

The Language of Human Rights: Applying the Communitarian Critique to Global Human Rights Language

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There is a well-known critique of human rights talk in America, often named “the communitarian critique of rights”; however, except for a few hints and moments in the authorship of communitarian thinkers, such as Mary Ann Glendon, this critique is rarely applied to global human rights. Indeed, thinkers like Michael J. Perry say that this critique simply cannot be applied to global human rights. I will argue that the application is there to be made. In her book, *Rights Talk*, Glendon argues that Americans have particularly harmful rights rhetoric when compared to the rhetoric of other nations. The characteristics of American rights rhetoric that Glendon takes issue with the most are summarized by her as follows: “The exaggerated absoluteness of our American rights rhetoric... a near-silence concerning responsibility, and a tendency to envision the rights-bearer as a lone autonomous individual.” In this presentation, I demonstrate how these concepts apply at the global level and are thus intrinsic to rights language as a whole. I do this by demonstrating how the characteristics of trumping, entitlement, and individual protection are intrinsic to rights language itself, comparing the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to the African Charter on Human and People’s Rights and examining the current structure through which rights are asserted and claimed.

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Anna Wiersma is a senior international economics and cultural affairs major from Holland, Michigan. Throughout her education at Valparaiso University, Anna has had a particular interest in social justice issues, especially concerning poverty, inequality, and food security, which has led to a focus on economic and social rights in her research. She will be attending George Washington University, Johns Hopkins University, or the American University of Paris next year to pursue a M.A. in international development.

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