

9. Political economy

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LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this chapter, instructors will be able to:

- Guide students to connect political economic events to shifting opportunities and challenges integral to the demands and protections of human rights.
- Demonstrate to students the relationship between economic constraints on political decisions to respect, protect, and fulfill rights.
- Create learning materials for their students which enable them to also understand political economy approaches to rights.

INTRODUCTION

Political economy is a wide area of study, encompassing a range of subjects and approaches that exist at the intersection of politics and economics. While there is no authoritative definition, we can understand political economy as “the expression of increasing awareness that the linkage of the economy and the polity are fundamental to the understanding of contemporary societies” (Cardinale & Scazzieri 2018, 1). As an approach, political economy considers how economic conditions influence and affect political outcomes, as well as how political conditions and contexts affect economic outcomes. While some, such as Weingast and Wittman, understand political economy in a more narrow way, “the methodology of economics applied to political behavior and institutions,” we take the broader, more interdisciplinary and methodologically diverse approach in this chapter (Weingast & Wittman 2008, 3). The political economy approach gives space to a variety of methodologies and understandings and, in fact, some interpretations focus mostly on applying quantitative methods to the study of rights issues. This can include measuring state compliance with rights obligations (Murdie & Watson 2021; Watson et al. 2024) and

using inferential statistics and machine learning to predict where, when, and how often rights would be respected or violated.¹

When applied to human rights, this approach allows us to show students how to analyze political economy as both a dependent and independent variable in relation to human rights. We can analyze how shifting material economic conditions lead to demands for new rights, how changing economic conditions may challenge existing rights, and how respect (or a lack of protection) for certain human rights can influence economic outcomes. A political economic approach to the study of human rights can also include empirical research on human rights, with a focus on economic and economic-related factors. If we understand that much political conflict is a result of the interplay of greed, grievance (Collier 2004), repression, and dissent (Davenport 2007), then we can easily see how economic factors might motivate political conflict, including human rights abuses. These political economic factors can in turn lead to incentives for repression.

In this chapter, we will discuss human rights and political economy in a topical way, linking together human rights developments to the demands and challenges of major political economic developments: colonization; development; industrialization; globalization; global financial crisis; Covid-19; and global development goals. In each section, we also discuss major empirical approaches to human rights and political economy. Additionally, we present pedagogical suggestions on how to incorporate political economy in teaching human rights, as they relate to the major topics.

In many ways, this chapter takes a Polanyi-based approach to understanding the political economy of human rights. Karl Polanyi argued that despite the attempts to separate economics and markets outside of social and political contexts, “economic systems, as a rule, are embedded in social relations; distribution of material goods is ensured by noneconomic motives” (Polanyi 2001, 279). Our approach allows instructors to use different political economic topics to show students how economics has always existed within political and social contexts and, as a result, the externalities of capitalist production (aka “the social question”) opened conditions that led to the creation, practice, and knowledge production of human rights. We do not wish to argue that political economic conditions alone led to the creation of these rights, but rather that new political economic developments challenged existing social and political orders. This disruption, or contradiction, creates space for new political debates, new actors, new distribution of resources, and eventually a demand for new rights. In no way are the examples of this chapter comprehensive,

¹ See also Chapter 11 in this volume for additional discussion of the quantitative approach and Chapter 10 for qualitative and mixed-methods approaches.

exhaustive, or all-inclusive, but the chapter is designed to give you as an instructor a starting point to using or explaining to students how to use political economic approaches.

COLONIZATION

We understand colonization as a broad historical period beginning in 1492, when European colonization of the “New World” began, until the mid-nineteenth century, around the Congress of Berlin in 1878, when European powers divided up the African continent for their colonial aims. While this is a huge expanse of time, it was important as both a pivotal but somewhat slow stage for major revolutionary changes in the political and economic foundations of the “first global economy.” European “discovery” of lands led to the establishment of European outposts through Asia and the Americas. This “Age of Exploration” led to new economic developments, such as credit and insurance (for ships) and, notably, possibilities for the accumulation of unseen levels of private wealth, now available to those without heritable titles. This wealth accumulation also required labor to extract precious metals or work the land for lucrative labor-intensive cash crops like sugar, tobacco, and cotton. A key point to emphasize for students is that the *changing material and ideational conditions* among social groups had political implications, as new actors began to make claims against the state (itself a relatively new actor) and profit-seekers.

