

## Book Note

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*Inhuman Conditions: On Cosmopolitanism and Human Rights.* By Pheng Cheah. Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2006. Pp. 321. \$24.95, paperback.

*Inhuman Conditions* presents an ambitious critique of human rights and its relationship to globalization. Pheng Cheah's central argument is two-fold: first, that human rights are inextricably bound to the forces of modern capital; and second, that such a link undermines the prominent notions of transcendence that are at the heart of human rights discourse. Because the regime of international human rights is reliant on the neo-liberal forces of globalization for circulation and legitimacy, it is contaminated at the core. The connection that Cheah develops between human rights and globalization—which has been investigated elsewhere by scholars such as Tony Evans, Alison Brysk, and Susan Koshy—is uniquely framed here by a more localized analysis of Confucian capitalism, female migrant workers in Southeast Asia, and events such as the anti-Chinese riots of 1998 in Jakarta. Cheah's approach is at times fresh and insightful, and at other times burdened by relentless moralizing. The book is most lucid when examining regional debates in Asia, and weakest in its over-generalized approach to human rights.

The introduction begins with the observation that neo-liberal economic policies and human rights arose in the post-war period together, and that their simultaneity is not accidental or contradictory, but symptomatic of mutual reliance. For Cheah, "there has been a concerted attempt to give a softer, normative face to globalization by figuring it as an indispensable material condition for achieving humanity." More succinctly, he argues that human rights discourse has delivered the human face of globalization. The particular branches of human rights that Cheah deems as representative include the "elite civil society of NGOs," the World Bank and its "cosmopolitan rhetorics," and "transnational advocacy networks or human rights instruments," all of whom assume a false "degree of autonomy from the predatory imperatives of economic globalization." As a theorist with apparent Marxist sympathies, Cheah is particularly concerned with the ways in which these transnational formations undermine the power of the state to serve as the true guardian of social equality and wealth redistribution.

The book's most nuanced discussion of globalization is developed in the fourth chapter on "Chinese cosmopolitanism in two senses." Here, Cheah sets out to examine Tu Wei-Ming's theory that Chinese capitalism—due to the influences of Confucian humanism and communitarian principles—offers a version of capitalism superior to that of the Western, individualistic variety. However, rather than confronting the debate over Asian values di-

rectly, Cheah responds by arguing that the very notion of a capitalist spirit endemic to the Chinese is based on a profound misreading. In order to invalidate the so-called “genetic” link between the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia and capitalism, Cheah historicizes the emergence of a Chinese upper class through the apparatus of European colonialism. He argues that during the period of Dutch imperialism, the Chinese were assigned mercantile roles in society and thus quickly became scapegoats for “the fact that the colonial state itself was the most powerful agent of global capital in the age of imperialism.”

Cheah’s unwillingness to entertain any essentialist notions of Asian values leads to a related refusal, in Chapter 5, to debate human rights within the reductive paradigm of universalism versus cultural relativism. In an analysis of the Bangkok Declaration of the Representatives of Asian States (1993), for example, which Cheah describes as a staged resistance against Western imperatives, he argues that what all these different contenders for human rights share in common is the claim to be “the pure voice of reason representing genuine universality.” However, because both Asian and Western regimes of human rights are defined by “a constitutive imbrication in global capital,” any genuine universality is impossible. Cheah therefore concludes that actions taken by the Singaporean state to mitigate human rights abuses against foreign domestic workers, as well as the UN Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, present a merely “cosmetic rehumanization” of the female migrant labor subject. The two chapters on China and Southeast Asia conclude by reiterating the book’s central proposition that whether Confucian or Kantian, human rights today suffers from the “systemic contamination” of global capitalism.

Cheah’s deconstructive approach is praiseworthy as an antidote to overly facile claims of human rights as a form of transcendent universalism. His critique of human rights as a euphemism for economic globalization provokes reflection. Certainly, some token versions of corporate responsibility would add strength to the argument that human rights have been co-opted as an alibi for capitalism. It is not always obvious, however, which version of human rights Cheah is targeting, and to merge together NGOs, the UN, grass roots development movements and the World Bank into a single cosmopolitan elite is necessarily imprecise. The World Bank’s involvement in globalization is no doubt distinguishable from that of many grass-roots NGOs, many of whom exist in order to counter-balance the ill effects of economic inequality. Yet Cheah denies that any positive interface between globalization and human rights can exist, in part because of his understanding of globalization as a totalizing monolith, a haunting omnipresence that “spectralizes the post-colonial nation state” and inevitably produces subjects “spectralized by post-colonial global capital.”

Cheah’s heavily theoretical approach is at times disorienting, drawing on a dizzying array of major theoretical sources including the Foucaultian lan-

guage of bio-technology, Kantian ideas of universalism and cosmopolitanism, Jacques Derrida's spectralization, the Frankfurt School, Arjun Appadurai, Saskia Sassen, Michael Hardt, and Antonio Negri. In particular, Karl Marx's critique of rights as mere bourgeois formalism and Fredric Jameson's "neo-Marxism" are cited as explicit influences. The use of such theories is not always illuminating, however, and the collective effect is to make Cheah's treatises often opaque and strenuous to read. The gratuitous use of theory is evident, for example, in Cheah's discussion of a popular Singaporean book about domestic service, in which he criticizes the mainstream author for being "oblivious to the irony of violating Kant's categorical imperative." In addition, where the reach of theory becomes thin, Cheah resorts to speculation: he writes, "I have not considered the position of former Eastern bloc countries in a post-Cold War scenario, although it is arguable that they have been assimilated into the South." The placement of these new EU member states into the global South clearly requires more rigorous justification.

Finally, the notion of contamination itself, which is the pivotal starting point for Cheah's conceptualization of human rights, ironically assumes a sphere of purity elsewhere. His argument that "[t]he full realization of human rights would . . . be premised on the transcendence of the capitalist world system" employs the very language of transcendence that has been the source of his critical disagreement with progenitors of human rights. In the meantime, short of the transcendence of capitalism, Cheah argues, "[a]s long as the state is mortgaged to global capital and unmoored from its nation-people, talk of social democracy in the South is meaningless." This dismissal of the interim as "meaningless" posits an all-or-nothing scenario that is paradoxically both utopian and nihilistic. Cheah asks, "Can the migrant worker fully achieve humanity? The sad prosaic answer to these related questions has to be no. Aggressive competition in the name of development legitimates the mistreatment of migrant workers." In sum, Cheah's book is a solemn and important reminder of the bleak consequences of globalization; it fails to persuade us, however, that the modern regime of human rights—flawed as it may be—exacerbates, rather than sheds light upon, such inhuman conditions.

—Joy Wang

