

## **Meeting ‘the World’ at the Palais Wilson: Embodied Universalism at the UN Human Rights Committee**

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Finally the doors of the main conference room at the Palais Wilson swing open. The crowd rushes forward in uncharacteristic haste; the group is larger than usual, and slow movers will likely be left without seats. Consisting of people with differing shades of complexion and textures of hair who have travelled to this occasion from all around the world, the group embodies “the universal” that is the bedrock of human rights ideology and UN operations. The group has been waiting in the corridors patiently, yet in palpable anxiety. Participants were supposed to be allowed in an hour ago, but the Committee’s previous hearing had run exceptionally late. It is the first day of yet another session of the UN Human Rights Committee, which is the expert body responsible for monitoring compliance with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). The stage is once again set for

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the subsequent weeks of “ritual and ritualism” (Charlesworth and Larking 2014) also known as UN treaty body proceedings.

Inside the conference venue the air is dense; if only someone had opened the windows for a few minutes in between sessions. The conference room located on the first floor of the Palais Wilson – former headquarters of the International League of Nations and today the headquarters of the UN Office for the High Commissioner for Human Rights in Geneva – is spacious and usually more than adequate to accommodate the audience that follows the Committee’s proceedings. The painstakingly detailed sessions of UN treaty bodies are not the biggest tourist attraction of this grand global organization, to put things mildly. Yet today things are different, as the room is packed to the very last seat. Eyes are fixed to the front, expressions somber; a few beads of sweat already run down nervous foreheads. The shared importance of the moment is tangible.

Then, the session opens with a sharp bang of the chair’s gavel. Seated far at the front, and barely audible without earphones, he declares this hearing of NGOs open, informing those present of the two-minute time limit for their statements. All those with previous experience know that this limit is to be respected; those attempting to exceed it will be cut off. The session to follow will prove once again that, whereas most NGO delegates have done their homework well and prepared statements tailored to this short duration, a few will find themselves silenced in the middle of articulating urgent concerns. Some experienced delegates clearly take advantage of the mildly confrontational occurrence of being stopped by the chair after their time is up, skillfully employing it as an opportunity to add urgency to the issues that they represent as being just *slightly* more compelling than those presented by others. Many read their statements with confidence and skill; a few voices of first-timers tremble. NGO interventions soon form a steady stream of statements interspersed with

customary UN jargon, with each one attempting to grasp the attention of the UN experts seated at the front to highlight the wrongs of which governments around the world are guilty.

This scene embodies one of the most cherished elements of UN treaty body hearings. More concretely, the above sketch describes a specific session of the “most prestigious” of all UN treaty bodies – the Human Rights Committee – which is closed to state representatives and features NGO delegates from around the world. The session in question is the shared NGO hearing on the reports on Russia, Cambodia, the Ivory Coast and Cypress – a two-hour event made up of two-minute speeches by NGO representatives prepared in advance. Simultaneously, the above description builds on material acquired via participant observation from similar sessions from the 108th and 109th session of the Human Rights Committee from 2013. This shared hearing of NGOs is one of the two types of events in which NGOs can formally participate in the sessions of the Human Rights Committee. The other category is the smaller, one-hour lunch-time briefings arranged for NGOs and Committee members – events that are likewise closed off from state representatives, on which I elaborate later.

The explicit purpose of the above session is to allow direct interactions between treaty body members and NGO delegates – or interactions that are as direct as the contours of these elaborate international meetings permit. Once a rarity, now these NGO sessions form a staple in UN treaty body sessions, or at least the program of the Human Rights Committee. States may be the only formal parties to UN human rights treaties, yet, as these sessions testify, they certainly hold no monopoly in the dialogue they have with the UN Committees.

What, fundamentally, is going on in these sessions? Why do these exchanges between this high-profile UN body and NGOs exist? What about UN treaty body sessions in general? What kind of roles might they have beyond the most evident ones? I have addressing these questions also earlier (Halme-Tuomisaari 2012, 2013a, 2013b), and my arguments thus far

could be summarized as follows: although formally the most important element – the *raison d’etre* – of UN treaty body proceedings is the exchange of information on how state parties to UN human rights covenants realize their obligations as parties to UN human rights treaties, these sessions hold also numerous “informal” reasons for existing.

I have in previous instances examined these reasons from the perspective of knowledge: how moments that appear as empty from the perspective of information exchange in fact embody sharp tensions over which type of data – and presented by whom – is accepted as reliable information by UN treaty bodies, and, in contrast, what kind of data – and from whom – is dismissed as propaganda (Halme-Tuomisaari 2013a). I am continuing this analysis by linking these moments to their intrinsic role in initiating “dialogue,” and thus sustaining perpetual movement as one of the most fundamental purposes of the UN treaty body system (Halme-Tuomisaari 2013b).

In this chapter I develop yet another approach as I link these moments that transpire between NGO delegates and UN experts into one of the most crucial concepts of the entire contemporary human rights phenomenon: universalism (Alfredsson, Morsink 2000; Lauren 2011). Rather than seeing it as a condition grounded in ideology or culture, or even the consequence of geographic spread, I discuss universalism as a dynamic entity, the outcome of specific types of action engaged in by key human rights actors at the global centers of human rights. I link the notion of universalism to NGO interventions as tangible evidence of the “curious grapevine” that Eleanor Roosevelt felt would be needed for bringing the abstract provisions of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) to life, as has been recounted by William Korey. In his treatises, Korey has shown how today this position is commonly seen as having being filled by NGOs (Korey 2001).

My discussion of universalism finds wider context in my recent work on the history of human rights. The first angle relates to the role that “the myth of universalism” holds in descriptions over the history of human rights (Halme-Tuomisaari and Slotte 2015). The second angle relates to the drafting history of the UDHR, and how in reality its “universalism” is likewise an attractive myth, not an empirical fact (Halme-Tuomisaari 2015). The latter angle also has distinct consequences for analysis of human rights action today: it appears as being equipped with a distinctly expansionistic dynamic (Halme-Tuomisaari 2010a; 2010b). Simultaneously, “universality” is cast as a delicate entity that requires constant maintenance and cultivation.

In this chapter I discuss this process by focusing on the concrete, physical bodies of NGO representatives gathered at UN sessions. I examine in particular the role that they hold in sustaining and reproducing the ideal of human rights as “universal,” simultaneously preserving this ideal’s continued legitimacy. I discuss examples from treaty body sessions that emphasize the importance of this embodied “universal representation.” Further, I glance at moments in which this representation is actively supported – cultivated, even – by key actors “at the center,” that is to say, the insiders of Geneva-based UN human rights bureaucracies as well as – surprisingly – state actors who act as activist “intermediaries”(Merry 2006).

