Human Rights as Social Construction

Most conceptions of human rights rely on metaphysical or theological assumptions that construe them as possible only as something imposed from outside existing communities. Most people, in other words, presume that human rights come from nature, God, or the United Nations. This book argues that reliance on such putative sources actually undermines human rights. Benjamin Gregg envisions an alternative; he sees human rights as locally developed, freely embraced, and indigenously valid. Human rights can be created by the average, ordinary people to whom they are addressed. And they are valid only if embraced by those to whom they would apply. To view human rights in this manner is to increase the chances and opportunities that more people across the globe will come to embrace them.

Human Rights as Social Construction

BENJAMIN GREGG

University of Texas at Austin
For Keqin, Nicholas, and Saskia
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How does one write an acknowledgment? The “writer exploits the autho-
rial channel to convey – nay, to broadcast – a personal message in a voice
different from the one he will immediately take up. A Durkheimian twist.
As if the self-demanding labor of doing the book gave the writer the priv-
ilege and obligation to show publicly that he has a separate, private life
and is committed to it, while at the same time those who make up this
life have a right to be so recognized. One is reminded of the presence of
hand-held wives when husbands accept success or defeat in their effort
to win an election” (Goffman 1974:298, n. 68).

In that spirit, I am grateful for the critical feedback generously pro-
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