

PREFACE

Most books on the theory of human rights are written by and for scholars and are not easily accessible to other people. However, scholars are clearly not the most vulnerable part of humanity and may therefore find their theoretical insights are not very useful. Those who would find these insights useful, namely victims (or possible victims) of human rights violations and grassroots activists trying to protect these victims, are often not attracted to scholarly works.

Now one may ask: how would those people benefit from a clear understanding of the theory of human rights? Would they not be better served by some practical, strategic and organizational guidance, financial assistance, etc.? The answer is that they need both, because even when a brutal leader seems to be violating people's rights without explanation and without any compunction, if pressed he will offer some kind of justification for his actions. For example, he may try to explain that rights are not universal. Or that some rights may be sacrificed for the sake of other rights, or for some other "greater good". A theoretical argumentation about universality and interdependence of rights may come in handy when questioning these justifications and opposing these violators.

Such a theoretical background to the system of human rights is what this book tries to offer. It profits from scholarly achievements and translates these into ordinary and accessible language aimed at a general public. But it goes further. In addition to a theoretical description of the most important characteristics of the system of human rights, it also offers a practical discussion of the means to make these rights real, to turn them from words into facts, from moral claims into everyday reality. After all, it is obvious that theoretical attacks on justifications of rights violations will never be enough.

The book is easily accessible to those of us who are not yet familiar with the intricacies of the system of human rights. This is not a highly specialized philosophical or legal treatise but a first, general introduction aimed at those who are promoting human rights, either because their own rights are violated or because they are in a position to help victims or to construct institutions that can protect rights and make them real. It can easily find its place between on the one hand the more specialized works and on the other hand the usual general public works on human rights that too often focus on specific instances of rights abuses at the expense of a more general approach focused on the logic in the system of human rights.

An inevitable result of this approach is a certain lack of depth. It is difficult to be at the same time wide-ranging, complete, accessible and profound, especially in a relatively small number of pages. Those who feel the need to go somewhat deeper after reading this book may find some interesting references to other books at the end.

One obvious characteristic of this book is its combination of lightness of tone and seriousness of purpose. Nuances, jargon and detailed philosophical, legal and political discussions are avoided as much as possible. The purpose is serious because I wanted to transmit certain messages about human rights to people who perhaps have not yet reflected deeply on the subject but whose rights may be routinely violated. In doing so, I wanted to offer these people a tool to protect themselves.

In the course of my narrative, there are many occasions where I mention attitudes, institutions and other mechanisms that are required to make rights real. As I have chosen not to repeat myself in a summary, it was only fair to offer the reader a tool to make his or her own summary. Therefore, every time I mention the reality of rights, words like *reality*, *real*, *realization*, etc. are put in italics.

INTRODUCTION: TRUTH AND POLITICS

First, let's consider the status of the narrative contained in this book and more in general the relationship between truth and politics. The thoughts on human rights and democracy that I will present here are mere proposals and attempts. I do not pretend to proclaim the truth about rights and democracy. If there is any truth in the world at all, it is probably not in the domain of politics, morality and values. It is likely that all we can say about such subjects is mere opinion. However, even if we cannot prove anything or be certain about anything in politics, this does not mean that all opinions are equally valid. There can be good and bad opinions because opinions are based on arguments and reasons, and arguments and reasons can be strong or weak or completely lacking. If all opinions were of the same quality then no one would ever try to convince anyone of anything.

Opinions are, by nature, non-despotic: they cannot be forced on you. The truth can. No one can escape the truth. The laws of physics for example have a despotic character. You have to accept them. Opinions can be accepted or rejected, depending on the force of the arguments for or against, on your personal disposition, your intellectual powers of understanding, etc. Another characteristic of opinions is that they are part of a contradictory world of different opinions. An opinion exists only as long as its contrary also exists. If the latter ceases to exist, then the former becomes what we may call some form of truth, at least to the extent that we may give this label to an opinion that is the object of a worldwide consensus.

Truth implies consensus. Who dares to resist the truth? Only a fool or a moron. Truth eliminates debate because no one contradicts the truth. As long as someone who is neither a fool nor a moron contradicts the truth and gives good reasons for doing so, we have not yet attained the level of truth and remain in the world of opinion. This world is one of plurality and contradiction; the world of truth is one of uniformity. Only when everyone is convinced and no good reasons or arguments against are left can we claim to have identified something like the truth. Even when some opinions are predominant, they remain mere opinions as long as good counterarguments are available, or, in other words, as long as contradictory opinions based on good arguments — and not mere prejudices — are available.