In many ways it appears odd, in this scholarly moment in time, to dedicate such excessive attention to a concept that feels outdated, trite, even irrelevant. Yet, I argue, universality has both continuous, multi-faceted importance as well as significant unexplored dimensions, which could be summarized as follows: today it is evident that – in terms of geographic spread – human rights form “universal” notions that are a staple of political rhetoric, even in most national legislation throughout the world. Ratification of UN human

rights treaties enjoys virtual universality, in that some of them have been ratified by all, or close to all, states of the world. Simultaneously, human rights NGOs exist today in most parts of the world.

These observations can be recognized as key ingredients in impatient statements that wish to silence, once and for all, the nagging voices of “relativism” that attempt to continually challenge the genuine “universal essence” of human rights ideology (Alfredsson 1999). Universalism and relativism, of course, form the most persistent adversarial pair within the contemporary phenomenon that has formed around human rights since the post–World War II era. To elaborate this train of thought, the objective “universal” spread of human rights legislation, covenant ratifications and advocacy organizations thus becomes evidence of the intrinsic “universality” of human rights ideals as something that is common to humankind the world over. Simultaneously, such an approach leaves many things unexplored. Just how and by what processes – both on the micro and macro levels – have human rights ideas spread globally, first in terms of state ratifications of human rights treaties, then in incorporation of human rights notions in national legislations? How have human rights NGOs been created around the world – by whom, via what kind of international processes, and with what kind of financial support? How is the continued relevance of UN human rights monitoring as truly universal ascertained in action?

All of these questions have been discussed by recent anthropological work on human rights (see, among others, Merry 2006; Rottenburg 2009; Englund 2006; Allen 2013; Dembour and Kelly 2007; Kelly 2011; Curtis 2014; Cowan 2013). I contribute to this work by arguing that these questions have more than historical implications, and instead hold continued relevance for a deeper understanding of the contemporary human rights phenomenon today – and in the future. This chapter analyzes these questions via the minute

details of action in what I argue continually forms one of the global “centers” of human rights work. The concepts of center and periphery are familiar from the world systems analysis of Emmanuel Wallerstein, who has utilized them to describe structural positions in a world economy (Wallerstein 2004). Ulf Hannerz has expanded the significance of these concepts to the flow of meanings, which is also the principal sense in which they are utilized in this chapter, similarly to my earlier work (Hannerz 1993; Halme-Tuomisaari 2010c: 34).

The center–periphery dynamic borrows also from Sally Merry’s influential analysis of the human rights regime. Merry characterizes transnational consensus building characteristic to the international human rights regime as something that occurs in a social space – a center – where actors from all parts of the world come together. This space has its own norms, values and cultural practices; it is an English-speaking, largely secular, universalistic, law-governed culture organized around the formal equality of nations as well as their economic and political inequality (Merry 2006).

In many ways the center(s) of the human rights phenomenon can be construed as being “de-territorialized,” and thus temporary centers may emerge in any place that becomes the site of transnational human rights activity, such as a large international, high-profile meeting of human rights experts and policy makers. Yet a few more permanent centers can also be identified, the most important ones in the UN context being the organization’s headquarters in New York and Geneva, the geographic focus of this chapter’s analysis.

My analysis focuses on the proceedings of the “most prestigious” of all UN treaty bodies – namely, the Human Rights Committee monitoring compliance with the ICCPR – located at the headquarters of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights at the Palais Wilson in Geneva, former headquarters of the League of Nations. Further, this chapter examines how the processes to produce universalism at this center disseminate into different

parts of the world, and thus how *universalism of human rights in action* is also an empirical consequence of active cultivation by key actors at the “center.” Thus, the notion of universalism discussed in this chapter also connects to the impact that UN treaty body work has around the world.

Ultimately, the focus of this chapter has been an outcome of the data that emerged as relevant in my fieldwork. Contrary to increasingly dominant trends in academia in general and anthropology specifically, my fieldwork has not been conducted with a definite “action plan” in mind, namely a list of just what and whom I would be observing in my field, via exactly what method and theory. Rather, my research over the past decade has been and remains loosely directed by the same over-arching questions: How should we understand the vast global phenomenon that has formed around the discourse and ideology of human rights after World War II? What kind of visions of a new world order are presented by the institutional frameworks created around this discourse and ideology? What kind of fantasies, utopias and fears do key actors in these frameworks seek to both realize and suppress?<sup>2</sup>

In other words, my fieldwork at the Human Rights Committee redirected my attention to the notion of “universality.” This fieldwork brought to life this slogan that felt familiar yet empty from much of the “mainstream” human rights scholarship that I first encountered a decade and a half ago. Via my ethnographic data, this concept acquired a dynamic quality as

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<sup>2</sup> It is with this set of questions that I have observed human rights expertise, knowledge and learning in a Nordic context (Halme-Tuomisaari 2010c). In 2010 I moved onto studying documentary practices around human rights reports produced at the Finnish Foreign Ministry and processed by UN Human Rights Treaty Bodies (Halme-Tuomisaari 2012), and in 2013 I commenced an ethnography of the UN Human Rights Committee. This same set of questions has guided me to the past, specifically to the archives of the International League for the Rights of Man, the first human rights NGO in the 1940s, and lobbying efforts for a document then known as the International Bill for the Rights of Man, which in 1948 became the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Halme-Tuomisaari 2015).

a fascinating, often unarticulated category, an ideal held by the actors at my multi-sited field, further finding a distinct presence in the continually negotiated relationship of the “center” and “peripheries” of the contemporary human rights phenomenon. As my fieldwork progressed, universality became cast as a delicate entity that has a complex plural existence, accompanied by a fragility that needs special cultivation and protection.

### **Introduction to the Human Rights Committee and the UN Treaty Body System**

Despite of its decades of existence, the UN treaty body system remains little-known outside the UN framework. Very briefly, in the absence of an international court of human rights with universal jurisdiction – a UN-operated equivalent of the European Court of Human Rights, for example – human rights treaty bodies are the highest authoritative bodies of the UN to address human rights violations – or, rather, state compliance with treaty-based obligations. Ten treaty bodies exist today, of which the best-known are the Committees on ICERD – the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination - and ICEDAW – the International Covention on Ending All Forms of Discrimination Against Women - as well as ICESCR – The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and the Human Rights Committee monitoring compliance with the ICCPR – the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

In recent years, the treaty body system has been significantly overshadowed in visibility by the newcomer of UN monitoring practices, the Universal Periodic Review by the Human Rights Council (Cowan 2014; Billaud 2014; Charlesworth and Larking 2014). The fundamental difference between these two monitoring systems is that treaty bodies are based on contractual obligations and are thus “legal” – even if the relationship of treaty body work and “the law” is a significantly complex matter. The UPR, by contrast, is thoroughly

“political,” even if human rights treaty obligations and the work of treaty bodies are frequently highlighted in them. The treaty body system as a whole is currently under review (Pillay [2012](#); UN Office for the High Commissioner for Human Rights n.d.), with influential voices supporting its unification – a plan starkly opposed by others as it is seen to diminish the bite of this monitoring mechanism. A large internal review of the matter is scheduled for 2020, and with the remodelling of the UN Human Rights *Commission* into the *Council* it would not be surprising to see dramatic changes in the composition of treaty bodies as well – even if a significant modification would be more complicated to execute due to the covenant-bound nature of treaty body mandates.