Students may not be familiar with how this period of time created new incentives for states to raise taxes. During the time of European expansion, European countries, which were often more fractured and indirect in their rule than their modern counterparts, needed new ways to raise revenue, to fund and fight wars (especially the major continental wars such as the Thirty Years War). The older models of revenue raising (through taxation of local elites, who in turn taxed their subjects, usually taking a share of agricultural output) had become less effective. Successful colonial powers like Spain found new revenue sources through mining silver and gold in the New World. Students should learn about how competing European countries—who lacked access to precious metals in their colonies—had to compete by modernizing their military and security forces, creating standing armies, police forces, and consolidating political power within their borders to effectively defend against threats, both internal and external. But to effectively justify the state’s direct taxation of their subjects, states needed to bargain with their subjects, who made demands to become citizens. As Charles Tilly writes, “popular resistance to war making and state making made a difference. When ordinary people resisted vigorously, authorities made concessions: guarantees of rights, representative institutions, courts of appeal” (Tilly 1985, 183).

Students would benefit from learning about how these new forms of economic production led to serious philosophical debates that became the foundations of liberal political theory. Under the economies created in the early colonial period, philosophers and political leaders debated two related controversies: the right of the king to claim rights to the property of his subjects (through taxation) and the treatment of these non-European populations, who were largely regarded as lacking rights because they lacked “reason.” Natural rights scholars led in these debates, making significant contributions to the creation of liberal political philosophy. Questions over property led to the proliferation of social contract rights theorists, such as John Locke, who argued the men had a right to “life, liberty and property” and justified colonialism because of the value that Europeans added to land—which indigenous people did not (Locke 1967). New forms of property rights, such as shifting collective property (the commons) to private (through the Enclosure Acts) led to the creation of radical movements during the English Civil War, where emerging movements such as Diggers and Levellers, as well as “masterless” men, made new claims about egalitarianism, religious freedoms, and democratic political rights (Hill 2020).

Intellectuals and clergy also dealt with questions about the treatment of indigenous people, such as Vitoria and Grotius, natural law philosophers who made arguments about the rights and claims to rationality of indigenous people under Spanish colonial rule (Shrinkhal 2019). With the widespread decimation of indigenous people, European colonies relied on the emerging transatlantic slave trade. Bartolomé de Las Casas, a Franciscan cleric, argued most forcefully against the enslavement of American indigenous people and the African slave trade. While indigenous and enslaved people did not often participate in these debates, these changing materials and ideational conditions laid the foundations for future movements for such rights. (Shrinkhal 2019).

This in turn led to the political conditions of the early “bourgeois” revolutions—the English Civil War, American, French, and Haitian revolutions—unique for their anti-colonial and national struggles, and their main player challenged the taxation power of the crown. These revolutionary wars were made possible by the creation of an independent bourgeoisie that had political and economic claims outside of conventional bureaucracy. In addition, the French revolution rejected the opulence of the aristocracy (and their wartime spending) during times of poverty for working people. The Haitian revolution was substantively different from the American and French revolutions because it was a slave revolt, with much more revolutionary social and economic outcomes, but it also inspired the values of these previous revolutions. The Haitian revolution was noteworthy for its claims of racial equality and challenging the exploitative plantation system of political economy. However, France charged Haiti 150 million francs in reparations, leading to the first instance of Global

South indebtedness (Gamio 2022), which continues to hurt human rights outcomes (Bantekas & Lumina 2018).

EXERCISES 1 AND 2

Teaching exercise 1: Find a natural rights theory text (Hobbes, Locke, or Rousseau; full texts are available online). Have students evaluate a passage from a key text and describe what kind of economic conditions are important to the relevant political debates and discussions.

Teaching exercise 2: Assign students to read Bartolomé de las Casas' *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies*. Have students look up information on the economic benefits that the Spanish crown gained from its colonial conquests and write a short response.

DEVELOPMENT

Post-Second World War Prosperity

Economic development has long been understood as a method to improve human rights conditions. However, one interesting puzzle is that the process of development sometimes creates incentives for repression—and dissent. Students will benefit from exposure to key empirical studies that investigate how relationships between development and state capacity impact human rights outcomes. Research shows a strong consensus that states with less capacity generally repress more (Abouharb & Cingranelli 2006; Davenport 2007; Englehart 2009), though with some puzzling exceptions (Kleinfeld & Barham 2018).

The ways in which states develop capacity, such as relying on resource, rent, or tax revenues, also shape incentives to repress, with more resources and fewer taxes related to more repression (DeMeritt & Young 2013). This is related to research on the resource curse. As natural resource wealth (or other forms of “unearned income”) increases so too do bad political outcomes. Oil and gas wealth increase the duration of authoritarian regimes, which are on average more repressive than their democratic counterparts, increase corruption, and increase the probability of experiencing civil conflict (Ross 2015). More specific to human rights, unearned revenues decrease the reliance of the state on its population, making repression a less costly strategy. Further severing the responsiveness of the state to its populace by increasing authoritarianism also leads to decreasing costs of repression (Conrad & DeMeritt 2012).

