

Human Rights & Human Welfare

Volume 8
Issue 2 January 2008: Special Forum

Article 4

1-2008

Choices Matter: Human Rights, Economic Solidarity and the 2012 APSA Meeting

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Recommended Citation

Goodhart, Michael (2008) "Choices Matter: Human Rights, Economic Solidarity and the 2012 APSA Meeting," *Human Rights & Human Welfare*: Vol. 8: Iss. 2, Article 4.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/hrhw/vol8/iss2/4>



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Choices Matter: Human Rights, Economic Solidarity and the 2012 APSA Meeting

Abstract

I believe that because Louisiana's constitution violates the human rights of many of our colleagues, the American Political Science Association (APSA) should move its 2012 meeting from New Orleans. If it does not do so, I would urge members to boycott (the same applies to the Southern Political Science Association, which meets annually in New Orleans).

Keywords

American Political Science Association (APSA), New Orleans, LGBT

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Choices Matter: Human Rights, Economic Solidarity and the 2012 APSA Meeting

by Michael Goodhart

I believe that because Louisiana's constitution violates the human rights of many of our colleagues, the American Political Science Association (APSA) should move its 2012 meeting from New Orleans. If it does not do so, I would urge members to boycott (the same applies to the Southern Political Science Association, which meets annually in New Orleans).

I do not find the contractual arguments outlined in the Association's [Memorandum](#) on APSA Practice for Annual Meeting Sites and the 2012 Annual Meeting persuasive. The contractual language used by APSA states that "APSA reserves the right of termination of this agreement, without penalty or liability, if the government of the city in which the hotel is located establishes or *enforces* laws that, in the estimation of APSA, abridge the civil rights of any APSA member on the basis of...sexual orientation..." (emphasis added). That the *city* did not *enact* the law is irrelevant; presumably city officials will *enforce* the laws of their state. Moreover, the contract includes a clause specifying that "Neither party shall be responsible for any failure of performance due to acts of...*government regulation*...making it inadvisable, illegal or impossible to provide the facilities or to hold the meeting in the hotel or city as originally planned" (emphasis added). If a constitutional amendment is not an instance of government regulation, I do not know what would be. Finally, the issue of marriage rights is, as [Ackelsberg and Shanley](#) argue, a red herring. It is the reference to "incidents of marriage" that makes the Louisiana amendment particularly pernicious.

Probably the most persuasive arguments against moving the conference have to do with showing solidarity with the people of New Orleans. It is at least possible that the facilities for which APSA had contracted might remain empty or under-utilized, causing economic hardship to their owners, operators, and employees (who might anyway not support the statewide laws). Thus moving the meetings poses a problem familiar to human rights scholars and advocates: sanctions often end up hurting the wrong people. There is also the question of supporting the people of New Orleans, whose plight in the wake of Hurricane Katrina remains a national shame. While the city was chosen two years before the storm hit, keeping the meeting there registers a vote of confidence in its eventual recovery, both symbolically and financially. Once again, the issue is one with which students of human rights are familiar: what to do in cases where rights or goods come into conflict?

Such questions are most difficult in cases where two basic rights conflict. Here that does not seem to be the case. A simple illustration shows two reasons why not. If a store owner in my neighborhood refuses to serve Muslims, he cannot complain that my boycotting his shop violates his economic rights. While economic rights—including the right to a guaranteed subsistence—are fundamental, these rights do not include a right to another person's or group's custom. This principle is well-established: many human rights campaigns, from the civil rights movement in the United States to the global anti-Apartheid campaign, relied on boycotts to achieve their aims. Doing so is perfectly legitimate: there is no right to ill-gotten gains. The other point that the example of the shopkeeper makes clear is that choices make a difference. My boycott of his store is based on policies he has chosen. The people of Louisiana and of New Orleans have made a choice; it is perfectly legitimate—indeed, it is ethically imperative, in my view—that they be

made to understand and bear the consequences of their choice. As political scientists, we should understand that politics matter.

As others have pointed out, if the Louisiana constitution singled out blacks or women or Jews or Hispanics or disabled people, this debate would probably not be occurring. The only explanation for this discrepancy that I can come up with is that somehow some of us regard the human rights of our LGBT colleagues as less important than those of other colleagues. Perhaps few people would admit this openly, yet it is hard to make sense of the debate otherwise. We seem to be saying that some (other) people's human rights can legitimately be traded off or balanced against more pragmatic concerns. Perhaps this is simply a case of ignorance or thoughtlessness. Still, I am troubled by the possibility that this issue reflects a disturbing national trend toward treating torture, domestic spying, racial profiling, preventive detention, harassment of legal immigrants, and other human rights abuses as acceptable costs for others to bear for our (perceived) safety or convenience. A commitment to democracy and human rights requires vigorous opposition to such tendencies wherever they appear.

Michael Goodhart is Associate Professor of Political Science and Women's Studies at the University of Pittsburgh. His research focuses on democratic theory and human rights, especially in the context of globalization. He has published on these subjects in Human Rights Quarterly, Perspectives on Politics, the Journal of Human Rights, Polity, and elsewhere. Goodhart's first book, Democracy as Human Rights: Freedom and Equality in the Age of Globalization, was published by Routledge in 2005. He is book review editor at Polity and a past president of the APSA organized section on human rights. For more information visit www.pitt.edu/~goodhart.