The Human Rights Committee was founded in 1976 in accordance with treaty provisions when the ICCPR entered into force. The Committee’s mandate is based on covenant provisions, as is the case with most other treaty bodies. The Committee’s operations as a part of public international law are best contextualized by recent contributions to international law, many of which summarize the general “forward looking progressive ethos” of much human rights scholarship (Bayefsky [2000](#); Kamminga and Scheinin [2009](#); Crawford [2010](#); Cassese [2012](#); Bassiouni and Schabas [2011](#); Simmons [2009](#)). That the Human Rights Committee is regarded as the most authoritative of all the UN treaty bodies finds succinct echo in the Committee’s title: where the names of all the other treaty bodies are more restricted and linked to the substance of the covenants that they monitor – the Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), as one example – the very name of the Human Rights Committee indicates a certain generality: it addresses “human rights” in their full scope.

The Human Rights Committee has 18 members, nominated for candidacy by their governments and selected as members by elections via processes that remain a combination

of state politics and respect for their personal, independent human rights expertise. Echoing the overall porous nature of the treaty body system as well as its somewhat obscure impact is the fact that, whereas the actual work of the Human Rights Committee, like other UN treaty bodies, occurs today predominantly in Geneva, elections for membership occur at the UN headquarters in New York and are conducted solely by states. This practice produces a curious disconnect between the work of the Committee and the procedures through which its composition is determined. Thus, exactly who gets nominated to treaty bodies and why remains obscure, even to members of the treaty bodies themselves as well as the personnel at the UN secretariat who handle the practical work around their operations. This reality also contributes to the importance of the secretariat in creating a sense of continuity in Committee proceedings on a practical level.

Like other UN treaty bodies, the Human Rights Committee convenes annually in three sessions of four to five weeks, three weeks of which are open to the public. The primary and most visible part of treaty body work is the processing of periodic reports submitted by state parties in public sessions, which are also open to NGOs and other observers, such as scholars. These sessions are concerned with how states comply with the provisions of the human rights treaty in question. The intervals for periodic reports are today defined by the Committee. In practice, the Human Rights Committee invites states to submit periodic reviews at intervals of between five to ten years, and on this basis examines how the state has met the obligations that it has undertaken as a party to the ICCPR. It also assesses how state compliance has changed from the previous evaluation. In reality, many states fall behind in these obligations, and some have never participated in treaty body proceedings, all problems which – together with the low visibility and compliance with the Committee’s work – pose

serious problems, giving rise to the aforementioned pressures to reform their work fundamentally (Krommendijk 2014).

In each session, the Committee processes between five and eight periodic reports submitted by states. In addition, it issues documents known as Concluding Observations, in which the Committee compliments and reproaches states for their conduct, forwarding suggestions for improvement. The other principal element of Committee work is to process individual petitions, which occurs in closed sessions and is both referred to and considered as the most “court-like” of the Committee’s operations. In addition, the Human Rights Committee produces General Comments, which are elaborate statements intended to clarify the meanings of specific treaty provisions due to legislative and other changes, including the work done by the Committee itself, which have occurred in the four decades since the covenant entered into force.

Participants of treaty body sessions fall into five main categories: 1) expert members of the Committees, who in the case of the Human Rights Committee are commonly (male) law professors; 2) members of state delegations, who, with few exceptions, only participate in the “constructive dialogue” of their states; 3) members of the UN secretariat, including the secretary of the Committee and her staff; 4) members of UN conference services, including press secretaries and interpreters who jointly oversee that the sessions run fluently; and 5) outside audience. Of these categories – and with the exception of introductory speeches and short occasional informational announcements made by the UN secretariat – only members of the Committee and State delegations have the possibility to make oral interventions (with the evident exception of interpreters). Thus NGOs – which fall into the fifth category – are without formal possibilities for public interventions. Yet, in other significant ways they are

included in the program – including the two hearing categories already outlined – and thus hold important possibilities for making interventions of diverse kinds.

### **NGOs as “Physical Check-Up Lists”**

It’s two pm and the doors of the meeting room close. The NGO lunch briefing – open only to members of the Human Rights Committee, their assistants, representatives of NGOs from the state whose periodic report is to be processed next, and staff of the UN secretariat – is about to start. It is *hot* in the room. Someone opens the window. In the background, distant sounds of protests unfold in a language impossible to identify. This is unusual, as protests usually stay further up the hill, in front of the Palais des Nations, the Geneva headquarters of the UN. No demonstrators are visible, and it is impossible to make out what their complaints are about. Soon the traffic of the lakeside road muffles the sound of the protesters. Someone closes the window, and silence sets in.

The mid-sized meeting room has ornate ceilings and is divided by a large, oval-shaped table. One can easily imagine that, for decades, meetings of high-caliber international diplomacy have been held in the room. On the side of the doorway sit eight members of the Human Rights Committee; the scorching afternoon sun entering through the large windows facing the lake must feel uncomfortable in their eyes. The remainder of the room is filled to the brim with representatives of NGOs from the country in question, as well as a few representatives of international NGOs from their headquarters, often from London or Geneva. This is the most intimate encounter that takes place between NGO representatives and Committee members, and is usually the only moment in which they see each other face-to-face – excluding the fact that they often have lunch at adjoining tables in the cafeteria located down the hallway, oblivious to each other’s presence.

A middle-aged delegate, evidently a seasoned conference participant, opens the session, briefly introducing herself and the NGOs present. After that, there are short statements by other NGO delegates, many presented in fluent English and professionally organized in such a way as to indicate strong familiarity with the forms containing practical information for Committee members. Other statements are forwarded with heavy accents and flawed grammar, in prose that makes identifying relevant pieces of factual information a strenuous task for Committee members. Committee members listen attentively; a few look visibly exhausted. These four weeks of sessions, from 10am to 6pm, often extended with breakfast meetings and dinners, as well as reading and drafting work in the evenings, take their toll. Yet, all signs of fatigue vanish as the Committee members begin their round of questions after preliminary statements have been forwarded by NGO delegates.

