

SOLIDARITY, THE SACRED, AND HUMAN RIGHTS: A SOCIOLOGICAL RESPONSE

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IN HIS EARLY WORK, PROFESSOR TURNER WAS strongly influenced by Weber. While his discussions of Weber are broad ranging, I am especially struck by the apparent importance to him of Weber's themes of rationalization, bureaucracy, and disenchantment—and the resulting highly ambivalent attitude toward modernization—an ambivalence that I hear in Professor Turner's own work. But the second key element that seems to have been of significant influence is Weber's emphasis on attempting to understand and interpret behavior from the actor's point of view. This, along with the apparent influence of Heidegger, has made Professor Turner sympathetic to postmodernism—at least as a description of the emerging pluralism of the contemporary world.

While I am not aware that he ever says this, I sense a disenchantment and even a rejection of extreme versions of the linguistic turn and the emphasis on interpretation—where all texts are simply about other texts and where human actors largely disappear from the stage. I suspect that this is one reason that Foucault has been such an important influence on him. He likes Foucault’s earthiness and, of course, his emphasis on the body—an emphasis that has become the center of Professor Turner’s own work. As he notes, he also draws on the notions of “sensuousness” and “praxis” so central to the young Marx and has great ambitions for the sociology and phenomenology of the body. Perhaps it would not be an exaggeration to say that he would like to introduce into sociology and more generally into intellectual discourse, what might be called a “corporal or bodily turn” to supplement and balance the linguistic turn.

The voice of Durkheim seems much more marginal to Professor Turner’s views than the other two members of the sociological trinity, Marx and Weber. I will return to this matter later. But in addition to intellectual influences, the dramatic innovations that are occurring in biology and medical technology, and their potentially revolutionary social implications, further contribute to Professor Turner’s concern to make the human body the foci of intellectual interest.

Professor Turner’s focus on the body leads to a reorientation of medical sociology that involves two levels: concern with the individual body and concerns about the social body; and a sociological theory of human rights. I will focus on the issue of human rights. He wants to defend a notion of human rights, rooted in a notion of the common frailty of the human body. This is an explicit attempt to overcome the extreme relativism associated with many forms of postmodernism. As a prerequisite to using frailty as a basis for human rights, he debunks what he sees as the naïve optimism that medical science will be able to solve most of our frailties.

Recognizing frailty is a useful place to begin, but it has a severe limitation as a basis for either explaining or defending human rights. This is because frailty is a constant, and clearly the honoring of human rights

is highly variable across social settings. While the recognition of frailty is a start, it seems to me a very limited one.

I am puzzled as to why Professor Turner is reluctant to embrace explicitly some notion of intersubjectivity—the ability to grasp to a significant degree the other persons perspectives and feelings—as another prerequisite, and hence foundation, for human rights. This is implicit in the notion that we recognize one another’s frailties, but the emphasis on frailty limits the relevance of intersubjectivity to this minimum. A concern with intersubjectivity is a concern of such diverse thinkers as Habermas, Lyotard, and Rawls—not to mention of most traditional religions. Identifying this as an additional precondition of an effective notion of human rights does not commit one to some kind of misguided faith in human rationality. Unlike frailty, people’s ability to understand the other’s point of view is a variable. This suggests both a partial explanation for variations in the likelihood that particular actors will respect the rights of others, but also suggests policies that might increase this probability.

Of course, a fully developed sociological theory of human rights would need to identify many more factors that contribute to the likelihood of institutionalized human rights. One obvious aspect of this would be to identify not only what enables people to understand one another, but what social mechanisms enable people to reach sufficient levels of solidarity that they respect the rights of others. That these factors are not explored seems to me one indication of the limitations of rooting or at least limiting one’s sociology and politics primarily in or to an analysis of the body—which is not, of course, to deny the importance or legitimacy of this endeavor.

But in addition to the limited foundations for an analysis and defense of human rights, I am concerned about Professor Turner’s vision of the state and contemporary society. As he noted in the oral presentation of his paper, human rights are closely connected with the development of citizenship in a modern nation-state. But he goes on to indicate his concern that the very bases of rights of citizenship are being eroded by the disappearance of the traditional ways in which individuals legiti-

mated these rights: service in the military, parenting, and employment. Hence, to his very minimalist ideological foundation for human rights, he seems to take as more or less given that the institutional infrastructure of such rights is collapsing beneath us. What I find surprising about this account is the way he seems to accept as given global capitalism and liberal democracy as they currently exist in Western Europe. One need not adopt a vision of socialist revolution, but only consider relatively modest institutional alternatives. For example, as a substitute for both military service and parenting, societies might create national service corps, in which people for various periods of their life perform service for the society that are not provided for by the market place. This could include care of children and old people. Nor is there any absolute reason why unemployment has to be permanently high so that young people are excluded from productive work. Such an outcome is the result of particular policies, not an inevitable condition. My more general complaint is that throughout his account I get a sense of passivity toward existing institutional structures.

More specifically, there is barely the suggestion of a critique of unrestrained capitalism. One may very well believe in the legitimacy of markets and private property and still have grave reservations about the commodification of everything. This silence is surprising since the notion of social rights that he is building on, as developed by T. H. Marshall and R. M. Titmuss, was seen as one way of restraining markets in the context of liberal democracy. Is there any hope for civil society and social rights, if organs, genes, schoolrooms, and politicians—to name only a few things that are up for contention—become simply commodities? This absence of any critique of capitalism is not simply a political or practical problem, but also an analytical weakness. How does a sociology of the body and a notion of embodiment understand and speak to these issues? If it does not, how can it speak to the issue of human rights in a significant way?

Underlying the notion of citizenship is the notion of a society that has significant levels of social solidarity. The importance of solidarity is one of Professor Turner's three key concerns—the other two being scarcity and security. Recognizing each other's frailties is a start on solidarity, but a very limited one. If Professor Turner sees solidarity as one of the

three key concerns, then a more elaborate theory of the sources of solidarity is needed—and this brings me back to his seemingly limited reliance on Durkheim. Durkheim argued that social solidarity was rooted in two key mechanisms: participating in common rituals directed toward the sacred, and a feeling of a common identity between worshipers when they were in the presence of the sacred who was totally other. I am not arguing that Durkheim had the final word on the sources of solidarity, but if solidarity is a key concern, it would seem incumbent upon Professor Turner either to embrace Durkheim or to develop an alternative theory. If you take the former course, and the gods are dead, then what is it that can be treated as sacred? One answer would be the body and its frailty. But this answer leads to another problem. The very process of embodiment, which is so central to his argument, inherently leads to an intimacy between the self and the body. Such intimacy is, at least according to Durkheim, precisely what will not work; for the sacred must be *other* than we are—at least most of the time. If solidarity is so crucial, in what ways is Professor Turner Durkheimian, and if he rejects Durkheim, what is his theory of solidarity?

In sum, a sociology of the body and a theory of human rights must more directly address some of the key issues of macro sociology if they are to be part of a convincing intellectual discourse and have a meaningful and positive impact upon the way postmodern humans live their lives.