Human dignity in international relations

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Summary

The literature on dignity in international politics can be analytically evaluated based on three key themes: (a) historical, conceptual, and political underpinnings; (b) international law and global governance; and (c) the global political economy. Although discussions of human dignity within these three themes draw on varied disciplines (philosophy, political theory, political science, law, and history), they demonstrate a shared purpose in investigating the nature of human dignity and its implications to understanding individuals and political orders amid increasing global interdependence. Human rights scholarship has been a firmly established research agenda in international relations (IR) since the end of the Cold War, but the notion of human dignity has yet to gain traction as a key research topic on its own beyond its peripheral association with the human rights literature. Dignity may be a highly contested concept, but its mere invocation in policy and scholarly debates attracts so much moral appeal and intellectual curiosity. If the core normative task of IR research pertains to the improvement of the human condition (and its relationship to global humanity and the ecosystem), then human dignity should feature as a core object of analytic inquiry in the future.

Keywords: human rights, human dignity, legal theory, political theory, international law, United Nations, international institutions

Subjects: Human Rights

Introduction

The concept of dignity is enjoying unprecedented currency in global and transnational political discourses and practices, especially since the emergence of the post-World War II global order. Dignity has been the overarching moral language that binds human rights discourses and norms, and as Samuel Moyn (2010) claims, rights talk constitutes the "agenda for improving the world bringing about a new one in which the dignity of each individual will enjoy secure international protection" (p. 1). Human rights law scholar Christopher McCrudden (2013), in the introductory chapter of the anthology titled *Understanding Human Dignity*, underscored the prevalence of the concept:

> The concept of human dignity has probably never been so omnipresent in everyday speech, or so deeply embedded in political and legal discourse . . . [it] is not only a prominent feature of political debate, but also, and increasingly, of legal argument . . . the power of the concept of human dignity is unquestionable. (p. 1)

Yet, threats and challenges to human dignity vary depending on particular temporal and spatial circumstances, and compliance with international human rights standards is also highly variable, thereby making rights and dignity highly contentious principles that are open for contestations and deliberations (Forsythe, 2018, p. 67; Rodriguez, 2015).

Although philosophers, legal scholars, historians, and political theorists have problematized the concept of dignity, international relations (IR) scholars have yet to theorize fully its implications in the study and practice of world politics. In philosophy, in which dignity first gained traction as an area of inquiry, there is a paucity of research on dignity despite the omnipresence of dignity-oriented discourses in Western political, philosophical, legal, and daily human discourses (Debes, 2017, p. 8). That sort of neglect in the philosophical discipline is quite similar to IR research, despite earlier high-profile attempts to introduce human dignity as an object of inquiry for scholars of world politics and transnational studies. In fact, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, two former presidents of the International Studies Association delivered their Presidential Address (later published in *International Studies Quarterly*) on the topic of human dignity in world politics (Jacobson, 1982; Kelman, 1977). The first piece by Kelman (1977, p. 529) defines human dignity as the condition of human individuals as "ends in themselves rather than means to extraneous ends" and emphasizes that dignity can only be facilitated through the promotion of international peace, social justice, and individual freedoms. The second piece, by Jacobson (1982), supports Kelman's emphasis on human dignity as the ideal organizing logic of the international system and calls for more rigorous implementation of scientific methods (especially quantitative) to investigate the status of human dignity across various political communities worldwide. The works by Kelman (1977) and Jacobson (1982) remain underappreciated as both pieces only had fewer than 60 citations combined as of early 2021. A few years after the publication of the works on dignity by IR scholars Kelman and Jacobson, political scientists Rhoda Howard and Jack Donnelly (1986) published a piece on human dignity in the *American Political Science Review*. In their widely cited piece, Howard and Donnelly (1986) conceded that human dignity is universal to all human societies, maintained that dignity and rights are two different concepts, asserted that human rights are purely Western inventions, and contended that only the Western notion of rights is appropriate for what were then the conditions of global politics. That myopic view by Howard and Donnelly (1986), however, was later successfully debunked, particularly on the grounds of Western ethnocentrism, on its disregard for the Global South's philosophical traditions that offer many moral lessons to the West, and many Western scholars' ignorance of the cultural philosophies and practices in Africa and beyond (Cobbah, 1987; Mutua, 2002, pp. 71–92; Shivji, 1989). Notably, legal scholar Makau Mutua (2002, p. 80) compellingly demonstrates the logical inconsistencies in the analysis of Howard and Donnelly (1986): The claim that only Western political liberalism could be the foundation of human rights is illogical especially if their advocates claim for the universality of rights. Mutua (2002, p. 81) notes the "cultural chauvinism" that is persistent among human rights scholars in the Global North, and he argues that adherence to universal human rights requires the intensive study of each society's culture to know particular beliefs, norms, and practices that are supportive of international standards of universal dignity. If dignity is universal to all human societies, as Howard and Donnelly (1986) conceded, then an inclusive notion of human dignity should be the basis of international politics and not the narrow-minded and chauvinistic Western notion of human rights. This notion of

dignity as the basis of human rights was further explicated through a call for a pluralist and inclusive notion of dignity of the human person (regardless of one's social, economic, gender, and cultural identities) as well as the rewriting of rules of global economic governance to facilitate just redistribution of global wealth (Regilme, 2019a).