These hearings are closed off from state representatives – allegedly, there have been instances in which NGO representatives faced reprisal from states as a consequence of having presented unfavorable information on the state to UN treaty bodies. Thus, I will offer no further detail here on which state this particular hearing regards. Simultaneously, such detail is not relevant for the current debate: rather than highlighting distinctiveness, this ethnographic glimpse holds importance in illustrating commonalities in the current analysis of “universalism” of human rights action. In this instance, the actual presence of NGO participants and their capability to embody “the international” becomes relevant. What is going on in these proceedings? Why are they so important? I have previously addressed similar questions in a desire to gain a more profound understanding of the numerous layers attached to treaty body proceedings – how, instead of merely functioning as sites of information exchange, treaty body proceedings entail, among other things, intense contestations over who has the capacity to make legitimate representations in front of UN

bodies on behalf of distinct populations. Using the example of China, I have argued that its single-party regime, seen widely by the international community as being constitutionally illegitimate (Simpson 2004), also reduces China's capacity to offer information that is seen as reliable in UN treaty body proceedings (Halme-Tuomisaari 2013a).

Whereas the official purpose of treaty body proceedings is to transfer knowledge on how states comply with covenant obligations, in reality this function is more complicated – a finding that certainly applies to these NGO hearings that take place only moments before the public “constructive dialogue,” as it is known in Committee parlance. This “constructive dialogue” is exchanged between Committee members and state representatives in the public session held at the main conference room of the Palais Wilson. Given the extensive preparation that takes place in anticipation of this dialogue, the timing of these closed NGO meeting raises important questions on the nature of these exchanges – what happens in these meetings from the perspective of information transfer?

In principle, in treaty body proceedings Committee members and NGOs are “on the same side”: the mandate of both is broadly to safeguard the well-being of humanity whereas, unfailingly, in these proceedings the state is cast as “the bad guy.” Information presented by NGOs is predominantly treated with great respect and it holds a high status as a source of reliable information, echoing the general position of NGOs in the contemporary human rights phenomenon. Thus, the dynamic of the NGO briefings is in general strongly set toward a positive exchange. However, this underlying dynamic by no means suggests that NGO representatives are “in for a picnic” in these lunch-time hearings – Committee members frequently come across as rather strict. Their questions are sharp, and target surprisingly minute details of national legislation as well as recent local events; often, Committee members request exact statistics or figures, such as the number of inmates of a given prison.

Evidently, this exchange is not suited for dilettantes, and offering satisfactory answers is challenging even for the most well-versed of NGO delegates. In discussions after these hearings, many NGO delegates confess to feeling surprised, even overwhelmed, by the level of precision sought by Committee members.

Wide differences in their professional profiles might contribute to the evident nervousness accompanying these hearings: whereas members of the Human Rights Committee are leading international experts in their fields, many NGO representatives are very young, often taking their first aspiring professional steps as NGO workers or interns. Occasionally the hearings resemble oral university exams, as NGO delegates sometimes remark afterward – an understandable comparison as most Committee members serve as university professors outside Committee sessions. Yet it is not solely because of these background profiles or the pleasure of exam giving and taking that results in this dynamic. It is more likely linked to the function that these proceedings hold as “personified check-up lists.”

This point becomes understandable from a continued overview of the “formal” description of treaty body work that I began earlier. Officially, the most important role of NGOs in the proceedings is to submit ancillary or “shadow” reports to complement periodic reports submitted by states. Ideally, NGO reports are submitted simultaneously or close to state reports; both genres of documents are deposited publicly at the UN website and disseminated to Committee members prior to the constructive dialogue taking place between state parties and the Committee. Overall, the weight given to NGO reports is significant, and they hold the important capacity not only to contest the veracity of information offered by states in their reports, but, as was already mentioned, also gain importance also for their ability to challenge the state’s capacity to make legitimate representations over the population

that the state reports target. Thus, Committee members often rely on them extensively as they prepare for the constructive dialogue with state representatives.

Yet the influence that NGOs hold in treaty body proceedings does not end with these written documents. Some additional detail illustrates this point: state reports are submitted around 18 months before being processed by the Committee in the “constructive dialogue” described earlier. For example, the periodic report of Finland, processed by the Human Rights Committee in the July session of 2013, which was the 108th session of the Committee, was submitted by Finland in late Autumn 2011. The deadlines for NGO submissions are slightly later, but they should ideally arrive a full year before the oral exchange takes place in Geneva. The interim period between submission of documents and their processing in the “constructive dialogue” now includes one additional round of documentary exchanges, as the Committee sends state parties clarifying questions, to which states commonly send complementary information. These clarifying questions are linked to the “List of Issues” adopted by the Committee two sessions prior to the actual constructive dialogue with the state party – with regard to the report of Finland, the List of Issues was adopted in the October session of 2012, in the 106th Session of the Committee.

Adopting the List of Issues is the one moment in which the impact of NGOs may be the greatest. Today at the Human Rights Committee this phase includes direct consultations with NGOs, and often the concerns elevated by NGOs in these consultations will be strongly reflected in the issues that are eventually addressed by the Committee in its constructive dialogue with the state. Participating in these preliminary hearings for the adoption of the List of Issues is tricky, however, mainly because receiving funding for this purpose is difficult. Most commonly, funds are available primarily for NGOs to attend the actual sessions. Thus, for example, with regard to the report of Finland, I found that no Finnish NGO

representatives were present physically in the 106th Session when the List of Issues was adopted.

Simultaneously, the weight of *any* individual moment in these proceedings is restricted, as these steps are by their nature cyclical and all individual steps conjoin with the preceding and subsequent ones. This not only illustrates the intrinsic difference between treaty body proceedings and court proceedings, it also concretizes an important overall purpose: to create a movement of forward-looking progressiveness in which individual moments receive their importance in their capacity to connect seemingly isolated events into a continuum of “dialogue” (Halme-Tuomisaari [2013a](#); Riles [1998](#)).

In this ongoing dialogue, the role of the UN secretariat is crucial, and is perhaps the most under-represented element in all the scholarship on treaty bodies and UN human rights monitoring more generally (for an important exception, see Billaud [2014](#)). In reality, preparing the background material needed in treaty body sessions, including the preparation of “Lists of Issues,” is done by individual members of the secretariat. One central technique for carrying out this task is to go over previous reports on the given state by other UN treaty bodies, and incorporate relevant issues and recommendations that these reports have raised with appropriate modifications and elaborations. This task is complemented by updated information on developments that have occurred since, and often involves straightforward copy-and-pasting. In updating previous documents, the information provided by NGO ancillary reports holds significant importance, in addition to data gathered by UN regional offices, for example.