Related to economic development, a body of literature separately investigates the provision of things like healthcare, education, labor, and social safety nets. Przeworski (2004) argues that democracies produce better economic outcomes outside of growth, also impacting rights-adjacent outcomes like life expectancy (right to health), women's economic participation and wages (women's economic rights), and maternal mortality (right to health). Increased economic development is also associated with better gender parity, insofar as development decreases poverty and creates conditions for women to demand compensation for previously unpaid labor either in the home or in agriculture (Duflo 2012). An adjacent literature in the peacebuilding and conflict recovery fields highlights changes to demands and fulfillment of rights after conflict. Hughes and Tripp (2015), for example, find that after 2000, as norms related to women's political representation spread, women were able to make greater progress towards political equality after civil conflicts.

In addition to fighting for a general right to development, individual post-colonial and Global South countries began to implement new forms of developmental strategies. These Global South-based theories of development, and related industrial development policies, challenged Global North hegemony, tying colonialism and exploitation into their analysis. Economists from South America observed that many developing countries stayed poor while rich countries got richer. These dependency theory economists, led by Raul Prebisch, Andre Gunder Frank, and Theo Dos Santos, argued that countries like Argentina suffered from dependent development, and their relative poverty was the result of their position within the global economy (Angotti 1981). Dependent countries mostly sold agricultural and other commodities (i.e., raw materials like metals and minerals) and imported expensive manufactured products from rich countries. Thus, these countries would always be in a subservient position to the capital interests of powerful countries like the United Kingdom and United States (US), rather than failures within the country itself. While liberal Western countries urged that developing countries engage in trade liberalization (reducing trade barriers), dependency theorists argued for protection. These radical economists proposed a new form of development policy, subsidizing domestic industries from foreign competition through "import substitution industrialization"—protecting their infant industries from competition through subsidies and tariffs. These policies were implemented in a diversity of countries and led to periods of high growth, such as the Mexican and Brazilian miracles (Irwin 2021). Growth in import-substituting countries, however, did not guarantee subsequent improvements in fulfillment of rights (Donnelly 1984; Hewlett 1979).

Whereas Latin American countries experimented with import substitution industrialization, East Asian countries engaged in their own developmental experiments. The "Asian Tigers," including South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore,

and Hong Kong (all newly independent countries), adopted a trade-related form of development. However, since they lacked the natural resources and conditions for agricultural production of Latin American countries, their trade advantage came from exporting low-cost manufactured goods, mostly textiles, shoes, clothing, and small electronics. These countries limited their citizens' purchases of imported goods through luxury taxes and protected their developing heavy industries. This led to decades of high economic growth and the creation of high-quality, cost-efficient goods in competitive global industries, including shipping, automobiles, computers, telecommunications, and large consumer electronics (Chang 1993). As a result of this development strategy, the Asian Tigers experienced double-digit economic growth and rapid industrialization.

The post-Second World War period was also a time of new social movements, reflecting social and economic mobility for historically marginalized groups (such as women, racial minorities, and sexual minorities). These movements championed changing social norms, new family structures, and political demands for a range of rights (e.g., women's educational and employment attainment, civil rights in the US, Black power and the age of Africa). The civil rights movements led to the spread of a global anti-apartheid movement, a rejection and challenge to economic structures based on racial inequality. The movement mounted successful challenges through political protests like boycotts, divestment, and shareholder activism, often led by Black leaders (Stewart 2011).

EXERCISE 3

Small-group activity: Review the text of the Establishment of the New International Economic Order (<https://investmentpolicy.unctad.org/international-investment-agreements/treaty-files/2775/download>). Identify the main economic and social problems discussed in the document and how they relate to human rights violations. Have any of these issues been addressed since 1974? Explain how they have or have not. What would the establishment of a New International Economic Order written today look like?

Later Cold War Period: The End of the Economic Miracle and Political Shifts

The end of the post-Second World War period of unprecedented economic growth led to new struggles, new political movements, and new demands for rights. We demarcate this period as beginning in 1971, with US President

Nixon announcing the end of the full convertibility of the US dollar to gold, thus throwing the stability of the global economy, often called the Liberal Economic Order, into uncertainty. Countries in the Global North and Global South both faced challenges, such as the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) oil crisis, stagflation, and economic uncertainty and instability. The OPEC model of limiting production to increase prices for commodities, often used in the Global North, led to new political organizing in the Global South, called the New International Economic Order. This sought to change the terms of global trade, including better prices for primary goods and more developmental assistance for developing countries. Global South countries, many of which had enjoyed economic growth in the post-war period, found themselves in crisis during the 1970s. The US dollar, no longer a stable currency backed up by gold, continued to enjoy global dominance, and the new market-based currency regime led to financial and currency instability. When large banks began lending directly to countries in the Global South, capital was available to those countries but came with the risks of growing interconnectedness. When stagflation hit the US, and the US Federal Reserve raised interest rates to unprecedented levels to lessen inflationary pressures, countries from the Global South could no longer afford to pay back the loans from those banks, and this led to financial crisis contagion and to the conditions that fueled the Third World Debt Crisis of the 1980s (Painter 2014).

