and the relativity of the culture from which the cultural practices are derived.

The critics, however, take a different stance entirely. There insists that there are also technical, social and biological measures of the cultural differences as well. They argue because we are all biologically the same, even though there are certain physical variations among ourselves. Therefore the human rights that we enjoy should be more or less the same. Although the same message has been stated by different Anthropologists, yet there seems to be no connection between the cultural and the physical anthropologists. Also, many anthropologists insist that there is always more emphasis on the difference between the various cultures, and not on the similarities that they enjoy. Yet many anthropologists do not pursue the question systematically. Therefore, the entire notion is not done enough justice.

Lastly, there is also a difference in the method that should be used to approach the problem. While there is a clear emphasis on finding ways to find an answer to this problem qualitatively, we cannot rule out the possibility of arriving on the solution in a rather quantitative manner. The consequences of any culture can be evaluated on facts and figures. These may help find out a pattern when it comes to numbers that evaluate different levels of health, nutrition or incidents of violence or any other set of objective markers for that matter. These markers can help anthropologists to subsequently contribute to this research question.

Some anthropologists take another view entirely, According to Amartya Sen, enforcing a universal set of universal human rights is the infringement of human rights (Sen, 2006). According to her, the ends cannot justify the means, even if it brings out positive results. She thinks that human rights are also the right to specific freedom that these freedoms should be seen as obligations that the different people of different cultures do to justify their existence. She also states that the implementation of a fixed set of human rights makes the entire idea of human rights too inclusive. In the end, she can be seen linking the whole notion of human rights to the motivation of certain human capacities. She believes that the general understanding of human capacities can help us to think out of the box when it comes to arriving at a set of universal human rights. She also believes that the whole notion of the capability of human beings can provide a rather comprehensive coverage of the content of human rights.

**Conclusion**

In the end, there is still the question of protection of diverse cultural values that need to be addressed. The difference in various human cultures is what keeps the entire societal structure intact. Also, there is certain doubt when it comes to the qualitative solutions to the problem of the establishment of universal human rights laws, due to differences in cultural practices. True, we should look for various similarities rather than differences, yet the latter must not be completely ignored. Lastly, the problem of human rights also depends on human capabilities as well, which go parallel with the entire notion of human rights.

Due to the following results, we should question ourselves what do we need a set of universal human rights laws. We need to extensively reason before arriving at a clear conclusion to this solution. We can also take the approach to build our laws on similarities rather than differences. Lastly, we never violate the concent of different races of men. Traditions and cultures provide a reason to live for many. The laws that focus on the universality of human rights must never infringe on the right of the people to follow their religious practices that they hold most dear. History has proven that the rulers that have value and cherished diversity in cultures were the ones that have survived in the pages of history. So there should be no doubt in anyone’s mind that a rigid set of laws may end up doing more harm than good. This would seriously hamper the basic goal of the implementation of a universal set of laws regarding the conservation of human rights, which is global peace and security for all.

End Notes

1. Messer, E. (2008). Anthropology, Human Rights, and Social Transformation. In M. Goodale, *Human Rights: An Anthropological Reader* (pp. 105-126).
2. Sen, A. (2006). Human Rights and Capabilities. *Journal of Human Development, 15*(16), 151-166. DOI:10.1080/14649880500120491