The crucial role of the Secretariat in this background work contributes to the “dialogical” or chain-like nature of treaty body proceedings. Individual members of the secretariat are well positioned for this task as they are likely responsible for preparing

background material for two or even three treaty bodies at any one time – thus, one member of the secretariat may be in charge of preparing the background material on, say, Belize, as well for the Committee on CERD and for the Human Rights Committee. Consequently, there is a likelihood that they have personally prepared the material on a given state’s report for another treaty body previously, and it is on the basis of their own work that they then draft new background material for Committee work.

All these findings bring us back to the NGO lunch-time briefing that opened this section, allowing us to re-examine what transpires in it, particularly its qualities of oral exams and functioning as a “personal check-up list.” What does this latter characterization mean in light of these proceedings? How do these NGO briefings appear in light of information exchange? In essence, it casts their nature differently: instead of moments where fundamentally new information is introduced by NGOs to Committee members, they are moments in which Committee members test and confirm whether the information they have received from various NGO reports on specific detailed events, statistics or legislative reforms is accurate.

These face-to-face interactions, in other words, offer moments for the Committee members to test whether the understanding that they have acquired of, say, the number of inmates at a given prison, or the percentage of children from a specific ethnic background that continue into higher education, from the massive background information for each state report is accurate. This also explains the occasional severity that characterizes the tenor of the Committee members: examined from this perspective, NGO representatives are the last “test ground” for Committee members before they engage state representatives in the oral exchange, using knowledge as the weapon with which to address the state and its potentially fraudulent portrayal of reality: they are the last moment to stock up on the arsenal with

which, moments later, they go into the main conference room and the public session of *constructive dialogue* to engage with state representatives.

In this capacity, they bring to mind Marilyn Strathern's analysis of University Mission Statements: she finds that one approach for making sense of why institutions of higher education produce documents which, from the viewpoint of information, are nonsense, is to regard them as "bullet-proofing," in an echo of the analysis of John and Jane Comaroff (Strathern 2006; Comaroff and Comaroff 1992). In a similar vein, these NGO hearings come across as physical check-up lists with which Committee members fortify their armor for the constructive dialogue in between state parties and itself. Simultaneously, these hearings also hold another kind of importance, connecting this discussion to the notion of embodied universality, as I discuss next.

### **Finland's Report and "Centrally" Sponsored "Peripheral" Participation**

Is there anyone here who knows of the situation of the Roma people in Finland? What about claims that the Finnish government was aware of Guantanamo Bay prisoner transfer flights by the US military through Finnish air space? The treatment of under-aged asylum seekers? LGTBI-issues, gender-corrective surgery and forced sterilization? (*Fieldnotes, UN Human Rights Committee*)

Committee members look inquisitively at the NGO representatives seated on the opposite side of the oval table. The representatives squirm slightly; these issues do not fall under their competence and thus they have no information to share. It is yet another hot afternoon during the 107th Session of the Committee in July 2013. The week has been an intense one, with reports from numerous high-profile states with conflicting human rights records. The seats of the main conference room have been consistently packed, as have the NGO hearings taking place in this smaller meeting room. The contrast between the charged atmosphere of the

NGO hearings and this one could not be more pointed, even if the NGO delegates present are no less committed to forwarding their causes. With slight reluctance, so it seems, Committee members abandon their questions, and the meeting is declared to be over.

This hearing on Finland has not been the greatest triumph among NGO briefings. In the end, there were only three people in the room representing Finnish NGOs – and of those, only one was from Finland himself: the representative of the Sami people. The other two NGO delegates were a representative of the Sami people from Sweden – the Sami people inhabit a unified geographic territory, which extends to the regions of Finland, Norway and Sweden – and a representative of a Geneva-based single-issue NGO focusing on conscientious objectors. A representative of another Geneva-based NGO focusing on LGTBI issues and collaborating with a Finnish-based NGO was due to appear, but she never showed up. In discussion afterward, NGO participants wonder whether the tepid quality of this hearing will resonate with the forthcoming constructive dialogue between the state delegation of Finland and the Committee. Was this the case, the Committee could easily be excused: how could it possibly spend an equivalent time discussing the human rights situation in Finland as the situation of Indonesia or Ukraine, both of which were discussed during the same week, a seasoned member of the Human Rights Committee remarks humorously.

These predictions, however, prove to be grossly misguided as the exchange between Finland and the Committee in no way lags in intensity when compared to the constructive dialogue on states with far more evident human rights violations to account for. In fact, the hearing is almost exceptionally precise – it feels as if the legal predictability, high degree of available quantified data and the overall bureaucratization of the Finnish state machinery form an ideal match for the monitoring instrument that the Committee embodies. Ultimately,

the “constructive dialogue” ironically exceeds the time reserved for it – even if, admittedly, only because of the verbose final statement of the Finnish delegation head.

As the intense one-day hearing concludes with yet another bang of the chair’s gavel, all parties exit from the conference room with smiles of satisfaction. Members of the Finnish state delegation – both directly afterward as well as in discussion a year and some after the fact – compliment the Committee on the fact that it had, as a whole, been very well informed. Save for a few questions that – the Finnish state delegates note with dismay – “circulate from one UN report on Finland to the next,” and with the exception of one particularly lengthy question focusing on gender inequality that most labelled as totally incomprehensible, the questions raised by the Committee were seen as being on-point and relevant. Also, most of the recommendations in the Concluding Observations issued by the Committee were approved of, even if some more experienced state representatives again raised charges of the “same old,” which they say applies to most UN treaty body documents on Finland. Committee members, in turn, praised the state delegates for their careful advance preparation and diligence – although the high number of internal committees that the Finnish civil servants have the habit of highlighting as solutions to problems of various kinds was not left unnoticed.

In all, the parties agreed that this constructive dialogue was a success – save for one element: that there were practically no NGOs from Finland physically present to participate in the NGO briefing or listen in on the constructive dialogue. This fact came up in numerous discussions with members of the Committee and the UN secretariat in retrospect, and it was singled out as the sole disappointment of these proceedings on Finland. The absence of NGOs also manifested itself in the public session of constructive dialogue with the Finnish state delegation. Throughout the day, the mood of the audience was, to put things mildly,

calm: only a handful of people were seated at the audience section, and there were virtually no genuine “outsiders” – that is, no people who were present solely because of professional tasks linked directly to the Committee’s session.

More specifically, during the constructive dialogue on Finland, there were only the customary representatives of UN conference and press services seated at the back, as well as a few interns of Committee members. The Geneva-based umbrella NGO targeting the work of the Human Rights Committee in general was stationed at the seats reserved for it; the “Committee anthropologist” was present, diligently taking notes of the goings-on – but again because of scholarly interest, not because of embodying a member of the genuine “outside world.” In addition, only the same three NGO delegates who participated in the NGO briefing were present, valiantly representing “the world” and “embodying the universal” in the midst of a sea of empty seats.