Despite those important debates about human dignity, IR scholars have studied human rights—as a set of discourses and practices—in a quite exhaustive manner in the past three decades without a full investigation and analysis of the notion of human dignity. For example, in his seminal introductory text *Human Rights in International Relations*, David P. Forsythe (2018) did not explicitly and sufficiently conceptualize the notion of dignity in the practice and study of human rights in world politics, except for this overarching statement: "Human rights was widely seen as a useful means to help achieve human dignity in contemporary international relations" (p. 32). Similarly, in *Human Beings in International Relations*, the prominent anthology by Jacobi and Freyberg-Inan (2015), the contributors did not explicitly analyze the role of dignity in the construction of the human individual in the global order, although dignity was mentioned twice in passing due to a peripheral discussion in Richard Ned Lebow's (2015) chapter on ancient Greeks' notion of human nature and its implications on human needs in foreign policy. This marginalization of dignity in both the practice and study of IR is also reflected in the prominent anthology titled *The Cambridge Handbook of Human Dignity* (Düwell et al., 2014), which does not explicitly problematize dignity as an organizing concept or even as a normative value for the contemporary global order, although there are some peripheral allusions to the concept of human dignity in the chapters focusing on global justice (Pogge, 2014), international wars (Hasenclever, 2014), and the economy (Anderson, 2014).

Thus, this article analytically maps out the emerging yet important field of analytic inquiry: human dignity in IR. It does so by presenting the key strands of the literature that defines the notion of human dignity and by presenting some of the core research problems in IR scholarship on human dignity. The notion of human dignity in IR scholarly and policy literatures can be traced to three main strands: (a) historical, conceptual, and political underpinnings; (b) international law and global governance; and (c) the global political economy. The section on "Dignity: Historical, Conceptual, and Political Underpinnings" evaluates the state of knowledge about human dignity based on its contested historical, conceptual, and political foundations.

Dignity: Historical, Conceptual, and Political Underpinnings

In contemporary English language, the term *dignity* implies a sense of worth or value ("Dignity," 2021). In Western political theory, *human dignity* pertains to the "fundamental moral worth or status supposedly belonging to all persons equally" (Debes, 2017, p. 1). Yet, as the philosopher Remy Debes (2017) notes, that aforementioned conceptualization, which underscores the equal moral worth of *all* human persons, is comparatively new. The English word dignity traces its etymological roots to the Latin word *dignitas*, and it was only "until a little over a century ago, dignity connoted *social* status of the kind associated with nobility, power, gentlemanly comportment, or preferment within the church"—and not the equal moral worth of all human persons, regardless of their race, religion, national backgrounds, economic class, or any other

form of socioeconomic identity markers (Debes, 2017, p. 2). As Barilan (2012, p. 23) maintains, the notion of dignity emerged in Western political theory and discourse "after exposure of the Nazi horrors" (see also Habermas, 2010). In Barilan's (2012, p. 93) account, there are four elements of human dignity ("universality, equality, primacy, and irrevocability"), thereby upholding a naturalist conceptualization of dignity as a universal and eternal value of humanness. The natural law perspective, particularly in the Aristotelian Thomistic view, maintains that dignity is not a mere human construction but, rather, based in the eternal nature of the universe, whereby human individuals exist for their own good (both individual and common good) and not as a mere instrument for another end (Berquist, 2019). Still appealing to the unique nature of human individuals, but departing from the religious undertones of natural law, George Kateb (2014) upholds that dignity is inherent not only in human individuals per se but also to the entire human species as stewards of nature. Mutua (2016), however, clearly differentiates human dignity from rights, particularly by insisting that dignity "is not just a language of legal rights, but a concept that encompasses empathy, hospitality, and the inner worth of human beings" (p. 140).

When applied in a political community, dignity pertains to the intersubjectively constituted value or worth of a human person. It is intersubjective because any value or worth of a particular entity or ontological object—in this case, the human person—depends on the evolving ideational constructions and social contestations bounded by the constraints and possibilities within a geographical space and temporal period. In other words, dignity emerges from the constructive and collectively social processes of humanization (Weinert, 2015). Although constitutionalized in both the 1945 United Nations (UN) Charter and the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), human rights norms function as sociolegal standards for human behavior, and all those benchmarks are anchored on the belief of inherent human dignity (Clark, 2001, p. 11; see also Meiches, 2019, p. 117). For Stephen Hopgood (2013, p. xiii), the value of human dignity is deployed in order to hold competing human rights visions. In the account of Charles Beitz (2009), dignity implies a "social dimension: It involves one's standing with others and its achievement may require a higher level of well-being than considerations of agency alone would justify" (p. 67), thereby arguing that dignity requires also the satisfaction of material and economic needs of dignified human individuals. In addition, these practical and social dimensions of human dignity have been raised by Lydia Morris (2013), who contends that the recognition of dignity in the key documents of the UN implies "a collective social act, for rights will only have practical meaning through their implementation within a community that recognizes them," and that act of solidarity "requires engagement of both the heart and mind in the cultivation of a collectivity through which the recognition of inherent human dignity can be made meaningful and effective" (p. 168). Similarly, Yamin (2016, p. 31) contends that any global human rights framework should emphasize a dignity-based principle, which upholds respect for all human individuals as members of interconnected and interdependent political communities and societies. Dignity—in the sense of equality among all human individuals despite their differences—has the potential to resolve the unacceptable power asymmetries and suffering caused by gendered, racialized, and ableist structures of power. This pragmatic and aspirational view of dignity in global and domestic politics has been echoed by Hicks (2011), who notes that the desire for dignified humanity is widespread and morally appealing. Accordingly, dignity offers a useful framework for leaders and governance actors, particularly through conflict resolution that

