

IS THE IDEA OF HUMAN RIGHTS NOW DOING MORE HARM THAN GOOD?

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The title to this lecture is in the form of a question, are human rights now doing more harm than good? The lawyers call this a question of the “have-you-stopped-beating-your-wife?” variety: whatever way we answer it we concede something that may not necessarily be the case. To assess whether the concept of human rights is now doing more harm than good, therefore, we need first to be clear on whether or not the concept of human rights can ever be said to have been “doing *good*” of any sort. Though the answer I have given to this inquiry has varied over the years (to put it mildly!) I think that for a long while now, the term “human rights” has been doing a very great deal of good indeed, but that it is precisely in this capacity to “do good” that the subject has exposed itself to the potentiality of also doing a very great deal of harm. In this lecture, I will first identify the good before turning to what I think of as the harm. At the end I will try to answer my own question, to say whether in my opinion human rights are now doing more harm than good, and if so what can be done about it. The whole lecture can be taken as a reflection on something Thucydides wrote in his *History of the Peloponnesian War*: “Words had to change their ordinary meanings and to take that which was now given to them”

My first theme this evening is the positive power of the language of human rights, its capacity to act as a rallying point for much of what is valuable in our secular culture while at the same time also connecting with two layers of our immediate past, the modern and the pre-modern. As Francesca Klug in her work has particularly shown, it is in its capacity to speak to a trinity of different audiences – the religious, the rational and the post-modern – that it is clear that human rights talk contains a unique language code with a capacity to make an immense contribution to human flourishing, both capturing the best parts of our past and making those memories fresh and alive in the present. This is evident from the many international human rights documents on human rights that are now to be found. With the end of the Cold War and the rise of global capitalism, these documents have stood out, often it has seemed almost alone, for a different ethical vision from that of the sweat-shops, the exploitation and the poverty that have marked the underside of progress in the post-Communist era.

Human rights stands at its core for the assertion that all humans are equal, and that *therefore* they are each and every one of them deserving of equality of esteem. For many in the world, this equality is explained by the simple fact that we are all made by God, and are all equal before Him (or Her). This is the origin of our subject in the

West, and an underlying belief in the Divine plan for all of human kind remains for many a sufficient underlying rationale for the belief in human rights to which they enthusiastically commit themselves.

It is fair to say, though, that had human rights pinned its survival exclusively on its religious foundations, it would have long since drifted off centre-stage, a relic of a past age of superstition rather than the vibrant, contemporary ethic that we find today. Our subject's chameleon capacity for change shows itself in its re-affirmation in the modern era as a secular ethic, with reason replacing God as its source but with the ethical outcomes – respect for others; treating people as people and not as things – more or less entirely intact. Modernity's emphasis on reason, and its confidence that there were foundational truths out there to be discovered by the use of reason, matched perfectly the universalism that seemed to be inherent in human rights, and the subject has thrived in, indeed largely belongs to, and is certainly most identified with, modernity. The high point of this phase was perhaps the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, with its explicit "recognition [in its preamble] of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family" which basic facts are declared to be "the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world".

But just as it is no longer enough in these secular times to say that human rights are derived from God, nor is it as persuasive as it once was to say that our obligation to others emerges out of the clever use of our minds, deduced from a communal wracking of our brains about what is true and therefore what is right and good. The breakthroughs in language and philosophy of the past two hundred years make it hard for us now to continue to see ourselves as a cohort of mini-Kants in search of a purely rational basis for ethical action. Neither the pre-modern (religious) nor the modern (rational) explanations fit well with what drives the ethical actions of our western contemporary culture: we are now too secular for the first, too anti-foundational for the second. That there is plenty of *good* around is plain for all to see, but we live in an era of relativism when nothing is true or false, good or bad except what we happen to agree to describe as such. It would seem clear that no kind of ethic, much less a human rights ethic with all its connotations of objective truth and universal certainty, can come out of such a morass of inter-subjectivity. And yet our subject, changing once again to fit in with the times, *seems* to go from strength to strength: how can this be?