Why were there no other NGOs present, and why was the contrast so notable with the proceedings on numerous other states? Certainly, with Finland being relatively close to Switzerland, Finnish NGOs could find the means for this journey, which, on a global scale, is of modest expense. Or so one might assume. Yet discussions with Finnish human rights NGOs “back home” consistently highlighted the difficulties in summoning resources for attending. The airfare from Helsinki to Geneva may be a modest expenditure, but Geneva is one of the world’s most expensive cities, and thus carving out money to attend is no simple matter for NGOs, even for a relatively prosperous state such as Finland.

Ironically, this material reality also manifested itself in the only Finnish NGO representative who *was* present: the aforementioned representative of the Sami Council. Her presence was paid for by the Finnish Foreign Affairs Ministry. This finding might come as unexpected, even troubling. As has been highlighted, the presence of NGOs serves a vital

purpose in these proceedings precisely *because* of their independence from states – it is only because of this independence that NGOs are invested with their legitimate position as challengers of the veracity of information offered by states and are widely seen as representatives of humanity. As this chapter has shown, protecting this independence is engraved in the work of the Committee and the Secretariat through sessions closed to state representatives – the exclusive purpose of which is to ensure the integrity and even concrete physical safety of NGO representatives who appear before the UN Committee with possible sensitive information on the state’s conduct. Are these functions and the entire division of labor that gives this monitoring mechanism its legitimacy compromised if the participation of NGOs is paid for by states? And why would a state organ pay for the presence of an NGO at a UN treaty body in the first place?

Answers to these questions are in part linked to the status of the state of Finland as a “model student” of the UN human rights framework (Halme-Tuomisaari 2010a) – a status cherished by Finnish civil servants and also frequently commented on by members of the Committee and UN secretariat with regard to Finland’s report. Because of this status, Finland’s collaboration with NGOs is viewed not as something compromising the integrity of NGO representation, but, rather, as strengthening the adherence of the state of Finland to international human rights commitments. As I have discussed elsewhere, a similar reaction from a state with a constitutionally “illegitimate” single-party regime such as China would be utterly impossible (Halme-Tuomisaari 2013a).

Yet there are also crucial, more intimate layers at stake here, connected to distinct inside contours of international UN human rights bureaucracies, which simultaneously reconnect this discussion to the notion of universality as well as to the concepts of center and periphery. With regard to the report of Finland, all these elements are personified in a civil

servant whom I will call “Mark.” In addition to being one of the key figures in human rights policy at the Foreign Affairs Ministry of Finland, Mark is a prominent figure in Finnish human rights activist circles more broadly – the country and circles both being very small. Importantly, despite being a career civil servant at the Finnish Foreign Ministry, Mark is in many ways also an insider of the UN human rights framework, having worked at the UN secretariat in Geneva as well as collaborated with various Geneva-based human rights NGOs before that. In his professional capacity he, like many civil servants at foreign affairs ministries around the world, participates frequently in UN human rights meetings. He knows many key people of UN human rights bureaucracies in person – or, at a minimum, is aware of their “inside” reputation through his extensive personal contacts.

In light of most scholarship on UN treaty bodies authored primarily by activist international lawyers, Mark’s profile appears unexpected – most of this scholarship reifies the above-described stark division of participants into the categories of “state,” “NGO” and “UN treaty body.” Yet, as one of my most consistent ethnographic findings has become, in reality these categories are much more fluid precisely because of the professional profiles of human rights bureaucrats in which these categories merge. Thus, my findings suggest that instead of representing genuine “outsiders” – the “bad state” whose actions these UN monitoring mechanisms are geared to address – many civil servants handling human rights issues in foreign ministries around the world embody both knowledge and association with the “inside” and the “outside,” making the borders between these abstract categories much softer and more malleable in the reality of UN human rights monitoring than the existing scholarship suggests.

My lengthy interaction with the Finnish civil servants has suggested that, in fact, they are likely among the most pro-human rights bureaucrats in existence. My data also suggests

that, like Mark, this shared professional space in between UN offices and state positions is intensified by concrete professional profiles: experience in any UN-related position – whether as an intern or an UN-related NGO worker – is highly prestigious, and thus I suggest that a broader overview of state bureaucrats working with UN human rights reporting would show many of them to have similar professional portfolios. To date, however, such extensive comparative work has not been done, and thus elaborating this point will have to wait.

Yet, even with the absence of sufficient ethnographic data to generalize extensively – studying state representatives remains the single most difficult group of actors at the Human Rights Committee – I will argue that this finding has explanatory weight that extends beyond civil servants at the Finnish Foreign Affairs Ministry. Thus, the real opposition of “bad” state officials who belittle international human rights obligations and “good” human rights defenders cannot be neatly connected on the borders drawn on the divisions of “state,” “NGO” and “INGO.” Rather, the empirical professional and social space is much more nuanced and shared.

These findings have concrete importance for the discussion on “cultivated universality.” It is evident that Mark’s actions vis-à-vis the Sami representative far exceed what one would expect from a mere civil servant solely carrying out professional duties according to his station. A continued overview of Mark’s actions strengthens this finding: in addition to overseeing the preparation of Finland’s official state report, Mark worked actively to inspire Finnish NGOs to attend and submit ancillary reports. In spring 2013, leading up to the “constructive dialogue” on Finland’s report by the Human Rights Committee in July 2013, Mark informed Finnish NGOs of the relevant deadlines for submitting parallel reports. He attended NGO meetings in person, where he instructed NGOs on what UN treaty body proceedings are, and how and why NGOs could and should participate. As the spring

progressed, he distributed guidelines for NGO participation generated by an umbrella NGO operating in Geneva, with hopes of encouraging them to participate in the ongoing “documentary cycle,” and even sent out last-minute reminders as the deadline for submitting shadow reports approached.

Yet he did not stop there, as was already mentioned with regard to the travel expenses of the Sami representative. What had happened, more concretely, was that the Sami Council had received funds from the Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs to attend another UN Expert meeting ongoing simultaneously at the UN Palais des Nations, the meeting of the Permanent Forum for Indigenous Peoples. While the representative of the Council was already in Geneva, Mark had encouraged her to also participate in the hearing of the Human Rights Committee at the nearby Palais Wilson. Thus, were it not for Mark’s insistent urging, there would, in fact, have been *no* Finns to represent NGOs or the Finnish civil society in Geneva at the Human Rights Committee’s hearing – something that would have been quite embarrassing, in context.

Mark’s actions initially appear difficult to comprehend: after all, he *is* a civil servant of an individual state – why would he engage in all of the above? Strictly speaking, not only does he evidently extend what the mere call of duty dictates, but his actions could also be seen as almost intrusive due to their impact on the rudimentary division of labor that forms the bedrock of UN human rights monitoring. I argue that in order for these actions to become sensible, one needs to view Mark in a different light: yes, as a civil servant, but also something more – a devoted human rights believer who in the course of his duties does not see himself as representing merely his own government, but also as someone whose devotion extends to the safeguarding of human rights and their realization via the UN regulatory framework.