Second-wave feminism (and increased educational and career attainment for women, especially in the Global North) led to greater demands for both political/civil rights and economic and social rights for women. In many countries, suffrage was expanded to include women and countries began to implement policies to support women's educational and employment attainment, as well as protections of reproductive rights. In 1979, declared by the United Nations as "Year of the Woman," the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women was adopted (United Nations 1979).

The 1970s were a time in which state-led development experiments (often funded by import substitution that had been propped up by authoritarian regimes) began to falter. Economic reforms were a destabilizing force that sometimes led to democracy. While these failures led to difficult economic consequences, they also led to conditions for transitions to democracy (often called the Third Wave), which expanded political and civil rights to countries in Latin America and East Asia/Pacific, Eastern Europe, and Sub-Saharan Africa in the 1980s. Many authoritarian regimes were toppled as a result of popular uprisings or negotiated transitions (Huntington 1991). Observers suggested that liberal democracy and market economies had won the ideological battle of the twentieth century (Fukuyama 1992). However, some state-led development experiments, such as the export-oriented industrialization of the Asian Tigers (South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore), were very

economically successful, and these changing conditions led to democracy for some countries but continued autocracy in others.

Finally, the 1970s was a significant time for the environmental movement. The first Earth Day was established in the US in 1970 and the nuclear disarmament movement, which began in the 1940s, found a newfound resurgence in the late 1970s and early 1980s, as activists around the world protested the development and testing of nuclear weapons, as testing often had disastrous health consequences, especially for communities in the Global South (Wittner 2003).

The 1980s was a time of economic crisis in many Soviet Bloc countries and, as a result, the Soviet Union (USSR) and other countries experimented with economic reforms. In 1978, China under Deng Xiaoping participated in market reforms with the creation of special economy zones. These reforms led to some political and economic liberalization, and weak enjoyment of some civil and political rights in authoritarian regimes. In turn, the changes created conditions that enabled reform movements (such as Solidarity in Poland) and eventual transition to democracy, or the “victory of liberal democracy.”

EXERCISES 4 AND 5

Teaching exercise 4: Have students consider the new social movements (or their equivalent) in your country. How have these movements affected human rights development in your country?

Teaching exercise 5: Assign students a country that either went through a major industrial development strategy in the post-war period (or if you are located in such a country, have students research your own country’s developmental period). What were the human rights consequences of this period of time? What were the human rights benefits?

Industrialization and Human Rights

Industrialization caused further shifts in values, prompting struggles over rights related to workers, racial equality, and gender equality. In the pre-industrial era, the economy was organized around guilds, which effectively served two purposes: to train new artisans and to provide barriers to new entrants into the marketplace. Industrialization, though, limited the role of artisan guilds and agrarian economics, and with the rise of mass production, incentivized urbanization and introduced factory conditions. This had a profound impact on labor, gender roles in society, and the distribution of wealth. Early capitalists

were able to generate vast sums of wealth by controlling the means of production and, in more contemporary terms, following a “race to the bottom” by cutting labor costs through exploiting workers with low wages, inhumane conditions, and a lack of regulation.

Influential writers on political economy began to analyze the conditions around them, creating the foundations of future political movements. Karl Marx, a German philosopher, wrote *The Communist Manifesto* in 1848 explaining the revolutionary but socially alienating nature of capitalism, which became the basis of international socialist and communist movements worldwide, which in turn played a major role in advocating for workers organizing and other material rights (Marx 1848). Early socialist and communist movements organized workers to demonstrate their collective strength by unionizing and demanding better pay and safer workplace conditions.

Additionally, unions played an important role in demanding fulfillment of economic and social rights. For example, unions supported legislation designed to fulfill rights of social insurance, health insurance, and housing (Brown 1997; Meyer 1944). Conservatives in power at the time, like German Chancellor Otto Von Bismarck, attempted to thwart some of that growing political power by instituting popular reforms like old person’s pensions, what we now think of as retirement and social security. This would lead to future demands for social and economic rights.

