

Rowson Podcast Episode

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SPEAKERS

Sarah, Imogen, Damien, James, Flo, Jonathan Rowson, Caroline, Tom Pegram

Tom Pegram 00:00

Welcome to 'Global Governance Futures', based out of the UCL Global Governance Institute. This is a podcast about the challenges facing humanity, and possible global responses. If you're new to the show, and you want to get a list of our favourite books, or the resources, listen to past shows, and to join our community, go to ucl.ac.uk/global-governance. Hello, This episode is our first podclass. What you're about to hear is the live conversation between Jonathan Rowson, co-founder and director of the research institute Perspectiva, philosopher, and former chess grandmaster, and students on our MA in Human Rights programme at the Department of Political Science, University College London, Jonathan was kind enough to drop by to discuss his recent essay on reimagining Human Hights for the 21st century, which is composed in the form of a letter entitled, 'Dear Human Rights Movement'. It's available in the show notes, I was really struck by the essay and keen to share it with my students in the module: Human Rights, Politics and Practice, which I co convene, and it did not disappoint. The essay opened up many portals of reflection, and I think left a deep impression on the students. It was also a very lively discussion with agreement and dissent on Jonathan's core argument, that a shift from rights to duties is now required if we are to confront the crises of our times. So it was a real pleasure to have Jonathan join us, we hope that you'll also enjoy the conversation. So without further ado, we bring you the live pod class with Jonathan Rowson, on 3rd of March 2021.

Jonathan Rowson 02:06

So the letter to the Human Rights Movement, is, as I say, a kind of declaration of confusion. It's about coming to terms of the world, as we find it, as opposed to the framing of the world as I grew up with, which was a broadly liberal, liberal democratic vie8(w5)-4(04w5fqd 54.024 220.39 Tm0 g0 Gto)8(n7(5n)8g)135Tm0

of the surveillance capitalists, Facebook, Google, Amazon, and others. And the acute problem of climate change that we seem to be unable to adequately address. These have happened on

Caroline 07:46

Sure. Um, so mine's to do with like, the COVID pandemic and human rights. So do you think that the COVID-19 crisis is a turning point in history? And after the pandemic, which direction and approach

awareness of anthropogenic climate change over many years and now decades, makes human beings start to think that we might be failing beings, as he puts it. In other words, we see the problem clear as day, but we just can't mobilise a response, we lack the coordination. We lack the humility, we lack the constraint. We lack the cooperation, whatever it is, resolve, perhaps. And of language users those that we're becoming aware that climate change is outstripping the, I think he says, the cognitive and affective abilities or cognitive and emotional abilities of the species. So that's why I say there's a capability movement opportunity, because if you frame the problem, as look writ large, the problem we have is, these meta crisis problems, these wicked problems at scale, including human rights abuses, including climate change, including problems of governance, corruption, inequality, you know, all of those things going on. They require a different way of understanding different pattern of understanding, which is not just cognitive, it's also about forms of empathy and compassion and imagination even. Now, that sounds like Whoo, right? I'm aware that people might hear that and go, yeah, yeah, that's kind of overly well, it's dead serious. Like, it's not trying to escape the hardcore political discussion. It's saying the hardcore political discussion is delusional, and wasting us precious time. That actually, we really need to get real about the fact that our model of the world is broken, and start building a new one. And that's the kind of clarion call for the human capability movement. It's one of saying, look, we need to start educating ourselves about how we're going to survive, and maybe even thrive for the next 100 plus years. Because if we don't, we're looking at not just fires in Australia, and vanishing islands, and other pandemics, and people on the streets because, you know, they're either unemployed or inequality becomes too offensive. You know, it's hard to see a story of the world where things collectively get

Imogen 20:22

I just wondered how you see, like NGOs and established human rights organisations like contributing to this civic education?