Further, in this capacity Mark illustrates a crucial feature of human rights experts: on the one hand they may be, as is also the case for Mark, detached professionals and lawyers working with diverse, clearly outlined professional mandates; on the other, they may be keenly engaged “human rights believers” who also act as activists for human rights. In this duality, Mark embodies the two sides of human rights expertise, combining – to borrow Bruno Latour’s classic comparison in between natural scientists and lawyers – elements from both sides (Latour 2004; Halme-Tuomisaari 2010c).

In this sense, Mark in important ways resembles what Sally Merry has influentially denoted as “intermediaries”: people who operate on the in-between terrain of global human rights centers and peripheries, translating diverse local concerns into the vernacular of human rights, thus both informing diverse people around the world that their issues are, indeed, “human rights concerns,” and simultaneously engaging them more closely with the discourse and action on human rights (Merry 2006). Yet, so I argue, to fully comprehend the scope of Mark’s actions one needs to add a crucial dimension to it. It is not a neutral navigation between these global centers and peripheries that Mark’s actions entail, but, rather, an activity that is also importantly linked to the interests of the center, which in the present case is embodied by the UN Human Rights Committee. Although Mark’s actions are undoubtedly intended to safeguard the interests of the Sami people and their plight, they also serve another vital purpose: to support the continued legitimacy of the UN monitoring mechanism, represented here by the UN Human Rights Committee via the concrete, physical participation of the Sami people as representatives of “embodied universalism,” which serves to verify, time and time again, the ideology of human rights as shared by all mankind.

As my fieldwork progressed, I was impressed to discover that, in fact, Mark was far from unique in his actions as there was an important “central actor” who occupied a largely

similar role to him, the difference being that this role was far more systematic and broader in scope. Here I refer to the already mentioned Geneva-based umbrella NGO which I will call Co-Ordinate. Co-Ordinate has numerous parallel organizations which all focus either on a distinct UN monitoring mechanism – for example the UPR – or on a distinct issue, such as conscientious objection or LGTBI-rights. Similar to many umbrella organizations, Co-Ordinate is a small centralized lobbying body, which has its offices in one concrete locality in Geneva, yet the scope of its operations is thoroughly global. What Co-Ordinate does is quite impressive, and echoes the actions of Mark: it selects a few states that are up for review from each session of the Committee, and approaches NGOs from this target country to inform them of the upcoming hearing of the Committee, with the purpose of inspiring them to submit ancillary reports. In this communication it provides NGOs with a set of guidelines on how to draft a report suitable for the purpose – no simple endeavor, given the distinct nature of Committee work embedded in UN jargon, linked to distinct covenant provisions as well as a distinct legalistic aesthetic via which information is favored by the Committee.

Yet, like Mark, Co-Ordinate does not stop there. Instead, it welcomes draft reports by its target NGOs, and, resources permitting, it revises these drafts and assists NGOs in their report submissions, work commonly carried out in its headquarters only a stone's throw away from the Palais Wilson. Further, it works with a range of funding agencies to attempt to secure funding that allows NGOs, particularly those from the global South, to participate in Committee hearings, assisting them with travel arrangements and visas; it even arranges many of the NGO hearings described in this paper. This funding, in turn, is commonly provided by funding agencies that echo the geographic focus of Co-Ordinate's operations – in other words, Swiss – or the most decisive funding patterns of the UN treaty body system in general – to generalize broadly, emphasis on Scandinavian and Dutch funders. In short, in the

sessions of the Committee, Co-Ordinate acts as the “inside guide” to the “outsiders” flown in from around the world as they frequent these Geneva-based meetings for a few short days. Co-Ordinate also contributes to the general visibility of these sessions via webcam and social media during public hearings; it issues press releases of Concluding Observations and follows-up on certain states in collaboration with the Committee.

Thus Co-Ordinate – like other international umbrella organizations – performs a crucial role in extending information of the Committee’s sessions “around the world.” Here it is important to recall that although the UN is a thoroughly global organization, due primarily to budget cuts most human rights treaty bodies now only meet in Geneva, instead of the previously regular sessions also held at the UN headquarters in New York. The sessions of treaty bodies are themselves quite localized, and the circles relatively small. In the end, only a minimal number of people stay put – the Secretary of the Committee and other key staff of the UN Secretariat, the UN Conference Services, the fantastic lady at the cafeteria of the Palais Wilson, and Co-Ordinate.

### **Embodied Universalism and the Continued Quest for Legitimacy**

How can we understand the work of Co-Ordinate in light of this chapter’s discussion on “universality”? What about the actions of Mark? Why did Mark invest so much weight in securing Finnish NGO participation in these hearings and go out of his professional way to keep NGOs informed of relevant deadlines, not to mention finding the means for the representative of the Sami people to attend? Why did it matter so much to Committee members and personnel at the UN secretariat that there were next to no NGO representatives present in the hearing on Finland’s report? After all, the above description suggests that from

the perspective of information this would hardly have a crippling effect on the “constructive dialogue,” the primary content of which was based on research commenced months earlier.

To begin, consider the issue of resources and whether Finnish NGOs really have them or not, and whether this was the reason for their absence from these proceedings.

Realistically, even in situations of restricted resources, funds can often be found for purposes that are seen as imperative – does this apply here? Why did Co-Ordinate help Finnish NGOs secure funding? The answer is predictable: with Finland being a Western European democracy with a well-established human rights record – a party to the “model students” of the international human rights regime – it is very difficult for such international actors as Co-Ordinate to persuade local funders to support NGO participation. Rather, funders easily see that these resources are needed for NGOs from the geographic “other” – aka the global South and the developing world.

What about the resources of Finnish NGOs themselves? Certainly they have some, as otherwise their operations would be hard-pressed, and realistically the more prosperous among them also have some leeway toward international collaboration. Why did they not tap into those resources to attend the Committee’s constructive dialogue? In discussions with Finnish NGOs – the Finnish League for Human Rights; the Finnish chapter of Amnesty; as well as the Finnish umbrella organization for sexual minorities, SETA – nobody elevated participation in UN treaty body proceedings as a top priority. Or, more directly still: the Finnish chapter of Amnesty International was aware of the forthcoming constructive dialogue on Finland at the Human Rights Committee and was sending the Committee its own ancillary report – on the basis of the report that they had drafted for the Universal Periodic Review that the Human Rights Council had carried out the year before. Yet they had no plans to send a representative there in person – which would have been difficult anyway, according to

Amnesty's guidelines that local chapters are not supposed to target local contexts but, rather, human rights violations occurring elsewhere (Hopgood 2006).