The Industrial Revolution also led to abolitionist movements designed to end slavery. By the early 1800s the transatlantic slave trade was banned in all of Britain (and British colonies), as well as all of the northern US. The mid-1800s saw the abolition not only of the slave trade but also the practice of slavery in most of those same places. Slavery and the slave trade were formally abolished everywhere by 1890, however, forced labor remained an issue as those looking to exploit cheap labor found other marginalized populations that fell outside of formal protections. Debt slavery, a practice which has existed for most of history, continued around the world throughout this time period. The Indian indenture system, for instance, led to roughly 2 million Indians being moved to colonies of European powers between 1833 and 1920 (Lal 1998). Prison labor also expanded (Terrell 2021), largely in response to the organization of labor and increased protections in the formal economy. The end of slavery led to debates about racial equality and discrimination and also further privileged industrial over agricultural production.

Industrialization likewise shifted gender roles. The textile industry in particular was predisposed towards hiring women and children due to their smaller fingers and the ability to pay them less than men. While this expanded opportunities for economic advancement and equality, it also led to increased exploitation. The early industrial era saw unequal access to rights related to health and nutrition in England and Ireland (Thompson 1825), where rural

women fared significantly worse than rural men and urban women (Nicholas and Oxley 1993). This is a fairly typical consequence of industrialization, repeated in the Americas as well as Africa and Asia during their respective industrial eras. Marginalized rural groups, particularly women and girls, are viewed as less capable of heavy agricultural work, leading household resources to be unequally invested in men and boys, which in turn led to a lack of nutrition (like lower protein consumption), health issues (including stunting), and lower educational attainment.

The political economic consequences of the First World War and its conclusion led to significant developments in human rights. Economically, the First World War was an expensive war, during which the US (which stayed out of the war for some time) was able to benefit financially by supplying both sides. This also led to the end of the British economic hegemony, but set up a world without clear rules or a leader, leading to many problems with economic cooperation (that would worsen, not help, future cooperation). Global trade declined by 30 percent, which had disastrous consequences for the economic well-being of citizens (Madsen 2001). In addition, the conditions of the Treaty of Versailles were so punishing for Germany that it was unable to make reparation payments and experienced hyperinflation in the 1920s, which led to significant feelings of anger and political grievances that eventually gave rise to the National Socialist movement, contributing to the conditions that led to the Second World War. This in turn violated the fundamental civil and political rights of many people, especially Jewish communities throughout Europe. These economic conditions in turn led to resistance and eventual demands for new kinds of human rights, especially cultural rights.

The Treaty of Versailles created new rights, including labor rights, under the newly formed International Labour Organization. This created a narrative around war and peace, in which the conditions of social justice and decent work were directly linked to other countries' welfare, and ultimately world peace (ILO 2024). The Treaty of Versailles also established the right of self-determination for peoples, but in practice only European people with the break-up of large empires. Yet these ideas permeated throughout Asian and African colonies and had an impact later on. For example, Ho Chi Minh, a young man during the Versailles Peace Conference, sent letters to key dignitaries and even held placards outside the negotiations, urging self-determination for Vietnam (Singh 2009). While self-determination was limited to only *some* European people, this process helped to embolden colonial nationalist movements.

Another important source of human rights in the interwar period was the Russian revolution and the establishment of the USSR. Politically, the presence of the USSR as the leader of a global socialist/communist movement would promote economic and social rights in various international fora and provide a focal point for communists and socialists around the world. These

movements advocated for greater protections for workers and for greater social rights and protections under capitalism (Ishay 2005). Earlier movements for welfare states, originating in Bismark's Germany (politically motivated as an attempt to undercut socialist movements) began to spread and gain support during this time (Garland 2016).

The Great Depression, started by a Wall Street crash in 1929, was a time of economic contraction, with mass unemployment, poverty, lack of economic opportunities, and many states reverting to autarky. Many countries, in an attempt to promote their domestic industries, engaged in greater tariffs and protectionism, which had the opposite effect but did lead to further political support for nationalism. There were many proximate causes to the rise of fascism in Europe during this time, including the economic and political turmoil of the Great Depression, reaction to the USSR, and political grievances from the settlement of the First World War (Corrin 2017). From a rights perspective, many countries with fledgling democracies (Germany and Italy) found the legitimacy of their political system under attack by right-wing threats, which hurt the realization of civil and political rights. In addition, the 1930s was a time of trade union and left-wing social mobilization, as people began to organize to better their conditions. During this time, social movements and trade unions fought for social and economic rights for all, as early welfare state rights were established in places like the US (Whelan & Donnelly 2007).

Following the atrocities and horrors of the Second World War, the world attempted to come together to recognize the importance of the rights of individuals. While the mistreatment of prisoners of war and battlefield horrors like nerve agents led to "humanitarian" laws of war, the rights of non-soldiers were also solidified in documents like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the development of treaties like the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights. Alongside these developments was an era of decolonization, spurred in part by developing norms of the right to self-determination. Ultimately, these new international norms and institutions led to greater demands for political rights, the ending of discrimination, and stronger welfare protections, including the development of the modern welfare state.