If we leave God and reason to one side as no longer as useful to the sustenance of our subject as they once were, we can see that the latest great breakthrough in equality was achieved by Charles Darwin. From him was deduced the pivotal post modern insight that we are all little more than (as Nietzsche put it) "clever animals". From this perspective there is no extra bit of us called soul of which some of us (men, priests, rulers, believers) might have more than others. We are all in this life project

together, made up by rather than tethered to our bodies, all seeking collectively and individually to do the best we can. The *collective* has come to be reflected in our commitment to the democratic form of government, the best system available for identifying what actions are most likely to lead to the general flourishing of the community, and by far the best suited to an era in which the search for objective truth has been set aside as either wrong in principle or impossible of achievement. But the *individual* also matters because of the recognition that none of us can any longer be guaranteed to be, or be required to be, heading on the same path towards some objectively verifiable theological or rational truth. So radical pluralism becomes not only intellectually viable but an essential component of this new (to use Richard Rorty's phrase) post-philosophical world.

But why care about any individual's life projects? If the analogy with animals suggested by Darwin is exact, then it becomes relevant to observe that we don't see many cats, dogs and the like ensuring that every such creature has the best feline or canine chances available to this or that litter. It is not that easy to deduce from an empirical observation (we are all the same; we are all animals) the ethical proposition that we must *therefore* work together towards collective and individual human flourishing. That *therefore* simply doesn't work; it is a bridge which without further support simply collapses for trying to connect across too wide a chasm. You could just as easily say – therefore we are on our own, that dog must eat dog. Darwin gave us a great slogan to underpin this alternative ethic of the jungle: the survival of the fittest.

This is where the idea of human rights has triumphantly insinuated itself back into the ethical foreground of a sceptical age that should have no time for it, with another characteristically chameleon move: the idea of human rights helps us to reject the jungle ethic that we are not ready to bear – it helps turn the animal-fact of our equality into the basis of an ethical theory as to how we should act. We are equal; *therefore* we have a *right* to equality of respect; *therefore* we each deserve a chance to do the best we can with our lives, according to our own lights. In our contemporary culture, human rights have become an indispensable tool in supplying an ethic for selfless action that it would be otherwise difficult to explain, much less justify. As Rorty puts it, the concept of human rights explains "our actions by identifying ourselves with a community of like-minded persons – those who find it natural to act in a certain way". That certain way is benign, respectful of others, anti-jungle.

But without the hope inspired by religion or the logic imposed by reason, why do we still find it natural to act in a human-rights-oriented way? Why not embrace the logic of equality – every person for him- or herself – and the only moral truth in postmodernism, that nothing is true unless we agree that it is? The indispensability of human rights derives from the fact that contemporary western culture cannot bear the consequences of its own post-modernism, its addiction to the nothingness of

“discourse as the only truth”. Human rights talk is an appealing echo of two previous eras when first God and then reason said what we want to hear, that there is right and wrong, that there is truth which can make us good, that life is worth something more than our own skin, our instinct, and the noises we call speech. Here we reach the very core of the success of today’s human rights talk: it speaks spiritually to the believer, reasonably to the rationalist and sentimentally to the post-modernist, and it can carry on all three conversations at the same time.

But there is danger in such trickery. If the strength of human rights talk in the West now lies mainly in the way it echoes past certainties, and if this echo is only heard because we are not inclined to embrace the selfishness that seems to be the only alternative, then these are shakier foundations for our subject than we are used to.

This is where Thucydides comes back in. The facts are shifting around us, shaking to the core what we mean by human rights. There is a new brutality in the air. Inequality has surged ahead rising as fast as the human rights discourse that we loudly declaim. This is true globally, with vast differences continuing between those with easy access to material resources and those existing in conditions of abject impoverishment. This situation of inequality is fostered by the structures of global governance, put in place by the international trade organisations and insisted upon by those who fund international investment. It is also the case that inequality is on the rise nationally, even in the developed West where many countries – the United Kingdom amongst them – report a continuing chasm between rich and poor. These problems are not quirks of fate but are rather the inevitable consequences of a quite deliberate set of policies, pursued by political leaders who clearly – whatever their public claims – do not have the centrality of equality at the forefront of their minds. At times it seems as though capital, having conceded much ground to communism during the great ideological battles of the twentieth century, for fear of losing everything, is now intent – its enemy vanquished – on seizing as much back as it can.

It has to do so, though, in an era of human rights – but the fragility of the basis for our commitment to human rights is evident in what we are fast coming to understand by a commitment to human rights in today’s unequal world.