upholds, among other elements, inclusion, fairness, and accountability. This grounded view of dignity is also reflected in the globalization studies literature. For example, Menno Boldt (2011) supports this thesis: Whereas globalization and human interdependence can be traced even before capitalism, as it was the case in the ancient world, contemporary world politics requires a "global moral social order based on a principle and ideal that upholds as a common good the obligation to acknowledge and honor everyone's humanity equally" (pp. 3–4). This shared humanity, as Boldt (2011) argues, should be based on the principle of equal dignity, which is a fundamental prerequisite for our quest to a "good society." Hence, the principle of human dignity serves as the overarching principle that binds all forms of human rights claims. In Gilabert's (2018) account, the moral claim of human dignity strengthens the universalistic humanism of human rights discourse, which affirms the need to actively reinforce human capacities and resist any attempts that undermine them.

The notion of dignity, however, is not a distinctively Western philosophical innovation. The American Declaration of Independence and the French Declaration of the Rights of Man only pertain to a religious basis of dignity. These documents, however, have a very limited conception of human persons as legitimate constitutional subjects of the political community (Feldman & Ticktin, 2010, p. 7)—a marked contrast from the all-inclusive conception of the human person and a global conception of the political community as conceived by the Haitian revolutionaries in Grovogui's (2011) account. Considering the Eurocentric conceptions of human dignity, scholars have called for a multicultural approach to the moral worth of all human persons, which includes the abandonment of the idea that Western societies originally own dignity as part of their cultural ideological imprint (Mutua, 2002; Regilme, 2019a). As Keck and Sikkink (1998, p. 205) maintain, not all cultures possess a traditional view of human rights (defined in its individualistic, universalist, and indivisible terms), yet the majority hold on to the principle of human dignity. Meanwhile, some scholars argue that upon closer inspection of the Global South historical and philosophical traditions, human dignity has been conceived in a more emancipatory and inclusive sense of personhood than those earlier supposedly revolutionary traditions in the West. For instance, Siba Grovogui (2011, p. 56) refers to the case of the Haitian Revolution (1791–1804), which showcased the successful emancipation and insurrection of self-liberated slaves, whose notions of humanity and dignity are universal and more revolutionary than the views of their French slaveholders. Similarly, in some accounts of African political theory, human rights are based on two fundamental premises: (a) the African communal view of dignity and personhood and (b) how that view is premised on individual responsibility (Ikuenobe, 2019, p. 589). Bonny Ibhawoh (2018) traces human dignity through *ubuntu*, which "encapsulates the notion of an interdependent humanity that is central to indigenous African cosmology" (pp. 31–33), thereby constituting an African perspective of the prominent golden rule of reciprocity that is existent in a wide variety of civilizations and faith-based traditions. This principle of *ubuntu* emerged as a key principle in post-apartheid South African constitutionalism, and as Ibhawoh (2018) argues, the significance of *ubuntu* for human rights politics and scholarship refers to its unique stance that takes "individuals not as isolated entities, but as linked in a web of social relationships founded on empathy and compassion" (p. 32). The notion of *ubuntu* as the grounding principle of human dignity is not easily reduced to individualist versus communitarian paradigms of human rights; rather, *ubuntu* may be conceived as an integrative concept that highlights the person's

moral worth that is generated both through oneself and through the community. As Mutua (2002) notes, pre-colonial African societies had an "integrated conception of human rights in which the extreme individualism of current human rights norms is tempered by the individual's obligation to the society" (p. 82). In East Asia, particularly in Japanese philosophy, the term *jinkaku* (literally translated as "moral character") has been usually associated with the term human dignity. As Inoue (2001) maintains, the right to *jinkaku* initially had an elitist concept, but it eventually gained traction with more egalitarian political leanings, specifically during the Taisho period (1912–1926), when Japan had begun its ascent as a world power while introducing political liberalism within its territory. Inoue (2001) notes that *jinkaku*, in its contemporary sense, has integrated the American view of individual rights with communitarian view of democracy.

Despite this universal conception of human dignity, racism and socioeconomic stratification in world politics constitute the dominant exploitative logics of the contemporary world order. Mutua (2002, p. 82) criticizes Western scholarship and discourse on human rights as cultural chauvinism and Eurocentrism, whereby Western societies are often characterized as culturally superior due to their false view that Western philosophical traditions exclusively possess universal human dignity as a moral principle. Based on that Eurocentric account of rights and dignity, Global South societies are mere beneficiaries of uniquely Western human rights ideology (which is obviously wrong). The condescending tone and exploitative political logics of Eurocentrism do not stop at the scholarly and policy discourses front. While Eurocentric advocates uphold the fictional view that human rights and dignity are uniquely Western inventions, persistent talks and practices dehumanize people of color, particularly Black people, even in supposedly liberal White-dominant societies in the Global North. As Iman Jackson (2020) notes, "The Black body's fleshiness was aligned with that of animals and set in opposition to European spirit and mind," considering that animalization is used to deprive Black humans of their humanity and dignity (pp. 6, 20). Yet, these stratificatory processes of the global system persist in the conduct of contemporary wars, whereby human dignity is differentiated among those affected by wars and violent conflicts. Levy (2019) notes that contemporary states implement a "death hierarchy," which pertains to an "ordered scale of value that they apply to the lives of their soldiers relative to the lives of their civilians and enemy noncombatants." (p. 7). This death hierarchy constitutes an affront to the universal human dignity principle, considering that not all identity groups (differentiated by nationality, gender, race, and (dis)abilities) are equally exposed to the types of risks that are systemically generated by wars.