In addition, the US spent millions on development assistance to promote alliances, through policies such as the Marshall Plan (European recovery), Alliance for Progress (anticommunist assistance for Latin America), and through funding of the Bretton Wood institutions—World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade. While these institutions were not explicitly human rights organizations, their role in funding economic recovery and promoting stability helped many people enjoy a range of human rights in the fragile immediate post-war period, and helped usher in a period of unprecedented economic growth (Vonyó 2008).

While former empires did not break apart as a result of the Paris Peace Treaty, many newly independent post-colonial states gained their independence in the period between 1945 and 1971. In 1960, dubbed “The Year of Africa,” 17 new countries in Africa declared independence. These newly independent countries now had control over their own sovereign economic development. While some countries allied with the US and the West and others with the USSR, many countries joined the Non-Aligned Movement, or Third World movement, seeking a separate path from the hegemony of the global powers and to stand in solidarity against colonialism (Prashad 2007). From these efforts came the eventual passing of the 1986 Declaration of the Right to Development in 1986.

EXERCISES 6–8

Teaching exercise 6: Review the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: Think, pair, share: Which of the articles seem impossible because of the dominant economic ideas in your country? What would need to happen (politically, economically, and socially) for these articles to become a reality? If you were going to design a compact that provided economic incentives for promoting human rights, what would it look like?

Teaching exercise 7: Divide students into groups of countries present at the drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: (Australia, Chile, China, France, Lebanon, the United Kingdom, US, and USSR). Have students briefly research the development position of each country and explain how it influenced their human rights goals.

Teaching exercise 8: Think, pair, share: What treaties have an explicit political economy component, and which could be improved by incorporating one?

Globalization and Human Rights

The fall of the USSR led to the triumph of the neoliberal order—low regulation, minimal tariffs, and free markets supported by the evolution of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade to the World Trade Organization (WTO) and dozens of regional free trade agreements. The two most obvious connections to rights are (1) the previously protected workers in the Global North seeing their jobs offshored in the Global South; and (2) the promise of civil and political rights in formerly totalitarian regimes experiencing democratization, many

of whom were previously ruled under the USSR. Regarding the first, downward political economic pressures caused by international trade on labor rights came from both the supply and demand side. In terms of supply, more economically developed countries with higher respect for the core labor standards of freedom of association, collective bargaining, prohibitions against forced labor, banning child labor, and workplace nondiscrimination began outsourcing jobs to other countries with lower levels of respect for those worker rights. On the demand side, states seeking to benefit from that outsourcing hoped to keep their own worker protections low to attract investment (World Trade Organization 1996). India historically has represented the voice of these countries at the WTO, hoping to prevent the organization from reaching a binding and enforceable agreement of these rights (Meyer 2015). While the WTO has allowed for trade restrictions based on *product* standards (i.e., vehicle emission limits), they have yet to allow for restrictions based on *process* standards (i.e., labor rights) (Greenhill et al. 2009).

Economic shock therapy in the former USSR led to democratic backsliding in Hungary and Poland and state capture of Russia by economic and military oligarchs. Aid from the US, designed to promote respect for civil and political rights, failed or had limited impact (Marangos 2004), as individuals saw increased repression of protests and speech rights. Attempting the twin reforms of market liberalization and democratization led to partial reforms, as existing elites were able to capture lucrative industries and convert that wealth into political influence, to continue to prevent further democratic reforms (Acemoglu & Robinson 2006; Hellman 1998).

Less obvious, though, are the myriad ways in which this era of globalization led to diffusions of rights and backlashes caused by the erosion of social, political, and cultural norms. For instance, international economic factors—what some might call economic globalization—also impact respect for rights, and states interacted with these factors at an exploding rate in the 1990s and early 2000s. Phenomena like foreign direct investment, trade and exports, International Monetary Fund loans, sovereign debt, credit, and default, portfolio investment, and foreign aid and official development assistance all have significant and unique streams of scholarship devoted to them. While there are many articles and books which address these issues, one of the most comprehensive is “Money with a mean streak?” by Richards and colleagues (2001). Here, the authors identify multiple forms of global financial flows—including foreign direct investment, portfolio investment, sovereign debt, and official development assistance—and test competing insights from dependency theory and neoliberal economic theory on whether what they call foreign economic penetration impacts physical integrity and civil and political rights. They find that only portfolio investment—a form of investment understudied in the literature—impacts physical integrity rights, and does so positively. Foreign direct

investment positively impacts political and civil rights, while levels of debt are significant and negative. Richards and colleagues posit that portfolio investors desire baseline levels of stability in order to maximize their profits, while foreign direct investment is more long term and leads to workers eventually demanding more political and civil rights.

