

**Free Speech, Human Rights, and Western Values?**  
**28 October 2003 at the Centre for the Study of Human Rights, LSE**  
**Opening remarks – Matthew Engelke**

Last night as I was thinking about what to say in my opening remarks for this event, I was saved by my e-mail. These days e-mail rarely saves me from anything, but in a moment of serendipity Joy Whyte forwarded me a message from a Zimbabwean alumnus of the LSE who saw this event advertised on the web. This gentlemen, whom I'll call Lazarus (not using his real name), had clear answers to the questions we've set ourselves today. I'd like to read you what he wrote:

Hello Ms Whyte

It's a pity I am in Zimbabwe. I would really have loved to listen to this contribution on Freedom of Speech. I know its a bit rush to prejudge a speech before its even made. But I do not think for one moment that the language of rights can be qualified by anything called "western" or "african" or whatever thinking. I am living in a country where the onslaught on human liberties is horrific, a person faced with the practical brutality of repression in action will never subscribe to the language of relative human values. I thank your department for creating this centre. Its highly necessary. I would love to give you a Zimbabwean perspective of the current human rights issues. Hope you enjoy this coming presentation.

Regards

"Lazarus"

It just so happens – as Joy well knows – that my research as an anthropologist is based in Zimbabwe. And without speaking for Lazarus or his fellow citizens, I can attest to his account. Since he cannot be with us here today, perhaps I can say something about the "Zimbabwean perspective" to which he referred.

The situation in Zimbabwe is dire; the President, Robert Mugabe, has ruled the country with an increasingly brutal grip since 2000, when opposition to his government began to mount. Some of the latest figures and documents I've seen suggest that up to 20 individuals are disappeared and tortured each week – often for speaking out against the government. Often, that is, for exercising what they see as their right to free speech. Just this past weekend, the Daily News, the only independent daily published in the country, was re-opened after having been shut down by the police. The courts ordered that they had bee shut down illegally, and

so they announced their return with a Saturday edition with the headline: “We are back.” Within 24 hours, however, the police shut the Daily News’ office down yet again, arresting many of its journalists and editors and threatening them with imprisonment for printing seditious material.

Free speech, and freedom of the press, stand at the heart of the struggles in Zimbabwe today, and Lazarus, at least, seems convinced that the fact he’s African has nothing to do with it.

When the United Nations Commission on Human Rights began the work of drafting a universal declaration, it was the Filipino representative, Carlos Romulo, who insisted that human rights would be upheld most strongly in countries that had a free press.

There is good deal of anxiety in human rights work over the extent to which a document like the UDHR represents a western ideological project – over whether, in fact, it expresses “universal” sentiments. If we take Romulo’s position at face value, or indeed Lazarus’s, we would have to conclude that no, the rights set out in the UDHR, chief among them the right to freedom of expression in article 19, are not simply western ideals.

But it is bad form to take anything at face value these days, particularly in the field of human rights—whose activists, in my opinion, sometimes undercut their own efforts by refusing to engage in a critical discussion of the ideas that inform their work.

We have invited Ursula Owen and Andrew Puddephatt—two experts on free speech—to do just this, to share with us their thoughts on the extent to which we can assume free speech is a “western value.” Like the rest of you, no doubt, I look forward to what they might say—not only to us, but to people like Elijah.

**Ursula Owen** has been involved in the world of publishing for the past three decades, for most of that time as co-founder of Virago Press, but more recently as the editor and chief executive of the Index on Censorship.

**Andrew Puddephatt** is executive director of Article 19, an organization which as many of you will know is involved in the protection and promotion of free speech. He has extensive experience working with NGOs throughout Africa and Europe.

Let’s welcome them to LSE.