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Scientists Have Been Out for Some Time Now: A Response to Sonia Shah

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Scientists Have Been Out for Some Time Now: A Response to Sonia Shah

Abstract

Sonia Shah's categorization of the scientific community as having been "by and large. impassively unmoved [by human rights], churning out their papers, applying for grants and debating esoterica at their private professional meetings" is grossly inaccurate on at least two accounts.

Keywords

Human rights, Science, Science and Human Rights Coalition, Advocacy, Conflict of interest

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Scientists Have Been Out for Some Time Now: A Response to Sonia Shah

by Clair Apodaca

Sonia Shah's categorization of the scientific community as having been "by and large. impassively unmoved [by human rights], churning out their papers, applying for grants and debating esoterica at their private professional meetings" is grossly inaccurate on at least two accounts.

- By and large members of all professions and the mass public are impassively unmoved by human rights violations around the world. Why single out hard scientists (chemists or physicists) specifically? In fact, in the fields of political science and international relations (social scientists), the disciplines with a natural interest in political and economic repression, only a very small percentage of scholars work on human rights-that is churning out papers. Far fewer join the human rights sections of the two major associations (APSA and ISA), which were only established in 2001 and 2006 respectively.
- [Scientists have been active in human rights research and advocacy for years](#) . A few examples should suffice, although an interested reader could pick up a copy of Richard Pierre Claude's [Science in the Service of Human Rights](#) (University of Pennsylvania Press , 2002) for an excellent discussion of the topic:
 - a) Although the focus of Shah's article, the Science and Human Rights Coalition, was launched in January 2009, the [Science and Human Rights Program](#) (SHR) of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) was initiated in 1977. The AAAS has a long history of using its considerable methodological and statistical talent to investigate and analyze human rights violations. The organization has also been active in the promotion of human rights standards around the world and in providing technical assistance to human rights organizations such as Amnesty International. Audrey Chapman, former director of the [Science and Human Rights Program](#) , explains that in the 1990s the focus of the SHR was on "providing experts for forensic investigations into suspicious deaths and exhumations of mass graves" and also for the "application of genetics to human rights for purposes of confirming or disproving a family link with children believed to have been kidnapped from human rights victims and to identify remains in mass graves."
 - b) The [Human Rights Data Analysis Group](#) (HRDAG), an organization that originated with AAAS, "develops database software, data collection strategies, and statistical techniques to measure human rights atrocities." This group's expertise helps human rights NGOs develop evidence-based legal and moral cases against violators.
 - c) [Physicians for Human Rights](#) , a co-recipient of the 1997 Nobel Peace Prize, celebrated its 20 th year as a human rights organization in 2006. Physicians for Human Rights exercises its political clout to pressure governments and mobilize the public to protect civilians. Moreover, the International Forensic Program has used its considerable forensic knowledge to investigate and document human rights violations for over two decades.
 - d) The [Federation of American Scientists](#) (FAS) works on a broad range of topics which often touch on human rights issues. Under the direction of Jeremy Stone, FAS was a strong advocate for human rights and this dedication continues under his successor Henry Kelly.

- e) The [American Statistical Association 's Committee on Scientific Freedom & Human Rights](#) provides statistical expertise to scientific societies on questions concerning human rights violations.

Despite Shah's gross exaggeration and blanket dismissal of the scientific and academic community when it comes to human rights, she nonetheless brings up an issue of great concern. Shah points out the fact that multinational corporations are increasingly paying for research, thus directing the research project output. The "owner" of the research as commercial product will not willingly have the research reviewed by peers or published in scientific journals (least competitors pilfer the results), thus destroying the quality and rigor of scientific evidence. Indeed, in such cases, the findings of the research are the intellectual property of the corporation that uses the study or discovery for commercial purposes, thus expanding profits and not often improving human welfare. In this situation science and its potential discoveries are captured by economic interests. This can readily be seen in the field of agricultural research where the development and control of genetic materials, for example, by large agro-biotech corporations has been shown to threaten the livelihoods of small farmers and possibly the health of consumers. On this topic, Shah's analysis is on target, and perhaps the human rights academic community ought to pay more attention to this phenomenon.

In Shah's haste to dismiss the historic work of the scientific community, an aspect of the relationship between science and human rights that Shah did not mention is the issue of the scientist as victim of human rights violations. Scientists and other scholars are often at greater risk of political repression because they speak out against the possible consequences of their work and inventions for human rights, human wellbeing and human security. For example, biomedical advances may have beneficial or adverse affects on the life and dignity of human beings. Scientists who put out public warnings against the possible misuse of their research (for example for military use) or criticize the government for converting biological research into biological weapons, as an example, may find themselves under dangerous government scrutiny and not only in totalitarian states. Scientists' advocacy for the protection of other scientists has lead to the creation and persistence of several networks that distribute and publicize information on threatened scholars (and the repression they suffer). Among such networks are the [Scholars at Risk Network](#) , the [Network for Education and Academic Rights](#) (NEAR), and AAAS' [Science and Human Rights Action Network](#) . Again, we see the longstanding concern and activism of the scientific community in the pursuit of human rights standards.

Scientists and other scholars are actually more active in human rights advocacy than many other professional groups or many members of the general public. It is so because their work and research are intricately tied to human rights and human welfare issues (such as the development of weapons, biogenetic technologies, environmental protection, or understanding governmental power structures), but also because they are often the direct or indirect targets of government abuse and coercion. All in all, in writing a fluff piece on the issue of science and human rights, Shah's article does a disservice to the many scientists who devote their time, energy, and money to the cause of human rights protection.

Clair Apodaca is an Associate Professor in the Department of Politics and International Relations at Florida International University. Dr. Apodaca has published extensively in the areas the international protection of human rights, women's human rights and refugee studies. She is the author of Understanding U.S. Human Rights Policy: A Paradoxical Legacy (Routledge 2006). Her work has appeared in the Journal of Human Rights, International Studies Quarterly and Human Rights Quarterly among many others. In recognition of her scholarship in the field, human rights scholars and practitioners elected her to the first Executive Committee for Human Rights at the American Political Science Association (APSA) in 2001. Presently, Dr. Apodaca serves on the Executive Committee for Human Rights Section of the International Studies Association.