For the Finnish League for Human Rights, one of the oldest human rights NGOs in the country and commonly seen as an “umbrella association” of sorts to safeguard human rights issues in general, the director of the League (who had just assumed her position) was not aware of the forthcoming hearing by the Human Rights Committee *at all*, and thus, not surprisingly, the League was not planning to submit a report of any kind or send a representative in person. The NGO on sexual minorities, SETA, had, by contrast, heard of the hearing, yet due to a shortage of personnel resources, submitting the report had been left on the back burner. Ironically, after my visit to the organization, the organization's head was reminded of the deadline; simultaneously, she remembered the recent reminder of this deadline sent in by Mark; and eventually the NGO did submit a report, which was thus deposited on the UN website and discussed in the Committee's hearing.

In other words, none of these NGOs had any plans to attend the hearing of the Human Rights Committee in Geneva – not so much because of restricted resources but, rather, because attendance was not seen as a priority on any level in their operations, irrespective of the monetary costs involved. All the NGO workers that I interviewed described the UN system as distant, unfamiliar and with uncertain usefulness in its low impact and visibility. Curiously, despite its almost four decades of existence, all of the NGO workers also described the treaty body system as a “new” system which, because of its “recent nature,” was still unfamiliar to them. The latter characterization was particularly puzzling in the case of the Finnish League for Human Rights, as I later learned that more than a decade ago, in the late 1990s, the organization *had*, in fact, been active in submitting shadow reports and even attending. Clearly, the sentiment of “newness” was in this instance not an accurate

description of things, but a subjective sentiment held by the new head of the organization and created *after* previous participation by the League on the Committee's monitoring cycles.

Recent research suggests that rather than being isolated instances, these sentiments capture a relatively prevalent view of UN treaty bodies. In his comparative study based on extensive interview data as well as documentary analysis in Finland, the Netherlands, and Australia, Jasper Krommendijk found largely similar patterns – except, if possible, more prominent still: the hearings of treaty bodies implied very few consequences of any kind, whether measured in newspaper articles, civil society action, parliamentary debates or legislative changes (Krommendijk 2014).

These findings are deeply troubling for the continued legitimacy of UN human rights treaty bodies in particular, and for the global monitoring framework around human rights in general: in order for it to remain credible, relevant and *alive* it needs to be – or least give the impression of being – genuinely relevant to people, as something that is needed and adhered to by people *all around the world*, as something that is *universal* in its embrace and existence. Against this background, the message emanating from Finnish NGOs is deeply worrying, and sufficient in itself to contribute to the declining importance of this discourse and ideology that has formed the most visible “last global utopia” of recent decades (Moyn 2012). This lack of interest, or sense of irrelevance, poses a tremendous threat to this utopia. More potently than any ill-intended governments or malignant sovereigns, it is these sentiments that have the potential to reduce it from an ideology of “universal” scope into one of restrictive, “particular” relevance.

## **Conclusion: Embodied Relevance**

It is with these words that we arrive at the last ironic turn of this chapter: for almost seven decades – with greater or lesser intensity – scholars have been engaged in a regularly revived debate on whether human rights notions and language form universal phenomena or are merely “particular” in their scope and origin. Simultaneously, we have collectively ignored what is really at stake in this debate, particularly after human rights have undoubtedly and genuinely become thoroughly global, or “universal.” Especially in the first decade of the new millennium, scholars, particularly those in international law but also in the anthropology of human rights, have discussed these concepts as if they were connected in meaningful ways to “cultural difference.”

My suggestion is not that this debate is entirely insignificant –it is not this debate that I am engaging with here, nor is this the argument that I wish to forward with these ethnographic glimpses from UN treaty body proceedings. Rather, I wish to highlight how “universalism” is an entity that is actively cultivated by actors at the “centers” of the contemporary human rights phenomenon so as to make human rights notions and the work of regulatory frameworks around human rights relevant for actors in the “peripheries” – or at least to create an impression to that effect. It is in both of these capacities that the concrete, physical bodies of the representatives of humanity “from the peripheries” – such as NGOs from Finland – gain their importance for participating at the “center” – such as the sessions of the UN Human Rights Committees at the Palais Wilson in Geneva.

First, when NGOs around the world participate in the monitoring cycles of UN human rights treaties, they are informed not only of the possibilities of participation within these monitoring mechanisms, but also of their very existence – not to mention the scope of specific human rights covenants. When they articulate their diverse concerns via the language

of human rights, they simultaneously contribute to the salience of that language and the framework for processing complaints through that language. When they travel physically to Geneva, they, through their bodies, become complicit in the realization of the ideal of universalism into a living reality. When they engage in the NGO hearings in the meeting room of the Palais Wilson with members of UN Committees, they, through their physically present bodies, testify to the importance of these hearings, simultaneously reifying the importance of the work of the Committee. As they sit in the public sessions of the main meeting room of the Palais Wilson, they embody “the world,” thus bringing “the international” alive as something that *needs* this monitoring mechanism.

So far, the over-arching assumption of UN human rights treaty body work has been that it exists for “something” or “someone” –both of which are in existence in the world, but often removed from view. By definition, they are “peripheral” to this action occurring at this “center.” While sitting in the Palais Wilson, one never encounters this “something” or “someone.” Yet the belief in the existence of both, as well as the relevance of the action at the center, forms a crucial accelerating factor for the continued action at the center. Further, without belief in this “outside,” UN monitoring mechanisms would be reduced to a mere self-sustaining cycle of perpetual motion which operates and exists in an autonomous realm cut off from reality, engaging in action that is meaningful only to itself.

The assumption remains that the constructive dialogue taking place between the state and the UN Committee travels back – ideally assisted by local NGOs – and that the views presented by the Concluding Observations by the Committee similarly find tangible existence in reality. Yet, so recent scholarship contends, in reality all this is doubtful: very few people take notice of what goes on in Geneva during the events themselves, and even fewer notice after the fact. More often than not, no attention is paid to the Concluding Observations of

Committees, save by the civil servants whose professional duty it is to read them and consider them for the next report due to a UN human rights body.

This chapter suggests that instead of the dynamic emanating merely from the “center” to the “periphery,” we need to, if not replace it, at a minimum accompany it with the reverse dynamic and ask: what kind of energy does the sustained movement of actors from the “peripheries” offer to the “center”? What does this movement do to contribute to the continued vibrancy and legitimacy of action occurring at the “center”? My argument is that instead of ultimately contributing to the transfer of information or the outcomes of these proceedings back to the peripheries, the ultimate importance of their participation is a contribution to strengthen the impression of human rights work as being truly universal, important to people around the world – and it is this work that the physical bodies that subject themselves to this ritual of audit effectively support.

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