In a recent, rightly celebrated book (*States of Denial*), our chair this evening Professor Stanley Cohen reflected on how it is we can know about atrocities and suffering and still feel able to carry on with our lives. According to Professor Cohen, we can do this by deploying various mechanisms to achieve that secular Nirvana, the state of denial. Sometimes it is literal denial “Nothing is happening”; on other occasions it is interpretive denial “What is happening is really something else”; if all else fails it is implicatory denial “What’s happening is justified”. As Stan Cohen put it, “[t]he function of euphemistic labels and jargon is to mask, sanitize and confer

respectability. Palliative terms deny or misrepresent cruelty or harm, giving them neutral or respectable status” (p 107). When I read this I am thinking not just of States that deny but also of all our individual capacities to enter into states of denial.

My central argument this evening can now be shortly put. Human rights reflects a commitment to equality that survives in our culture because we are not yet ready not to hear its background sound as we go about our business. We still need this echo of past moral certainties. We still need to think we care about the human species and the moral importance of each and every one of us. But this need is gradually dissipating, the echo that repeats our commitment to equality is weakening. To mask this fact – which as yet we cannot bear – we talk up our commitment to human rights, ever more loudly, more noisily, as though to convince ourselves that – despite the facts, despite the way we act – we really do care. In the process what we mean by human rights is getting distorted out of all moral shape.

It might help to follow the argument that follows if you think of human rights as a computer programme designed to do good, and then see the three problems I am now going to identify as three viruses in the system that in combination are threatening to transform the programme into the opposite of what it was designed to be. Because viruses need names, I am going to call them, for reasons that I will explain, the STAMM, the URTARR and the GWOT viruses.

Turning to the first of these, the STAMM virus. STAMM stands for Standards That Are Merely Mirages. Human rights has been infected with this for a long time. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, agreed in 1948, is a document of moral perfection. Every possible agent of human flourishing has been incorporated within its terms: there are the well known civil liberties and democratic rights, but there are also guarantees of work, free choice of employment, protection against unemployment, rest, leisure, holidays, health, well-being, social security, a cultural life; and much, much else. I have already referred to its preamble. In its proclamation at the start of the document, the General Assembly declares the Declaration to be “a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations, to the end that every individual and every organ of society, keeping this declaration constantly in mind, shall strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these rights and freedoms and by progressive measures, national and international, to secure their universal and effective recognition, both among the peoples of Member States themselves and among the peoples of territories under their jurisdiction”.

Note here that “effective recognition” of these rights is put on the long finger: it is “teaching and education” that are immediately called for. In other words there is no coherent programme of enforcement offered to make these rights meaningful. The subsequent human rights instruments, the Covenants of 1966, the later Conventions against discrimination and in support of the rights of the child and so on, add to the

enforcement machinery to some extent, but the whole framework of international human rights protection remains deeply inhibited by its lack of practical bite. The polite term that lawyers use to describe such innocuousness is “soft law”.

Many international lawyers and human rights activists regard the inadequacy of the enforcement of international human rights standards as a major deficiency. So it is – but that is the whole point of the standards: this deficiency explains precisely why these agreements have been achieved. This combination of rhetorical confidence and feeble implementation means that we can all agree we live in a culture apparently unparalleled in its commitment to human rights and equality, without having to make – or be forced to make – any of the sacrifices that would and should be required of us to make such a set of allegiance matter to anybody other than ourselves. STAMM gives us an answer to the question “how come we are so rich when so many billions are starving?” which does not involve the brutal honesty of “we were born lucky and don’t care about anybody else” for which as a culture we are not yet ready. Instead we can say, “we want everybody to flourish just like us”. But as Jeremy Bentham said of rights many years ago “a reason for wishing that a certain right were established is not that right – want is not supply – hunger is not bread.” Pretending to will an outcome without thinking hard and realistically about how to achieve it is a lazy shortcut to what remains – despite the deception – a spurious ethical life.

What happens if we do set out properly “to secure [the] ... effective recognition” of the rights in the Universal Declaration as the general assembly told us all to do in 1948? This is where our second virus kicks in to wreak destructive havoc on our best intentions: the URTARR virus: Using Rights to Attack the Realisation of Rights. The problem here is that seeking to achieve the kind of human flourishing envisaged by the Universal Declaration in a society which is already sharply divided between the rich and the poor inevitably involves tackling the excess of rights enjoyed by the lucky few. In such a political environment, the reforms that are needed if the move towards equality of opportunity for human flourishing is to be given any kind of real chance are bound to be resented by the entrenched and privileged interests whose grip on resources will naturally be undermined by such changes. Because of the STAMM virus, this is a problem that arises only in regional or national systems where rights instruments already have some legal bite. The force of human rights in such politico-legal environments is often more conservative than progressive, with corporations being able to rely on human rights to resist regulation, and deep-pocketed individuals and associations being able to fall back on property entitlements or free speech rights to foil efforts to achieve a fairer society or a more equal democratic system. Examples of the URTARR virus in action would include the emasculating of campaign financing legislation by the US Supreme Court in the 1970s (on the basis of free speech), the inability to undo the effects of privatisation on account of the astronomical levels of compensation that would be required (because of the right to