In *Understanding Human Dignity*, the prominent multidisciplinary anthology that explores the concept of dignity, McCrudden (2013, pp. 8–10) traces dignity's conceptual history and its current usage. Accordingly, dignity pertains to the demand that human individuals be given due respect and worth. Second, the contrasting concept of indignity refers to the scenario in which human individuals are perceived (and thereby treated) as animals, considering that the moral worth of human beings is deemed more valuable than that of other nonhuman living beings. Yet, the superior and distinctive moral worth of human persons is socially and historically constructed. Avishai Margalit (2011) notes the Kantian and religious legacy of the concept of human dignity, particularly by referring to the premise that human beings were made in the image of God (*imago Dei*) and highlighting the innermost essential value of the human person (see also Rosen, 2012).

Third, the notion of dignity, as explicated by Samuel Moyn (2013), consists of its individualist conception (value of the human person) and its corporatist conception, which refers to social distinction, moral worth, and status of institutions such as the Church or Parliament emanating from the 18th- and 19th-century notions of dignity (Crudden, 2013, p. 9). Other scholars argue that dignity could also refer to the high valuation or worth placed upon inanimate objects, social practices, or abstract concepts such as the "dignity of labour," the 'dignity of citizenship, or even the "dignity of legislation" (McCrudden, 2013, p. 9; Tollefsen, 2013; Waldron, 1999, 2013). In political practice, however, dignity can only be tangibly realized through legitimate membership in a political community (e.g., citizenship in a legitimate state), considering that the traditional view of international human rights law suggests that states remain the primary guarantor of human rights through citizenship (Cabrera, 2020, p. 134; Masters & Regilme, 2020; Regilme, 2020, p. 1457).

Beyond McCrudden's (2013) anthology on dignity, another strand of the literature shifts understanding of dignity based on inherent value or moral worth to the notion of *capacity*. Particularly, Rainer Forst (2016, 2018), a key proponent of the contemporary generation of the Frankfurt school of critical theory, argues that "dignity, equal status, and normative authority are all concepts that form a unity based on the idea of the moral autonomy of persons with a basic right to justification" (Forst, 2016, p. 30). More precisely, Darrel Moellendorf (2016, p. 60) maintains that human dignity includes the cognitive and rational capacity to act in ways that reflect the reasons and justifications for such actions. Echoing this relationship between human rationality and dignity, Martha Nussbaum (2019) highlights the importance of human abilities in manifesting human dignity: "At least some human capacities must be present in order for a being to be treated as equal—thus a person in a persistent vegetative state, or perhaps an encephalic child, would not count" (p. 249). Nussbaum (2019), however, cautions that "perception, emotional capacities, and the ability to move are all human capacities, and some cluster of them is sufficient for equal respect," thereby contending that "dignity can be found in many different varieties" (pp. 249–250). Similar to Nussbaum's (2019) emphasis on capacity, Barak (2015) highlights instead free will as the key condition of human dignity: "At the core of a person's humanity stands the autonomy of her will, which means that the person herself . . . determines her destiny" (p. 144). Likewise, Marshall (2014) contributes to this literature on dignity as capacity by arguing that human rights law functions as "the force for respecting dignity and empowerment or self-determination," which means that dignity is equated with the "process of self-discovery" (p. 10). This conceptualization of dignity in terms of *capacity* includes Lefebvre's (2018) perspective, which underscores rights and dignity discourses as a lifestyle that empowers human persons in conducting ethical practices of self-transformation. Gregg (2016) uses the term "cognitive style" to refer to human rights and dignity as part of "critical conversation with the local styles . . . confront local contexts in their economic aspects and not solely in moral terms, let alone in absolutist moral terms" (p. 95). In this sense, dignity refers to the process of self-improvement and ethical lifestyle that are fully cognizant of the material and social realities of a particular context—a perspective that stands in contrast to the nature-driven conceptualizations of human dignity.

Yet, the multidisciplinary conceptual literature on human dignity attracts several criticisms. Costas Douzinas (2007, p. 8), for example, argues that dignity is a meaningless conceptual signifier and highlights the fundamental contestations among ideologies. Although other scholars note that dignity is often attributed to conservative politics (Barilan, 2012, p. 21), the meaning of dignity has always been politicized and subject to material contestations in various realms of the public sphere. For Douzinas, dignity is instrumentalized in legitimizing particular political demands and claims. In doing so, dignity is used to universalize particular political objectives. With that framing, dignity functions in a way that is somehow similar to the discursive use of other morally resonant concepts, such as peace, human rights, economic development, and security, among many others (Bob, 2019; Regilme, 2019b). For Bob (2019, p. 29), the widespread idea of inherent and universal human rights and dignity bolsters normative expectations about the need to help and protect vulnerable individuals, thereby making dignity a "rallying cry" in the quest for human equality and welfare regardless of one's spatial location. Thus, this means that conflicting parties and interest groups may invoke such morally appealing discourses for a wide variety of aims, and at times, they are strategically deployed in an effort to justify what otherwise would have been a particularly morally problematic policy objective. As Lamb (2019) concedes, "Ideas like dignity and equality are normative values capable of simultaneously commanding widespread support while nevertheless also housing deep disagreement over their practical entailments" (p. 557). For example, contemporary policy debates concerning extreme material inequalities within and between countries feature the strategic invocations of dignity and rights in pursuit of attaining particular material outcomes. Specifically, super-rich individuals and other economic elites justify their obscene wealth by invoking the dignity of the economic system and the overarching emphasis on private property rights (Regilme, 2019b). Progressive social movements, however, invoke the dignity of all human persons while underscoring the moral responsibility of governance systems to distribute material wealth in ways that guarantee decent living standards of *all* human individuals. Considering this realist view of human dignity, which emphasizes the highly contested nature of the concept, McCrudden (2008, pp. 722–723) insists that dignity's meaning is context dependent, particularly in ways that make it useful in justifying varying human rights claims against abuses. For McCrudden (2008, pp. 722–723), the main lesson of the literature on dignity is to establish the irrevocable worth of the human person while making the state as the subservient entity in service of dignity protection and promotion of its constituent members. Although the emerging view in the literature highlights its highly politicized and intersubjective nature, human dignity remains "central to human rights discourse, [and] the closest that we have to an internationally accepted framework for the normative regulation of political life," thereby showing the wide usage of dignity (Rosen, 2012, p. 1).