One tool of economic statecraft which proliferated after the fall of the USSR was the use of economic sanctions. Economic sanctions are often used as a “stick” alongside the promise of “carrots,” like preferential trade agreements. Sanctions, even ones designed to improve respect for human rights, often have the opposite effect, worsening repression (Peksen 2009). Preferential trade agreements, especially those with human rights or labor conditions specifically included, also increase respect for some rights (Hafner Burton 2005, 2011). Cheaper access to sovereign debt reduces repression (Clay & DiGiuseppe 2017), and so does defaulting on debts when debt burdens are high (Bagwell 2023). Blanton and Blanton (2016) highlight the ways in which different aspects of globalization limit respect for labor rights practices, even if legislation related to labor rights remains unchanged.

EXERCISES 9–11

Teaching exercise 9: Failures to protect human rights have all kinds of political economic consequences. Consider a major human rights problem in your country or community. Working in small groups, brainstorm the ways that this human rights violation has real economic consequences. How might policy address this problem? (i.e., if racial or religious discrimination is a significant problem in your country/community, how does this affect jobs, housing, the creation of small businesses, access to credit, education, etc. for the marginalized group?)

Teaching exercise 10: There are many reports about recent workers’ rights disasters (for example, type workers into a search query at a major human rights organization, such as Amnesty or Human Rights Watch). Ask students to analyze one short report and discuss why these workers’ rights violations occurred. Who were the actors involved and why did they decide to repress?

Teaching exercise 11: Data and information literacy are essential to modern understanding, advocacy, and analysis of human rights issues. One way to promote such literacy is to incorporate quantitative human rights research into your assigned readings and teach students how to pull out the most relevant information. Assign a reading—like “Money with a

mean streak?” discussed above—and have students identify the research question, theory and hypotheses, source of data, results, and conclusions. More advanced students may also be interested in the method of analysis. You can ask students to compare the type of information presented to qualitative work, to develop a holistic picture of research methods and human rights knowledge.

Global Financial Crisis(es)

The global financial crisis of 2008, caused by reckless housing and insurance policies in the US, demonstrated the risks of neoliberalism and consequent social backlash: the Eurozone crisis beginning in Greece, Portugal, Italy, Ireland, and Spain led to protests and repression in Greece, especially when the European Central Bank attempted to impose austerity measures. Cuts to pensions and other reductions in the social safety net prompted by austerity led to large-scale protests (Fominaya 2019; Karyotis & Rüdiger 2018) and increased repression. Outside of the European Union, austerity measures proposed by the International Monetary Fund and agreed to by states likewise led to reductions in fulfillment of economic and social rights and increased protest (Mark 2018). This highlights the interconnectedness of rights: when fulfillment of economic and social rights declines, civil and political rights often follow suit.

Despite neoliberalism’s claims that globalization would improve the lives of everyone, workers’ rights see a gap between respect in law and practice, and trends point to an overall decline in respect since the 1990s (Bagwell et al. 2023). This includes problems with workplace safety, fair pay, and workers’ rights to form and join unions. In addition, globalization and free trade regimes have decimated many industries, especially manufacturing in Global North countries. Many citizens blame globalization and migrants for these problems, leading to support for anti-democratic and right-wing populist candidates, supported by the electoral victories of Brexit, Trump, Orbán, Berlusconi, Bolsonaro, Fidez, and Erdoğan (Rodrik 2021).

In addition, many basic social and economic rights, such as healthcare and housing, are traditionally provided by a variety of public and private actors. In the private sector, there has been a financialization of such services, leading to their inaccessibility as return to shareholders is prioritized as a corporate goal above the provision of goods and services (Farha & Schwan 2021). In lesser developed countries, the International Monetary Fund plays a significant role in privatizing previously public services. These policies have significant negative rights implications, often causing the degradation of economic and social rights which, in turn, leads to more dissent and repression by state security forces.

EXERCISE 12

National budget trends: Students will look up public budget information about their own country or another country (assigned or chosen) and examine budgetary allocations (and changes over time) in the following categories: police (including allocations for salaries); education (K-12 and higher education); healthcare; housing; and food subsidies (especially direct payments for nutrition). These budgets can be national level or sub-national, depending on the availability of data. What can explain these allocations and changes in budgetary allotments? How do they affect human rights?

COVID-19 AND TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY CHALLENGES

The Covid-19 pandemic further exacerbated political economy issues, directly causing regressions in respect to almost all kinds of rights almost everywhere in the world. While there was great potential to make significant progress, gains appeared to be primarily short term. As one example, children's right to nutrition improved during the pandemic through government subsidies for lunches, and laws that prevented evictions reduced unfulfillment of the right to housing. But those policies were limited in scope and many were not renewed once the pandemic was no longer at its peak. Scholarship found that democracies were increasingly derogating from their responsibilities at rates similar to autocracies, but were on average no less efficient at stifling the pandemic (Maerz et al. 2020). Similarly, states did not formally claim their derogations, as required by international law.