property) and claims by the private schools in England and Wales that even to remove their charitable status (much less abolish them altogether) would infringe the European Convention on Human Rights's guarantee to everyone of a right to education. Just last week it was reported that efforts by British universities to favour applicants from state schools "may be illegal under the Human Rights Act".

I don not want to make too much of the STAMM and URTARR viruses. They have been with us for a long time, so long in fact that many of us think of them as so integral to the human rights programme that we have learned to live with, not even notice, their quirky effects on our perspective. They probably are a price worth paying for the quality of the overall human rights system, and in any event we could probably with a bit more work and greater determination manage to eliminate them altogether.

None of this is true of the GWOT virus, a true super-virus and one which threatens the whole human rights approach. This virus works by transforming the programme from within into the very opposite of what it purports to be while all the time seeming to be (and this is its real malevolent beauty) exactly what it always was. The GWOT virus causes the human rights idea to manifest itself in gross human rights violations and egregious human rights abuses which it presents not as incompatible with but as necessitated by human rights. And as many of you may know, the acronym is being used more and more, GWOT stands for the Global War on Terror.

The GWOT virus emerged out of efforts to get the balance right between liberty and security. Human rights has always had a weakness as a subject, derived from its very cosmopolitanism, in that it has not ever entirely understood the importance to human identity of religion and national security. Its two most recent guises, in the modern and post-modern eras, have been first hostile and then benignly indifferent to religious belief. Human rights is not good at responding to huge attacks on it based on religious belief: for all the reasons we like the subject it simply does not know what is going on. The same is true of the determination that many of us have both to love, and therefore if called upon to defend, our homeland. The human rights enthusiast asking "why does land matter?" is likely to be trampled over by the crowds on their way to build the sea defences. The new phase in human history that we have entered, not so much as a result of the attacks of 11 September 2001 but primarily flowing from the responses to those attacks, has been fuelled by a new emphasis on religious belief and national security and has been characterised by a high level of assault on the structure of our human rights world.

Many critics, activists and commentators have drawn attention to the adverse impact on both international and domestic human rights law of the measures taken as part of this supposed war on terror, both in the United States and around the world. I agree with many of these criticisms, and question, as many such writers do, the need for such legislative and executive action and the correlation between such repression

and effective counter-terrorism. That is not, however, what I am concerned with this evening: let us take that as a given. My interest in the context of this talk is in the impact of the GWOT virus on the very content of what we mean today by the phrase “human rights”. If my colleague at Birkbeck Professor Costas Douzinas is right, and human rights is a “floating signifier”, what is it that, under pressure of events, it is coming to signify?

An extreme example is to be found in David Rose’s new book, published last week, *Guantanamo: America’s War on Human Rights*. The book prints an internal Guantanamo document, headed “Detainee Standards of Conduct”. Its thirteen rules make spooky reading: “The following is a set of standards detainees WILL follow at ALL times ... Failure to follow the following standards will result in strict punishment by US security forces” and then 30 minutes for meals, five minutes for showers (amputees have an extra 5-10 minutes), other rules of that sort and – just in case the subtext doesn’t get through: rule 4 “Detainees will follow the orders of US security forces at ALL times” – a requirement that is not, however, made of the authorities themselves: rule 13 “US Security Forces RESERVE THE RIGHT to alter or temporarily cease the above standard if necessary”.

Now this is a frightening prospectus from any regime, much less one whose ideological roots are firmly based in a commitment to democracy and respect for human rights. But what is particularly unattractive is how the authorities assert that the Guantanamo regime is in compliance with international humanitarian law, specifically that although the Geneva Conventions may have been disappplied to unlawful combatants, the way they are treated is nevertheless in accord with the principles to be found in those Conventions. Here is a neat if vulgar way of bring human rights on side: move one is to disapply the international rules; move two is deduce from those discarded rules various general principles which suit what you are trying to do: it saves on unnecessary discussion time if these alleged principles are never identified; move three is to declare your treatment of those under your power as compatible with these principles; and move four is to deduce from moves one to three that what you are doing is in accord with humanitarian or human rights law as the case may be. Crude it may be but there is enough noise here for those who want to deceive themselves to square their self-interest with the echo of a human rights ethic that is still being picked up, ever more faintly, in their souls.