Jonathan Rowson 20:37

Yeah. So a practical question so well, we're narrowing the terrain of institution building really, if you're asking, how do you do this? And there's a bit beyond one person and I don't have a quick answer. But the question is, what are your constants? And what are your variables? So if you if your frame of education is sort of legacy institutions, like schools and universities, then it'll be hard to see the kind of solution that might work out. The reference here, by the way, if you really want to get into this question, is a wonderful book by Zachary Stein, called 'Education in a Time Between Worlds.' And much of what I see on this comes from that inspiration, but there already, there's already a European Bildung movement. That's trying to bring the idea of Bildung, which is transformative civic education, to the attention of policymakers in European countries, the Club of Rome already has a rethinking civilization initiative. And then, as I say, you have all these sort of, these are some people using the language intraversity instead of university that somehow we can use online material, and use our own kind of filtering process for that to maintain quality standards. But the question then is, what are you learning? Right? So and there the educational content question is challenging, because, you know, there, there's an issue of how do you be a better activist? How do you understand, how do you think systemically? How do you understand your own patterns of habit formation? How do you persuade people? How do you how do you care for someone who's dying? You know, these kind of things that are not in the main educational remit will become part of the curriculum, the hidden curriculum, if you like, of the next few decades, and what it will mean institutionally may not be that you go to a place, it might be more fluid than that. So you'll have to find places, but it might be libraries, or it might be, businesses might have, you know, separate areas for educational endeavours. You know I don't quite know how it will look. But the role of the NGO, I think, is to help imagine that, and to start building it. And the challenge with this, it's just like at the beginning of the anti-slavery movement, which took many decades to achieve its ends. It looks a bit intangible at the beginning, right. And I appreciate that. But it's almost like that Sherlock line. Sherlock, famously, Sherlock Holmes famously said, once you've eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth. And I feel a bit like that about human capability. It's like, we have to do this ourselves. We're not quite up to it yet. But we have the capacity to potentially make ourselves up to it. Let's find a way of doing it. And then it's up to your generation as well as mine to, to try.

Tom Pegram 23:46

Yeah, on the question of sort of engaging audiences, and perhaps going beyond the kind of the the orthodox academy and other institutional venues, Sarah, do you want to ask your question?

Sarah 23:59

Yes, sure. Um, so my question is a bit different. It's about the format. So I just I'm just wondering why you chose to write this in the form of a letter instead of a traditional essay or article academic writing. Is there something you were trying to achieve by this choice in particular?

Tom Pegram 28:42

which has good and bad aspects, you might need that in some ways, but it does mean that when it comes to building solidarity, yeah, it's complicated. But yeah.

Tom Pegram 37:14

It's you know, it's play for multiple stakes, right? To use the famous phrase by Robert Frost, it's incredibly important. Yeah. James, sorry. Do you have a follow up?

James 37:28

Yeah, thank you for your answer. You've actually preempted like two of the other follow up, or, you know, two of the follow ups, I was considering about, like, you know, what level change should cover. And also I was looking at your Twitter earlier, and I saw that you've been following the Nicola Sturgeon interviews at the moment, and I was gonna ask you something about Scottish nationalism. But I suppose I'll ask more of a sort of short term question. Obviously, we're talking a lot about long term issues. But right now, I mean, you alluded to it at the start, there's a massive problem with companies like Facebook and Google having these enormous monopolies over data and the problems that can come out of that. And from my point of view, anyway, it seems like the nation state at the moment is like the only body that even has the capabilities to deal with those problems, say, like, with Australia's sort of recent, I mean, how effective you can, how effective the Australian government actually was, is obviously up for debate, but they seem at the moment to be the only body that can do anything. So my question is, should we allow the nation states to sort of tackle corporate entities and deal with sort of maybe, maybe privatised, or sort of take away their power? Or would that have like an equally bad effects of sort of strengthening the nation states in a way that wouldn't be appropriate either? And if not, you know, what's the alternative?

Jonathan Rowson 38:43

Right. So I mean, those there's a lot of implicit political theory in that question and it's kind of case by case. I mean so another thing I grapple with is capitalism as such, right? Because there are so many kinds of capitalism. We mentioned surveillance capitalism, but there's sort of green capitalism. Some people speak about financial capitalism. There's a whole sort of body of economic thought about different forms of it. So when I say capitalism, I'm aware that we're speaking of the many and not the, not a single monolithic entity. Nonetheless, the logic of capitalism in almost any of its forms, has this property. And I think it's James Moore highlights this best of basically extracting value from nature. In effect, what capitalism does is it turns natural resources into profit. And there's lots of meat, lots of intermediate stages, of course, but in effect, the logic of it is to extract and plunder and profit. Now, on the other hand prosperity is a great thing and people want their lives, and their good food and their comfortable living places and you know, so it's not as though I want to say, switch off capitalism and create something new but I do think there gets to a point where, for example, if you think economic, indefinite economic growth on an ecologically finite planet may not be feasible, and you don't think the green New Deal logic stacks up, for example. Then you get to point quite close to an anti-capitalist position. But then it's like, well, what are you a communist? You say "Well, no, but I'm just saying, like, I'm pointing out that relying on this mechanism is underlying societal economic logic. If it's crazy, it's crazy, even if it's inconvenient." So I'm conflicted there again, instinctively I don't trust governments that much. And I don't trust the market much at all, much either. Again, I think it comes down to the quality of the human beings within the institutions, which is why I think it's fundamentally a philosophy of

Tom Pegram 49:27

Yeah, that's a great question. And I'm just grappling right now with thinking about the ecological peril of COVID-

