

Human Rights Research in Political Science

🕒 November 14, 2014 📁 Research 🔗 human rights, international law, IR theory, security 👤 Salvador Santino Jr Regilme



Third World Quarterly

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ctwq20>

The social science of human rights: the need for a ‘second image reversed’?

Salvador Santino F. Regilme Jr^{ab}

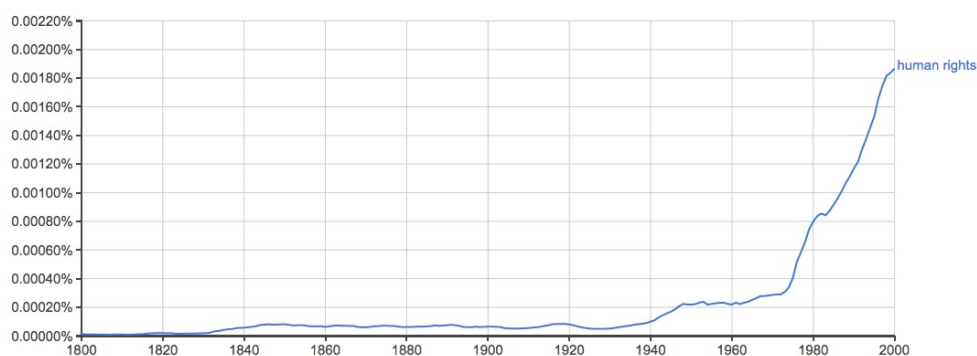
^a MacMillan Center for International and Area Studies, Yale University, New Haven, USA

^b Freie Universität Berlin, Germany

Published online: 03 Oct 2014.

Despite the fall of the Berlin Wall and the apparent triumph of liberal democracy, human rights abuses remain pervasive in many parts of the world. State-sanctioned abuses such as extra-judicial killings, torture, enforced disappearances, and political imprisonments are still widespread in some parts of contemporary Asia, Latin America, and Africa — in particular, even in those countries that are self-proclaimed liberal democracies. What causes state-initiated human rights abuses? What is the current state of political science literature with regard to the causes of human rights norm compliance?

Taking stock of our knowledge about the topic is not only important for academic reasons, but it is also a crucial task toward better global governance of the human rights regime. On that regard, the table below from [Google books Ngram Viewer](#) shows the annual frequency of usage of the term “human rights” in millions of digitized books; it reveals that the increase in usage started sometime around the late 1940s, perhaps just right after the UN General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948.



In a [recent article in *Third World Quarterly*](#), I provided a critical survey of contemporary scholarship on the causes of human rights norm compliance and deviations. The article revisits the state of the literature in comparative politics and International Relations with regard to the causes of human rights abuses. Notably, comparative politics scholars focus on intra-national variables as they explain variations in human rights compliance over time, while International Relations scholars emphasize the overwhelming importance of transnational and systemic variables. Thus, I argue that we have yet to see more systematic studies that examine the links between transnational and domestic factors as they jointly produce variations in human rights compliance over time.

The empirical implication of my argument is that the human rights crisis in the Global South (e.g. post-9/11 Pakistan) cannot be solely explain by pinpointing **either** the internal governance problems of the Pakistani state **or** by zooming into the failures of transnational civil society movements to put pressure on the government. On that regard, the article enumerates some pathways the current social science scholarship must traverse in order to better understand the causal underpinnings of human rights abuses in the developing world. If my arguments are correct, then the policy implication is clear: in many cases, human rights crises in the Global South ought to be posited as a global governance problem that requires the cooperation of transnational and domestic actors.

In addition, students and scholars of human rights might find it useful to also refer to other important and very recent works on the topic: Emilie M. Hafner-Burton' *Making Human Rights a Reality*; Thomas Risse and colleagues' edited volume called *The Persistent Power of Human Rights: From Commitment to Compliance*; Sonia Cardenas' *Conflict and Compliance: State Responses to International Human Rights Pressure*; David Karp's *Responsibility for Human Rights*; Courtney Hillbrecht's *Domestic Politics and International Human Rights Tribunals*; and Cindy Holder and colleagues' *Human Rights: The Hard Questions*, among others.

Finally, these recent pieces of scholarship could provide us a better understanding of the causes and the consequences of human rights abuses, which in turn, could give us a stronger foundation for crafting effective public policies for stronger human rights compliance.

2 thoughts on “Human Rights Research in Political Science”



Sören
Stapel

November 14, 2014 at 1:47 pm

Santino, just one little addition:

Amanda Murdie had a terrific blog post a couple of weeks ago about policy-relevance of the Human Rights issue area, and compared research and researchers in the HR area to the larger IR community. This was based on the TRIP Survey Data.

“Human Rights Research and Researchers in IR: Are We REALLY that Odd?”

<http://www.whiteoliphant.com/duckofminerva/2014/09/human-rights-research-and-researchers-in-ir-are-we-really-that-odd.html>



Santino
Regilme

November 14, 2014 at 3:45 pm

Thank you Sören! I'll definitely read Amanda Murdie's draft paper on the topic – looks very interesting.

Btw, considering that leading IR journals tend to be dominated by positivist scholarship on human rights, I must note that other critical but important

works, which take a critical stance with regard to this dominant “human rights scholarship and politics”, ought to be mentioned. For example, I just recently finished reading Stephen Hopgood’s book “The Endtimes of Human Rights” (Cornell, 2013) <http://www.cornellpress.cornell.edu/book/?GCOI=80140100538130> and I also recommend this very important book.