In addition to the Covid-19 pandemic, the world faced several other crises. Police killings of unarmed Black men and women in the US led to global protest movements, while governments were already restricting rights to assembly in order to deal with the pandemic. Protests related to climate and global warming added a third opportunity for governments to crack down (Bethke & Wolff 2023).

Recent political economic developments have led to new debates about how such developments might affect existing human rights. The widespread use and spread of language learning models (LLM), commonly known as generative artificial intelligence and common brands such as ChatGPT, has renewed both hope and fears about its human rights impact. On one hand, LLM can address social and economic inequalities in terms of access to knowledge and science (İlhan et al. 2024). On the other hand, LLM are very energy intensive

in their consumption, requiring fresh water and energy during a time when both resources are scarce (Berreby 2024). Cryptocurrency, another political economic development, is a decentralized currency based on blockchain technology, which is “time-stamped and immutable blocks of data” that can be used for different purposes (Tripathi et al. 2023). As these are emerging technologies, their implications for human rights remain unclear, but different advocates argue for new rights and protections as a result of these political economic developments (Nolan et al. 2024).

EXERCISES 13–15

Teaching exercise 13: Design your own treaty for unmet human rights that has a political economy component (i.e., to solve the problem might require public spending, the problem can be based on a resource allocation/distribution inequality, the human rights problem can be based on the dominant economic ideology). Be sure to include guides on how to interpret the treaty (i.e., clarify the scope of state obligations).

Teaching exercise 14: Cryptocurrency is a major political economic development. Divide the classroom into two groups, one pro-crypto and one critical of crypto. The pro-crypto group can make arguments about economic development, freedoms, and property and the critical group could make arguments about environmental protection and the speculative and unstable nature of crypto.

Teaching exercise 15: Imagine if there was another global pandemic of Covid-19 proportions in the near future (ten years). What are some of the human rights that would be most vulnerable? Which populations would be most vulnerable? What is something your country or local authority could do today to ensure better protection of those rights?

POLITICAL ECONOMIC BENEFITS OF RESPECTING RIGHTS

On the flip side, there is also literature examining the political economic impacts of respecting rights. Blanton and Blanton (2007), for example, find that respecting human rights leads to an increase in foreign direct investment. Likewise, Blanton and Blanton (2007) and Rodrik (2001) find that trade and human rights can operate in a virtuous circle, where liberalizing trade leads to greater demands for rights, which in turn leads to more respect from the state

and continued trade and investment from abroad. Improving women's rights, particularly progressing towards land ownership equality, leads to better economic growth (Rabenhorst & Bean 2011).

EXERCISE 16

Assign students an article from the open-source academic journal *International Journal of the Commons* (<https://thecommonsjournal.org/>). Have students discuss the different claims about rights, obligations, property, and collective claims presented in the article.

Development Goals and Global Governance

There are large literatures on human rights issues that do not use human rights framings. For example, racial discrimination leads to adverse economic outcomes—something that could be mitigated by complying with the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination. Likewise, the United Nations Millennium Development Goals and later Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a fundamental restating of existing human rights treaties, though they lack the legal obligation of previous international covenants. For example, SDG 2, which calls for the elimination of hunger, is also found in the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, which obligates states to provide adequate nutrition, as are SDG 4 (education), 6 (clean water and sanitation), and 8 (decent work). Additional SDGs appear based on other existing international laws, including SDG 5 (gender equality, Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women), and SDG 16 (peaceful and just societies, International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights).

There is also a rich literature on the role of macroeconomic and other factors on human rights. This includes research on the role of labor rights and development, as early research on the development state argued that economic growth often relied on labor repression, including repression of trade unions and wages, especially in East Asian export-oriented countries (Deyo et al 1987; Haggard 1986). However, this finding has been questioned as only relating to a limited pool of countries (Geddes 1990). A rich literature on the role of multinational corporations and human rights has emerged in recent decades, given the transnational reach of many large corporations (Hertel 2009; Ruggie 2013). Following the social movements from Global North university activism, many companies have adopted voluntary codes of conduct, although following the tragic incident of over 1100 worker deaths in the Rana Plaza building collapse in Bangladesh in 2013, more activists have fought for stronger, harder

law obligations for corporations that profit from the violations of workers' rights (Prentice 2021).

EXERCISE 17

Have students examine the United Nations' SDGs (<https://www.undp.org/sustainable-development-goals>). Students brainstorm on how might policies to make progress on two of these goals help improve human rights in your country.

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