The notion of human dignity in scholarly and policy literatures can be organized further into two main strands: (a) international law and global governance and (b) the global political economy. The next two sections evaluate the state of knowledge about human dignity based on those two organizing themes.

Human Dignity in International Law and the Global Order

Human dignity is a value that has been fully entrenched in the national constitutions of many countries and explicitly invoked in various instruments of public international law (Beitz, 2013, p. 259; Regilme, 2020, pp. 1459–1461). The notion of equal human dignity is fully constitutionalized in the global order through the UDHR (UN, 1948), and as early as the start of the post-World War II global order, the UN Charter (1945) explicitly invokes in its preamble "to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small" (Beitz, 2009, pp. 19–20). Similarly, the UDHR, which is the first to be introduced among the three instruments in the International Bill of Rights, states the following as its opening statement: "Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world." The UDHR and the UN Charter both signify the start of the global constitutionalization of human dignity as the normative basis of human rights protection and political equality among human individuals, who are now constituted as legitimate political subjects of the emerging post-World War II global order. In fact, before World War II, states were the only legitimate actors of the Western-led global system; the 1948 UDHR constructed human individuals as the legitimate subjects and objects of international law (Hesford, 2011, p. 48). The constitutionalization of dignity, therefore, facilitated the construction of human individuals as subjects of international law, especially human rights law. For example, although gender-based violence was acknowledged internationally as a human rights issue beginning in the 1990s, it was only in 2007 that the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities legally affirmed the dignity and humanity of persons with disabilities. Such initiatives show the contentious and perhaps belated global constitutionalization efforts in recognizing the humanity of historically marginalized identities such as women and persons with disabilities.

That aforementioned pattern of global constitutionalization of dignity also emerged in national constitutions. As Shulztiner and Carmi (2014, p. 461) observe, the concept of human dignity has been widely invoked in the large majority of national constitutions since the end of World War II. Accordingly, this omnipresent invocation of dignity in national legal systems serves three main goals: symbolic declaration of aspirations, guiding principle for the application of human rights protection, and demarcating principle in identifying violations of basic human rights (Shulztiner & Carmi, 2014, p. 461). This function of dignity in national legal orders represents its undeniable role as a quintessential principle in national constitutionalism, particularly as a normative basis for other constitutional privileges and rights, as an interpretive framework, and as a guide for proportionality analysis that is needed in adjudicating competing legal claims (Barak, 2015, pp. 103–104). The persistent invocation of human dignity in core instruments of public international law and national constitutions thereby represents the moral utility of the concept for a wide range of political and legal purposes (Zigon, 2018, p. 106). Daly (2012) demonstrates the wide range of judicial and legal interpretations of dignity in many cases, such as prison conditions, sexuality, death, privacy, and health care; taken together, those interpretations constitute a global jurisprudence on human rights based on human dignity as an overarching principle.

In addition to the judicial branch of the state, the executive branch of powerful countries such as the United States has also instrumentalized the appeal of human dignity in order to achieve concrete political objectives in both domestic and transnational realms. During the Cold War, U.S. President Jimmy Carter invoked human rights and individual dignity, as it was, for example, in 1979 during his state visit to Seoul, South Korea, where he convinced Park's government to adopt democratic reforms (Renouard, 2016, p. 140). Since the end of the Cold War, the U.S. government has consistently invoked human rights and dignity of all human persons as justifications for its foreign policy, even when those moralistic justifications have been used to justify increased state violence in partner countries, as was the case during the post-September 11, 2001 (9/11) U.S.-led global war on terror (Regilme, 2021). Another instance of strategic invocation of human dignity pertains to U.S. President George W. Bush's deployment of the rhetoric of "universal human dignity and progress" as justificatory foundations of his terror-oriented, post-9/11 foreign policy, which framed democracy and human rights promotion as the supposed basis of its strategy on counterterrorism and state violence (Nussbaum, 2018, p. 57). This deep entrenchment of human dignity in national constitutionalism and foreign policies can also be seen in the case of European integration. For Dupre (2016), human dignity and democracy deeply impacted contemporary European constitutionalism, particularly through the conferral of dignity in humans as individuals, citizens, and laborers—a perspective that supports Dupre's view on contemporary European constitutionalism as a form of dignified humanism. Moreover, in post-World War II Germany, political elites in West Germany, especially Christian Democrats, framed the horrors of the Nazi regime as an anomaly and argued for a Christian view of human dignity as the enduring tradition of the West (P. Jackson, 2009). In that way, dignity in West Germany emerged as one of key principles of German constitutionalism, particularly in the post-Cold War Basic Law.