We don’t do things quite so crudely here in Britain. Indeed the British authorities deny that the GWOT virus has penetrated our human rights programme at all. Moreover they point to an absence of STAMM as well – our human rights standards are not mirages, figments of the international imagination: they are embedded in the Human Rights Act 1998, which came into force in 2000 and which has shaped our response to the counter-terrorism crisis that began on 11 September.

I think it is probably true that the existence of a human rights law here has improved the content of our counter-terrorism law, putting in place a degree of due process that might otherwise not have existed and erecting a series of quite powerful inhibitions against excessive executive reaction. All of that is excellent, and I accept it without going into the details here. But I want to ask about the price that the human rights discourse has had to pay to achieve such successes. This is where I think the GWOT virus has definitely entered our system.

Consider first the way in which our human rights law is constructed. Under the Human Rights Act and the European Convention on Human Rights on which that Act is based, departures from the majority of human rights standards are permitted “in times of war or other public emergency threatening the life of the nation” (Article 15(1)). The Home Secretary Mr Blunkett duly entered such a derogation in preparation for the enactment of the detention-without-trial provisions of the Anti-Terrorism Crime and Security Act 2001, and the appropriateness of this action has since been legitimised by decisions of the Special Immigration Advisory Court and the English Court of Appeal. The matter is one of the issues that will be ruled upon by the nine members of the House of Lords appellate committee that heard argument in the terrorism cases that were before it last week. At one level, it is a good thing that derogations from human rights standards are themselves in accordance with human rights. The downside of this is that breaches of human rights are then capable of being presented as in fact compatible with human rights. Black becomes white, a vice becomes a virtue. The trump of rights is trumped by the über-trump of a public emergency. Here is clear evidence of the GWOT virus at work.

Even if there is no derogation, the legal framework of rights presents many opportunities for GWOT to insinuate itself into the system. The court of appeal has ruled that discriminating between non-nationals and nationals so as to expose only the former to detention without trial as suspected terrorists is compatible with their right not to be discriminated against in the enjoyment of their right to liberty, a surely remarkable finding when taken at face value and rendered only slightly less mysterious when it is appreciated that the non-discrimination right is not absolute but can be departed from where there is an objective justification for so acting. It will not be a great consolation to those languishing without trial in Belmarsh prison that their human rights are being entirely respected. Again this is something on which the judges in the Lords are to have the final domestic say.

R (Gillan) v Metropolitan Police Commissioner, decided on 29 July this year, is a particularly egregious example of the GWOT virus. Here random stop and search powers, supposedly provided by way of special authorisation under the Terrorism Act 2000 to assist in police action against the threat of terrorism, were being constantly renewed, without any careful consideration of their specific and ongoing necessity. Under these powers, a man on his way to demonstrate outside an arms fair at the

Excel Centre in Docklands was stopped and searched. Papers relating to the protest – which had absolutely nothing to do with terrorism – were seized. Another person, a journalist, was also stopped and searched and ordered to stop filming. The Court of Appeal found all this compatible with the human rights to freedom of assembly and expression that it was agreed each individual enjoyed. Because the law was limited to searching for evidence of terrorism, there was nothing in these powers that threatened either the right to freedom of expression or the right to assembly. Referring to the general power in the statute, the judges said that “the courts will not readily interfere with the judgment of the authorities as to the action that is necessary. They will usually therefore not interfere with the authorities’ assessment of the risk and the action that should be taken to counter the risk”. According to the Court, the stop and search of the two did not even amount to a technical breach of their right to liberty. Nor was the rolling programme of constantly renewing these powers at all objectionable from a human rights point of view. It is true that a close reading of the judgment reveals occasional flickers of anxiety on the part of the judges, a mounting concern about the implications of their reasoning, almost as though they were in the grip of the GWOT virus but unable to do anything about it: this is a particular characteristic of the operation of the virus in the judicial sphere.

