

## DEFENDERS OF THE UNITY OF THE HUMAN RACE

Alexander Daniel



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■ *Dear Alexander Yulyevich, do you think that democratic principles and those principles typically advocated by human rights activists are the same things?*

That depends on how we comprehend the word *democracy*. If we interpret it *ad verbum* like 'the rule of the people', then the concept of human rights actually becomes wider than democracy. This involves the principle of people power (at least, if taken in the form of 'the right to participate in the governance of the state'). However, together with this it, this concept presents a wide range of other principles. **'People power' provides for the legal interests of the majority, while human rights provide freedom and dignity for the minorities**, which cannot be violated by the majority, right down to the minimal conceivable minority – the

individual. This concept affirms the unity and solidarity of humanity, because it is based on the thought that all people, without distinction, have a minimal set of rights that is equally claimable for everyone. The old slogan of the French Revolution 'Liberty, Equality, Brotherhood' has not at all grown stale in any of its three elements. They remain inseparable even today.

The modern comprehension of democracy in the majority of developed countries is based exactly on this extensive concept. People power must be realised in a way that it does not infringe on the rights of the minorities, and above all, the rights of the individual. A different and narrower etymological comprehension causes political regimes that are not considered to be democratic by any standard. This can be seen in the 'plebiscitary democracies' of both Bonapartes, right through to those of the totalitarian states established in the 20th century.

■ *In your opinion, what is the reason for the failure of human rights movement in Russia and in some other CIS countries and for the relative weakness of the movement in the United States?*

I wouldn't necessarily say that the human rights movement in Russia has been unsuccessful. Rather, **it is the democratic evolution of the country that has turned out to be unsuccessful**. In spite of this, the human rights community does still exist, is still developing and functioning. Human rights organisations provide concrete aid to real people, and the scale of this aid is growing from year to year. Of course, the effectiveness of such aid would have been much greater if an independent system of justice were a reality in Russia. At the same time, if that were indeed the case, there wouldn't be such a sharp need for this legal aid. Another major function of the human rights movement is to oppose and to criticise state power (under favourable conditions, the movement can also

be a partner or an associate, but it is nevertheless obligatory to be critical). As well, despite real censorship in the Russian mass media, the voices of these human rights actors can be heard.

I also don't believe that the human rights movement in the United States is weak by any means. Look at the clear success that has been seen in the country over the last 50 years regarding the situation with respect to the Afro-American population and other ethnic minorities. It was specifically the human rights organisations that were at the fountainhead of the struggle for the civil rights of Afro-Americans. A good example of this is the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People. It was human rights activists who, in the early 1960s, strived to achieve the legislative desegregation of the country's South and pushed to have the struggle with racism included on the agenda of federal government. Or is it that you meant that the efforts of American human rights activists and of the international human rights community in connection with the happenings at Guantanamo prison were ineffective? Almost a year has passed since the prison was closed, and that is also largely to the credit of human rights organisations such as Amnesty International, American Human Rights Watch and others.

■ *Do you think that a form of solidarity can ever arise between human rights activists who criticise, for instance, Russia for its policy on Chechnya and who criticise the USA for what was occurring at Guantanamo? What are the reasons, either material or ideological, that have prevented that coherence to date?*

What do you mean when you ask whether 'a form of solidarity between human rights activists who criticise Russia for its policy on Chechnya and who criticise the USA

for what was occurring at Guantanamo?’ **Here we are talking about are one and the same people and the very same organisations:** it is the same Amnesty International and the same Human Rights Watch, and practically all of the largest human rights organisations of the world! The same things is happening in Russia. Take, for instance, the numerous quotes in the media about Guantanamo that have been cited from the Chairman of the ‘Memorial’ Association, Oleg Orlov, or the Head of the ‘Civil Assistance’ Organisation, Svetlana Gannushkina.

■ *Can human rights activists define and regulate common standards of democracy (at least within the OSCE)?*

Yes, I think they can. **Who do you think were the creators of the enacting clause of The United Nations Charter and The Universal Declaration of Human Rights? They were activists Jacques Maritain or Ren  Cassin.**

■ *Can human rights activists take into consideration the national and cultural features of different nations and their unique attitude towards matters of law?*

The problem of multiculturalism is often raised by critics of the human rights concept and this is another confirmation of the correctness of my thesis (actually, it is not my thesis. It rather belongs to Vladimir Solovyov). The argument is that **this concept is a quintessence of thought about the fundamental unity of the human race.** Of course, this unity can be realised only in given the variety of cultures and in no other way, but the human rights concept takes into account such circumstances. That is why the concept also aligns itself with the defense of minorities’ rights. After all, any ‘partial’ human community – cultural, ethnic, or religious – presents a minority within the greater population.

Human rights are just an attempt to define ‘end conditions’; a minimal set of common requirements for decent and free human existence. Roughly speaking, it is very likely that the Burmese dramatically differ



from Russians and Englishmen, and that is wonderful! I will never believe that any Burmese would be pleased to lose his teeth at the cop-shop of another country, or that he consoles himself merely with thoughts about an ancient Burmese cultural identity.

■ *When considering a human rights activist who takes into account the requirements of state security – do you think that doing so makes him stop being a human right activist?*

‘State security’ is nonexistent in nature. There is national security, that is to say, security of a country and its population, each taken separately and altogether. The state is an instrument by which to provide national security. The term ‘state security’ emerges, when a substitution of tasks occurs, when state positions itself not as an instrument, but something like a sacred value.

Clearly, a human rights activist who takes into account the requirements of state security does not stop being himself. Moreover, in my opinion, an activist who doesn’t do that does indeed stop being a human rights activist.

■ *Why is it the case that the majority of the population in the Russian Federation, the United States, and China do not actually consider human rights activists to represent their own interests?*

The same thing happens both in the above-mentioned countries, and in many others. This happens because **they do not voice any interests** – neither the interests of the respective ‘majorities’ nor of the minorities (a single ‘majority’ is non-existent in nature, as any man can belong to majority according to

some parameters, and to minority according to other parameters). Many people act as mouthpieces for various population groups, beginning with professional politicians, and ending with social public organisations. But the mission of human rights activists is not actually to protect the interests of the citizens, but to defend their freedom and dignity. Freedom and dignity are values, the lack of which can be felt only when it concerns you directly (although, this is not always the case). There are many people who mumble that human rights activists defend ‘the blacks’, ‘the gays’, the criminals, sectarians and anyone you could plausibly imagine, and to accept them – most of these complainers are law-abiding Russian Orthodox heterosexuals. But just as soon as they, occasionally, suffer from the nightstick of the policemen or from the heartlessness and cruelty of state power, they rush to the nearest human rights organisation office. Instead, I wish they would rush to the court, of course.

■ *Can we call such people as Noam Chomsky human rights activists?*

I know too little about Noam Chomsky’s activities as a leader of the anti-globalist movement to answer your question with any certainty. Since my childhood, I have been more used to regarding Chomsky as an outstanding scientist, and I certainly think that the views of such outstanding scholars on fundamental public problems cannot simply be ignored. ■

*Alexander Daniel was speaking with Liubov Uliianova*