In addition to national and global constitutionalism, transnational civil society groups have also deployed the concept of human dignity for collective mobilization in support of particular policy objectives. As Ann Marie Clark (2001, p. 29) notes, human rights in various legal documents serve as powerful "referents" for emerging social beliefs and expectations about ideal human behavior, and as such, civil society organizations such as Amnesty International deploy the liberal discourse of rights based on inherent human dignity to organize protests against human rights violations. Likewise, Michael Barnett (2011, p. 200) observes how CARE International, a global nongovernmental humanitarian agency devoted to anti-poverty programs, invokes dignity as the core entitlement of all human persons. Barnett (2011, p. 228) argues that dignitarian and humanitarian discourses suggest the recognition of differences among everyone, yet, more important, how each individual constitutes a representation of universal humanity. Another example pertains to the scholarly work of Fadlalla (2018), who underscored how the Save the Darfur movement campaigned on the dignity and humanity of Sudanese refugees in order to address the violence and conflict in the region. In the case of Western Europe, the death penalty has been made illegal—an achievement that is primarily attributed to European human rights activists successfully portraying capital punishment as dehumanizing and contrary to the quintessential principle of universal human dignity (Bob, 2019, p. 44). Thus, in 1983, the Strasbourg-based Council of Europe banned the use of the death penalty by its members, and consequently, the European Union has made the ban on capital punishment a key requirement for

prospective country membership (Simmons, 2009, p. 188). Notably, civil rights and anti-colonial nationalist Black activists and public intellectuals have also invoked universal human dignity in their global struggle to destroy White supremacy (Geary et al., 2020, pp. 6–7). In the 1960s, although civil rights activists were unable to attain their objective of full racial equality, they nonetheless persistently pushed for formal legal equality of all citizens regardless of racial background (Geary et al., 2020, p. 6). Following national milestones for formal legal equality, the UN General Assembly adopted in 1963 the Declaration on the Elimination on All Forms of Racial Discrimination, which was then followed in 1965 by the UN Convention against racial discrimination (Geary et al., 2020, p. 6). Nonetheless, not all transnational human rights organizations that intervened in the Global South generated positive outcomes in promoting the dignity of the most marginalized communities. For instance, UN interveners, as well as civil society peacebuilders, have, at times, perpetrated sexual abuse and exploitation of individuals in Bosnia and Timor-Leste, as ably documented and analyzed by Westendorf (2020). Those instances of exploitation and abuse of global actors, who are self-professed agents of human rights and dignity, undermine the welfare of not only their victims but also the communities and future generations of the post-conflict societies where they intervened.

Despite the milestones of progressive social movements that use dignitarian discourses to promote the welfare of marginalized communities, the mobilization and framing strategies of some transnational civil society groups face some notable criticisms. In an analysis of the failures of contemporary human rights discourses, Wendy Hesford (2011) uses the term "spectacular rhetoric" to refer to the visual and textual representations of particular bodies in non-Western areas of the world, which in turn express the dominant and superior agency of those in the Global North. For instance, Hesford (2011) refers to the Amnesty International USA "Imagine" campaign in 2002 that featured a photograph of an Afghan refugee girl in headscarf, making her an object of human rights imaginary in the Global North. That visual campaign strategy shows how the apparently hegemonic status of human rights constitutes the principle of universal human dignity, despite the fact that, as Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2015) accurately observes, "a large majority of the world's inhabitants are not the subjects of human rights" but, rather, the "objects of human rights discourses" (p. 1). Although the considerable minority effectively assert their rights through their hegemonic position in the international system (due to their material resources, hegemonic identities, and the birthright of citizenship from a powerful Global North state), the large majority of the world's poorest populations continue to resist global structural injustices. De Sousa Santos (2015, pp. 1–4) suspects that the hegemonic status of the individualistic human rights paradigm supplanted alternative ideals of emancipatory politics because of the appeal of bourgeois individualism vis-à-vis the rule of law, thereby dismissing political utopias (e.g., communism, socialism, and revolution) as "alternative grammars of human dignity" that could address both the structural and agential problems of injustices and dehumanization.

Despite the universal constitutionalization of dignity as the basis of human rights, state institutions and governments defy their commitments in upholding the dignity of all human persons, more so of their citizens, within their own territory. For example, statelessness and citizenship revocation still persist in many areas of the world, including in the so-called

"consolidated" liberal democracies in the Global North. For example, Shamima Begum, who departed the United Kingdom to join the self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS) in February 2015, lost her British citizenship when the UK government revoked her citizenship on the grounds of public security (Masters & Regilme, 2020). Although dignity serves as the overarching umbrella for universalizing shared humanity despite varying differences, the case of Shamima Begum shows how citizens from marginalized identities (a combination of an ethnic minority, girl/woman, Muslim, and a mother) have been stripped of their dignity and humanity because of a state security-oriented paradigm of citizenship (Masters & Regilme, 2020, p. 342). Dignity is systematically denied too in the case of refugees. Didier Fassin (2012, p. 143) notes that even when states seek to protect the dignity of refugees, there are clear differences in how states do so: A person who is seeking safety from political persecution is more likely to be legally recognized as a legitimate refugee compared to a person who is sickly and poor and seeking medical assistance and material charity. For that reason, Wills (2017, p. 78) highlights how human rights discourses that merely focus on civil and political rights are insufficient in addressing the material problems of poverty and inequality (caused by neoliberalism through unconditional emphasis on competition, efficiency, and economistic rationalism). Instead, Wills (2017, p. 78) proposes a human rights approach to development, particularly through a focus on economic, social, and cultural rights that emphasizes the dignity of all human persons, including their material needs.

