

## Social theory, human rights and philosophy

The new series of *Acta Academica*, launched earlier this year, is positioned to generate critical views on society, culture and politics. *Acta* seeks to attract a more globally representative public and authors and become a site of debate and contestation for humanities research by crossing disciplinary boundaries.<sup>1</sup> Critical social theories, as intermediaries for traversing these boundaries, frontiers and limits, organise a variety of interpretive schemes, which conjoins with social reality and the demands of disclosing critiques. Thus, the fresh brief of *Acta*, as it continuously crafts a new intellectual identity, alludes to an assortment of social and other challenges that are structurally anchored within the polity. Poverty, unemployment, globalised racism, social exclusion and unequal power relations in all spheres and levels of society, are at the core of what the humanities and social sciences should regard as the mainstay of their intellectual and practical endeavours.

When the editorial team agreed to this special issue, they did so against the backdrop of the great potential in the humanities and social sciences to dis-enclose and unburden its own praxes. It seems that one of the most industrious ways to explore this potential is to bring the dominant moral language of human rights in conversation with Social Theory and Philosophy, as stewards of our overarching explanatory schemes in relation to the social. Human rights, in its converse, came to denote the social pathologies at the centre of the project of the humanities and the social sciences. But, it is disingenuous to proceed outside the latitude that marks the declared crisis of the humanities and the social sciences. It is likewise unproductive to continue on the basis of a crisis without acknowledging the creative and imaginative work being done within the humanities disciplines. The call for papers for this special issue engages with the implications of Marcuse's (1955: 251) thesis that philosophy "devolved upon social theory", because Hegel (1770-1831) facilitated the "transition from philosophy to the domain of state and society". It further infers that the intellectual "stagnations" in Philosophy and Social Theory seem to hinge on the weaknesses of its contemporary scholarly work (Bell 2010). There is widespread concern that generally Philosophy and Social Theory nowadays are incapable of providing productive interpretive schemes for making sense of, or to study present-day social challenges. Stephen Turner (2009a) makes this clear in relation to social theory; Ulrich Beck refers to the central ideas of social theory as "zombie concepts" (see Turner 2009b); Bernard Williams (2006: xiii) alerts us to how little we can "expect from philosophy" if we ask how one should live, and Catherine Malabou (2013) charges that the humanities and

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1 See Lange (2014).

the social sciences in general have lost their “plasticity”, and thus their capacities for transformations. In *Philosophy as Social Research*, Axel Honneth (2012) argues that political philosophy has become so distant from reality as to be of little value. He suggests that philosophy, to be of any use, must begin to image itself as social research where standards of empirical enquiry apply.

The dynamic challenges thrown up by African philosophy, African studies, Africana studies, postcolonial scholarship and theories from the South within the interplay between Social Theory, Human Rights and Philosophy, command intellectual encounters. “Decolonising postcolonial discourses” is a call that will progressively gain currency on top of pleas for the decolonisation of Social Theory, Human Rights and Philosophy (Honneth 2012). Such calls and demands, far from only confirming a crisis, metamorphose the crisis into a space of scholarly contestations that can guide the transformations of knowledges and social praxes. Our institutions, including the academy and the university, will do well to invite and generate these contours as the conduits of border crossings and (de-/re-)borderings; the extension of frontiers.

The contributions in this special issue responded to the call for papers in ways that demonstrate the aptness of employing the steering notion of human rights as a stratagem for interplaying Social Theory and Philosophy; to regenerate rights, while transforming knowledges. The heterogeneity of the social, which is the impossibility that human rights try to capture in contemporary times, can only become intelligible as basis of justice through Social Theory’s and Philosophy’s navigation of rights. As the contributions confirm, the paradoxes thrown up by these considerations disclose fecund possibilities for our social practices. Thus, refreshingly, the posture towards rights throughout this issue is a critical one, sanctioning the editorial team’s idea that critique as praxis should be at the heart of our intellectual enterprises. As human rights emerge as governing social adjudicatory frames in modern-day societies, it is the tasks of Social Theory and Philosophy to generate human rights critiques to make its justice orientation more real, on the one hand. On the other, human rights critiques, inherently, involve disciplinary transformations within Social Theory and Philosophy, because it is materially set up as the dominant moral language of our time. Both these movements, and more, are reflected in the contributions, articulating the demands for innovative and useful social research as a consequence of the interplays between Social Theory, Human Rights and Philosophy.

