

# Universalism versus cultural relativism

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One of the most pertinent issues of the past twenty years has been the conflict between two different ideologies of human rights on a national scale, universalism, and cultural relativism. Universalism holds that more “primitive” cultures will eventually evolve to have the same system of law and rights as Western cultures. Cultural relativists hold an opposite, but similarly rigid viewpoint, that a traditional culture is unchangeable. In universalism, an individual is a social unit, possessing inalienable rights, and driven by the pursuit of self interest. In the cultural relativist model, a community is the basic social unit.

Concepts such as individualism, freedom of choice, and equality are absent. It is recognized that the community always comes first. This doctrine has been exploited by many states, which decry any impositions of western rights as cultural imperialism. These states ignore that they have adopted the western nation state, and the goal of modernization and economic prosperity.

Cultural relativism is in itself a very arbitrary idea, cultures are rarely unified in their viewpoints on different issues, it is always those “who hold the microphone [that] do not agree” (<http://www.aasianst.org/Viewpoints/Nathan.htm>).

Whenever one group denies rights to another group within a culture, it is usually for their own benefit. Therefore human rights cannot be truly universal unless they are not bound to cultural decisions that are often not made unanimously, and thus cannot represent every individual that these rights apply to. Even though cultural relativism has great problems and a potential for abuse, universalism in its current state is not the ideal solution.

Universalism is used by many Western states to negate the validity of more 'traditional' systems of law.

For example, if a tribe in Africa is ruled by a chieftain and advised by the twelve most senior villagers, is this system any less representative than the supposedly more liberal societies of the West?. It is not possible to impose a universal system of human rights if the effects of social change stemming from modernization are not understood or worse yet, ignored. In non-Western societies, industrialization, capitalism, and democracy might not have been the eventual outcome of the process of cultural evolution. These ideologies have been shaped and created by Western imperialism, the slave trade, colonialism, modernization, and consumerism.

Today's world shows signs of positive progress towards the universal system of human rights. The declaration of human rights occurred immediately after the atrocities committed during WWII. The globalization of human rights began when the world was awakened to the crimes committed under one government (Hitler), and the need for a more universal system of accountability and responsibility. Through a forum such as the United Nations, cultural differences are better able to be resolved, thereby paving the way for universalism while at the same time recognizing and compromising on the needs of certain cultures.

The recent adoption of the International criminal court in June 1998 is an important step in enforcing and promoting the values agreed upon by the member nations. As the world becomes a smaller place with the advent of globalization, universalism makes more sense as a philosophy of human

rights. In a world where many people might not be governed by national borders, having fundamental human rights instead of ones bound to certain cultures provides the best solution.