Notably, a purely dignity-based discourse of human rights without any analytic consideration of global material justice faces serious problems. This framing of dignity and rights—devoid of any clear linkage to global material justice—is the reason why Daryll Zigon (2018) deems the dominant human rights paradigm as the "politics of the a priori" (p. 54). Considering the failures of human dignity discourses without material justice, Martha Nussbaum (2019, p. 5) refers to the systemic defects of cosmopolitan politics, whose advocates promote stringent obligations of respect, including the abolition of war, assistance to abuses, and a ban on genocide and torture. For Nussbaum (2019, p. 5), the cosmopolitan politics of human dignity without regard for material justice fails because it does not demand duties of material assistance to the most vulnerable individuals, thereby making human rights talk ineffective for solving real-world problems of global justice and existential survival of human persons. However, Nussbaum (2011, pp. 29–33) also offers a capabilities approach to a dignified human life, which refers to the persistent striving of governance actors to meet at least the threshold level of 10 key capabilities of human individuals: life, bodily health, physical integrity, imagination, emotions, practical reason, social affiliation, responsible coexistence with other species, play, and control over one's environment.

Human dignity also functions as the core principle of other influential organizations and actors in world politics. Quataert (2009) notes that "for more than a century and a half, radical, socialist, feminist, nationalist, and anticolonial struggles emerged to defend alternative visions and strategies to achieve justice, dignity, freedom, and equality in society" (p. 3). For Arend and Lagon (2014), traditional global institutions such as the UN, the International Criminal Court, and regional security organizations invoke dignity as a core principle, thereby demonstrating the enormous potential of these institutional actors in the effective promotion of human dignity in global politics. Oberleitner (2013, p. 24) underscores the global significance of the International

Committee of the Red Cross and the International Labour Organization, particularly for their persistent work to promote human dignity in their respective policy areas, such as humanitarian assistance in the midst of conflict and the anti-slavery movement.

Moreover, other emerging institutions such as the Catholic Church (and other transnational religious institutions), multinational corporations, and transnational social movements such as the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria also invoke dignity in their global advocacy work (Arend & Lagon, 2014). A key example of global religious institutions creating and advocating a particular framing of dignity is the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) of the Roman Catholic Church, which shifted the orientation of the world's Catholic population by contending that religious tolerance represents an important step for the protection of human dignity (Beitz, 2009, p. 89). Invoking human dignity, the Vatican has also been persistent in promoting its own vision of family arrangement (between a man and a woman)—in contrast to the increasing global support for alternative family arrangements and same-sex marriage. In its advocacy for the traditional marriage institution, the Vatican insisted on dignity using two principles purportedly accorded to human nature—differences among humans and a universally shared humanity—thereby justifying its view of traditional marriage through dignity that is not underpinned by equality but, rather, based on difference through shared humanity (Buss & Herman, 2003, p. 112). Amidst the apparent decline of the United States as a global actor, Russia and China, as re-emerging world powers, have been poised to fill the vacuum by promoting their own vision of human rights and dignity based on cultural subjectivity and the nuances of their countries. Whereas the authoritarian regime of Putin in Russia has been systematically deploying state violence to repress all forms of political opposition to his authority, the Xi administration in China has actively intensified state violence against Uyghurs, or the Muslim minority in the Xinjiang region; thus, minoritized groups in both countries have been denied their claims of human dignity (Roberts, 2020, p. 250).

Dignity and the Global Political Economy

Another important strand of the IR literature on human dignity pertains to its conceptual and practical relationship with the global political economy. The material well-being of any human person is an outcome that is jointly generated not only by domestic or national factors but also by transnational and global variables (Regilme, 2014a). Scholars writing in this tradition acknowledge the causes and consequences of increasing global interdependence, which in turn makes the fate of all human persons more contingent upon the rules of global economic governance, particularly in policy issues covering international trade and monetary institutions, multinational corporations, states, and the transnational economic class. Yet, this global capitalist system has been actively resisted by various progressive social movements since its inception, but more so in periods of crises such as the 2007–2008 financial crisis and the multidimensional problems generated by the COVID-19 pandemic. That is why introducing a national approach to material redistribution and socioeconomic dignity alone, without rectifying the rules of global economic governance, is unlikely to be effective and sustainable. Rather, a global approach to socioeconomic justice through redistribution is more likely to protect the

dignity of marginalized individuals and communities both in the Global South and in the Global North. As Lessenich (2019) argues, the extreme wealth and affluence enjoyed mostly by those in the Global North are generated at the cost of the most marginalized communities and individuals in the Global South, through the "externalization" of social, economic, and environmental harms from the former to the latter.

