The paradox of Western hegemony of human nature

The world faces unprecedented social and environmental challenges that demand a coordinated, global response. However, such a response is hampered by a conundrum. The challenges are partly the outcome of Western notions of what it is to be human, yet those very notions will probably dictate the spirit and strength of how the challenges are addressed.

Dr Michael Zichy, a specialist in ethics at the University of Bonn in Germany, refers to this ‘Western hegemony’ around human values and suggests that they are in a paradoxical state of tension. Zichy aims to tackle this conundrum.

Zichy challenges the capitalist values of the West and how these can undermine human rights-based values of equality and dignity. For Zichy, a Western hegemony exists around what it is to be a human being, and its imperiousness is impeding a global response to the challenges we are all facing.

The undisguised colonialism of the last two centuries may have seen its days, but the concomitant values around humanity are still evident – if maybe more disguised – in the West’s significant political and economic heft, powered by capitalism and globalisation. This is important because such perceptions about the human shared within a society – Zichy refers to ‘Menschenbild’ – determine how humans perceive the world and others within it. History holds examples of how, in its most pernicious form, perceptions about superior human values and notions of what it is to be human can have horrific consequences – witness slavery, the Holocaust and the Rwandan genocide.

Even today, ‘Menschenbild’ shapes how citizens see refugees wanting to enter their country. More than that, perceptions of the human being deeply influence society’s moral, legal, pedagogical, and political institutions, and how we self-identify as humans. According to Zichy, there are currently two dominant human ‘images’ in the West: a normative human rights image and a capitalist image, and they exist in something close to a paradoxical state of constant tension. As a result, they are an impediment to any collective response to address significant global challenges.

For Zichy, the concept of ‘the West’ is based on specific values and standards shaped by Christianity and Enlightenment and expressed in epochal events in European and American history, such as the Reformation and US Declaration of Independence.
The capitalist priority points to a further contradiction in the Western notions of human values: promoting individual rights within the broader framework of capitalistic ideals costs wider society by undermining the basic tenets of those rights. The normative and capitalist human images prevalent in the West are in a paradoxical state of constant tension. Western evangelising that everyone has equal rights sits uncomfortably next to capitalistic notions that economic power entitles more rights. To paraphrase George Orwell: everyone is equal, but some are more equal than others.

Zichy’s question is whether this is a suitable ethical construct and notion of humanity to tackle the significant social and environmental challenges it has largely brought about. Furthermore, Western hegemony around what it is to be human still carries considerable authority within international organisations, but because its dominant images are at times inconsistent and in a state of tension, they can also induce inertia – something we can ill afford when we need global, coordinated action.

For Zichy, Western hegemony around the human image is due to its largely secular nature, which ignores or deprecates how deeply ingrained religion is in some non-Western cultures, and the assumption that its concept of human nature is self-evident and therefore universalistic. This is tantamount to arrogance; it is also anthropocentric. Placing humans at the centre of the world paradoxically separates them from it, something incompatible with, especially, indigenous cultures that value the connectedness between humans, other living creatures, and the environment. This anthropocentrism, says Zichy, has encouraged the West’s ‘instrumental relationship with nature and the environment’ and led to the large-scale resource exploitation and degradation that has accelerated biodiversity loss and environmental pollution and is also evident in factory farming and animal experimentation. The priority of individual human rights and the commodification of our natural environment are also tied to the other dominant – the capitalist – Western image of what it is to be human – what drives us.

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