This takes us to the most remarkable case of GWOT in Britain so far, the recent decision of *A v Secretary of State for the Home Department (no 2)* 11 August 2004, and now also coming up for a definitive ruling in the house of lords. Here we learn that in considering evidence certified by the Secretary of State for the Home Department as to why he had detained a person as a suspected terrorist, the Special Immigration Appeals Commission could take into account material produced in interviews of third parties allegedly obtained by torture. This decision has deserved the opprobrium that has been heaped upon it. There are no weasel words available to dilute the impact of what the court is saying: we live in a human rights culture so will not torture ourselves, but where others bring us the benefits of such torture (or more accurately the alleged benefits: torture is not a particularly efficient means of obtaining information) we will gratefully accept them. This is the GWOT virus brought right into the core of our supposedly human-rights-sensitive system of laws: unless the lords rules otherwise, a man or woman can be detained indefinitely here, without release or prospect of release, on the basis of evidence procured by the torture of somebody else – and not only is this not unlawful, it is entirely lawful: the human rights of the detainee are being vindicated throughout.

My final example of the GWOT virus is the most frightening of all. In its most vicious form it renders the whole human rights programme into an aggressive search engine, one which relentlessly seeks out other cultures on the basis of extraneous criteria (oil reserves; natural wealth; amenability to US influence; strategic value) and then destroys them, bombs their cities, kills tens of thousands of their people, incinerates their cultural history, appropriates their natural wealth; installs a puppet regime to

maintain their subjugation; all in order to secure for them their human rights. The United Kingdom's prime minister calls this kind of thing an application of the doctrine of the international community, though he is honest enough to acknowledge that this does not involve any listening on his part but rather "the spread of our values" as he described it in a recent speech. Interestingly this virus is strongly supported by many leading academic commentators who are not professionally or diplomatically obliged to toe such a line. Michael Ignatieff, for example, a well known observer on human rights, justified the invasion of Iraq by pointing out that "Good deeds are often done by people with bad histories" and that, as he put it, "peaceful regime change – through sanctions, fomented coups and support for domestic insurrection – had gone nowhere". In a recently published book which had been very warmly received in the US, another distinguished professor Jean Bethke Elshtain puts it in more general terms: "Endangered people around the globe will be able to count on us when American enlightened self-interest and the universal language of human rights and civil society come together in significant and robust warp". Endangered people everywhere should watch the election returns on 3 November with a great deal of justifiable concern, least they soon find themselves being helped by US bomber command.

The problem with all of this is not only that it turns human rights into an agent of destruction even when done for the right reason by the right people, but that in practice it is not Michael Ignatieff or even Tony Blair who make such decisions: they just tidy up afterwards, consoling doubters and confusing sceptics. It is George Bush, Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld and their friends, not the likeliest of human rights advocates in the world, who make the decisions. In this circumstances it is hard to resist Clifford Geertz's comment about liberalism in general that it "looks like just one more attempt to impose Western values on the rest of the world – the continuation of colonialism by other means". The language of human rights supplies a high moral tone to make the killing more palatable, not to the victims – who don't matter – but to those who do the killing and who do still care – but only about themselves and whether they are in the right. This high moral tone has the added advantage of also permitting what used to be called egregious human rights violations at home, but what people like Michael Ignatieff now call "the lesser evil" in a war to the death against the bad guys from other cultures. So arguments are now being taken very seriously in America, promoted by the likes of Alan Dershowitz, for torture warrants – the intention here is not to alleviate the suffering of our victims but to salve our consciences, to allow us to continue to pose as humanitarian while round the block people who don't look like us are being physically and mentally brutalised.

The great Edward Said died earlier this year. In a tribute in *The Guardian* the poet Tom Paulin wrote of Said's great ability to say truth to power. Even if in this uncertain world we are not so sure what truth is, we can at very least say to power "don't lie to us" and "don't treat us like mugs". That is quite enough to be going on with. Whatever

its origins, however fragile its foundations, the beautiful truth that is human rights, the extraordinary insight that we all count, should not go down without a fight, should not be turned by the engineers of the GWOT virus and their intellectual apologists into a force for oppression, exploitation, brutality and terrible cruelty. We should be angry, active and affronted – and forget for a while our uncertainties about why it is we know we are all equal. I am indebted to our chair for supplying me with my final quote this evening, from Berthold Brecht “In Praise of Doubt”. Brecht may have liked doubt but he condemned the thoughtful who never act:

They doubt not in order to come to a decision but
To avoid a decision
Therefore if you praise doubt
Do not praise
The doubt which is a form of despair

Thank you very much.

FURTHER READING

Cohen, *States of Denial* (2001)
Ignatieff, *A Lesser Evil* (2004)
Klug, *Values for a Godless Age* (2000)
Rorty, *Contingency, irony and solidarity* (1989)