The call for respecting the dignity of all human persons, particularly those who are financially impoverished, gains traction amid a global economy mired in extreme material inequality (Regilme, 2014b, pp. 282–283). In 2019, the world's 2,153 billionaires possessed more wealth than the 4.6 billion human beings who constitute at least 60% of the world's population, and the world's 22 most affluent individuals held more wealth than all the women residing on the African continent (Oxfam, 2020). This global order of extreme material affluence concentrated among several thousands of mostly White men located in the Global North constitutes a moral scandal because it systematically tarnishes the dignity of the large majority of the world's population that is languishing in extreme poverty. Thus, the right to economic dignity pertains to a concrete claim to human dignity, particularly through the provision of socioeconomic needs such as health care, social security, food and water, housing, and other instruments needed for decent living standards for all human individuals regardless of one's citizenship status and other identity markers (Regilme, 2019b; Regilme & Polat, 2019). In international human rights law and national discourses and legal systems, economic dignity is usually equated with socioeconomic rights. Wills (2017) defines such rights to be "at least in part concerned with achieving particular outcomes for certain individuals and therefore favor the distribution of resources according to normative criteria such as human dignity" (p. 64). Advocates of socioeconomic rights oppose a "minimal state" and instead advocate for a "social state" that is responsible for ensuring the economic well-being of *all* human persons within its territory as well as the rectification of market abuses (Wills, 2017, p. 67). For example, Germany's Federal Constitutional Court, the country's highest judicial body, declared that the "value of human dignity implied that every citizen had a right to an *Existenzminimum* [basic standard] of subsistence," which shows how dignity has been used to justify socioeconomic welfare in national constitutional frameworks and claims-making in judicial bodies (Moyn, 2018, p. 200). However, so many of the scholarly and policy discourses on workers' rights focus on a very individualized conception of rights claiming rather than the much needed emphasis on class-based coalitions, transnational labor solidarity, and collective rights (McIntyre, 2008). For that reason, reforming the rules of global economic governance is conceived as one of the obvious pathways for ensuring the dignity of all human persons, particularly in terms of their material and socioeconomic needs.

Yet, the global political economy strand of the literature features not only the dignity of the human person but also the dignity of corporations and, at times, the dignity of super-rich individuals. Specifically, corporations, especially multinational corporations, have been very active in asserting their interests in increasing profits for their stakeholders, promoting lower taxes or the absence of tax obligations, and evading social and environmental accountability—at times asserting those concrete demands through the discourse of rights and dignity (Banerjee, 2008). Similarly, extremely wealthy individuals, especially oligarchs who blatantly assert their

power in the public sphere, justify their so-called "neoliberal rights" and private property rights as the most important human right that is constitutive of human dignity—a perspective that is strongly resisted by socioeconomic rights advocates (Regilme, 2019b).

Christina LaFont (2016) distinguishes two key usages of human rights as the concrete manifestation and assertion of dignity: political and humanist approaches. In the political approach, humans—as the rights bearer—are erased from the invocation of human rights norms; in doing so, rights are conferred to the compelling interests of all legal subjects, including multinational corporations and economic organizations. On the other hand, the humanist approach pertains to the protection of human dignity as the key objective of human rights politics and demands the prioritization of human welfare over abstracted legal entities such as multinational corporations. For that reason, transnational corporations—although they may not be legitimate actors that could assert their prioritization over the welfare of actual human beings—should be rather construed as moral agents that should actively promote rights and uphold their social responsibilities in territories where they operate (Karp, 2014).

Conclusion

This article has provided an analytic presentation of the relevant literature on dignity in international politics based on three key themes: (a) historical, conceptual, and political underpinnings; (b) international law and global governance; and (c) the global political economy. Although the discussions of human dignity within these three themes draw on varied disciplines (philosophy, political theory, political science, law, and history), they demonstrate a shared purpose in investigating the nature of human dignity and its implications to understanding individuals and political orders amid increasing global interdependence. Each theme highlights particular debates and puzzles for researchers across disciplines.

On historical, conceptual, and political foundations of dignity, the literature highlights three key perspectives. The first perspective maintains that all individuals consist of an irrevocable moral worth by the virtue of their human personhood and that emphasis on human nature is justified by two distinctive and opposing reasons: religion (*imago dei* or humans as the highest form of creation of God) and secular reasons (intersubjective and socially constructed view of dignity). The second perspective concerns the debate on the universality of human dignity, whereby some scholars maintain its exclusive Western roots, whereas critical scholars compellingly demonstrate how human dignity is inherent in many non-Western civilizations. Despite their disagreements, scholars contend that dignity remains the overarching principle that binds various competing human rights claims together. The third perspective pertains to the inherently contentious nature of dignity as a concept in the scholarly literature and in political debates. On international law and global order strand, the literature on dignity features three important topics: (a) the constitutionalization of human dignity as the basis of rights and state responsibilities as enshrined in many national constitutional institutions and in public international law, (b) the deployment of dignity in the advocacy efforts of transnational civil society groups and other non-state transnational actors, and (c) the systemic failures of states and global governance institutions in protecting human dignity. On the global political economy

strand, the literature highlights the shortcomings of the global order in promoting the socioeconomic welfare—or socioeconomic dignity—of the most financially impoverished and marginalized individuals worldwide.

Although human rights scholarship has been a firmly established research agenda in IR since the end of the Cold War, the notion of human dignity is yet to gain traction as a key research topic on its own beyond its mere peripheral association with the human rights literature. Indeed, dignity has emerged as a core theme for research in other disciplines, such as law, philosophy, and history. In those other disciplines, qualitative and interpretative methods have been deployed in order to examine the core theoretical foundations, historical beginnings, and political implications of human dignity. Dignity may be a highly contested concept, but its mere invocation in policy and scholarly debates attracts much moral appeal and intellectual curiosity. If the core normative task of IR research pertains to the improvement of the human condition (and its relationship to global humanity and the ecosystem), then human dignity should feature as a core object of analytic inquiry in the future.

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