In the first contribution, Maart demonstrates *Philosophy as social research* by calling Philosophy to account for not engaging with the medium through which the Southern African world experiences its existentialism as raced. Weaving autobiographical reflections into philosophical analysis, Maart, through

an inventive writing style and genre, asks probing questions of the discipline of Philosophy and its construction of the Black subject as the paradoxical oppressed human rights bearer. In the process, she interrupts, by way of original social theoretical explorations with pragmatic import, both Philosophy and Rights.

In the second contribution, Zembylas & Bozalek suggest that the affective turn and posthumanism, in combination with one another, may inspire new ways of thinking about human rights and provide alternative possibilities of making claims about human rights, particularly in relation to justice. They propose an agonistic understanding of human rights that can critically engage with the social and political consequences of human rights; an intellectual analysis that emerges as a general trend in this issue.

The article by Du Toit offers an inquiry into the current state of the global debate on human rights and the need to strike a balance between the transcendent and immanent dimensions of such rights claims. She applies these insights to the serious issue of sexual violence against women in the South African postcolony and argues for a human rights activism that is attentive to the various dangers for perversion and co-optation of the human rights discourse.

Rossouw provides an insightful reading of Leonhard Praeg's *A report on Ubuntu*. Bringing philosophical and social theoretical analysis to bear on the question of *Ubuntu*, social understandings rooted in the ontology of community become, for Rossouw, a possibility from which we can source options to build a just, tradition-mediated alternative modernity. Within the context of our current challenges, it would be worthwhile for social theorists and human rights practitioners to engage with Rossouw's arguments that posit communitarianism as a productive explanatory scheme for human rights, and politics, generally speaking.

In contribution five, Palm also fixes her gaze on the paradoxes of human rights in our contemporary world, showing that it is increasingly framed both as a liberating tool and as an oppressive hegemonic ideology of the West. She summons the acumens of the Sudanese legal scholar, Abdullahi An-Na'im, who calls for the active engagement of religious and cultural resources as essential assets for a more effective contemporary praxis of human rights.

In the next contribution, Williams delves into the social theoretical literature on refugees, noting a significant distinction between an abstract body of work critiquing the politics of humanitarianism and an ethnographic literature focused on refugee subjects. Refugees, the subjects of a particular brand of human rights, should, according to Williams, not simply be seen as "bare life" which has been removed from political life, but rather as political subjects whose subjectivities

are shaped by the social environments in which they live. The import of Williams' analysis for rights-based sociologies, drawing on interplays between social theoretical schemes and social reality, are industrious.

My own contribution is a speculative essay that tries to bring the polemics and disputations of knowledge transformation to the fore while simultaneously demonstrating the productive possibilities of such disruptions via three examples of refractions. These refractions are generated within the crises and critiques of the discourses within which Social Theory, Human Rights and Philosophy are located. They are further cultivated and sharpened by the interplays between these discourses, suggesting the possibility of self-transforming knowledge constellations and the renewal of human rights.

These contributions, as a collective, do justice to the call for papers. What has been argued and enunciated reflects the inputs that the interplays between Social Theory, Human Rights and Philosophy can make in furthering our engagement with social reality from the vantage point of more sophisticated and creative interpretive schemes. Southern theories, and their battle to find expression within the academy, steadfastly emerge through these arguments and niftily co-construct the landscape on which the entirety of the reasonings in this issue needs to be engaged with. Readers are invited to probe these arguments to advance the interplays between Social Theory, Human Rights and Philosophy in order for us, as a collective academy, to continuously redraw our interpretive contours in the interest of finding varied coordinates for justice in a world saturated with social pathologies.

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