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Scientists Promoting Human Rights

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Scientists Promoting Human Rights

Abstract

Scientists have long been involved with work to protect fundamental human rights. The activities of the Federation of American Scientists to expose the health impact of nuclear testing in the atmosphere is typical. In the Soviet Union , many of the leading human rights activists, starting with the great Andrei Sakharov , were scientists. The same is true in China where a major intellectual force inspiring China's 1989 democracy movement was Fang Lizhi , an astrophysicist. Often their contribution to military security even gives them a little bit of protection.

Keywords

Human rights, Science, Federation of American Scientists, Advocacy

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Scientists Promoting Human Rights

by Edward Friedman

Scientists have long been involved with work to protect fundamental human rights. The activities of the [Federation of American Scientists](#) to expose the health impact of nuclear testing in the atmosphere is typical. In the Soviet Union , many of the leading human rights activists, starting with the great [Andrei Sakharov](#) , were scientists. The same is true in China where a major intellectual force inspiring China's 1989 democracy movement was [Fang Lizhi](#) , an astrophysicist. Often their contribution to military security even gives them a little bit of protection.

Scientists often think of themselves as in a universal field of knowledge which is not defined by chauvinist identities. They tend to abhor, far more than most of their countrymen, the notion that Einstein's theory was Jewish science. In repressive regimes, because of the international nature of science and a need to know English, scientists have more access to international realities that contradict the propaganda of the ruling tyranny.

It is important that scientists concerned with global warming, climate change and environmental catastrophes that threaten life as we know it become involved with human rights work. The environment is a life and death issue impacting us all. In China , peaceful people with no hidden political agenda who get involved with protecting the environment or slowing or stopping the spread of HIV/AIDS have ended up in prison. It would be wonderfully helpful if scientists around the world would take up the cause of these victims of abuses of basic rights.

The Obama Administration should break with the Bush Administration's abandonment of the UN Human Rights Council because it privileged social and economic rights. The three sets of rights, political, economic and social, are part of the same, integrated universe of rights. America should not be afraid of social and economic rights.

When China became active in the International Labor Organization (ILO), it was not because the [Chinese Communist Party](#) regime intended to support free labor unions. It does not. But China does take advantage of the principle of universality to get on the governing board of the ILO and other international organizations and to use its clout to work against the human rights regime, including social and economic rights.

The US would have more credibility with developing nations if it were not afraid of social and economic rights activism. More harm could be prevented if human rights were understood in this broadened way. Therefore we should welcome the involvement of scientists with a broadened notion of integrated human rights. Their work is in the interest of the species.

If the species does not find ways to cooperate and share burdens fairly, conflict is ever more likely. War is the great generator of the worst human rights abuses. Therefore we should think of new and large contributions by scientists globally on these matters to be crucial to any success in any larger human rights agenda.

Edward Friedman is a professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. He is a long time member of Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and Human Rights in China. In the 1980s he was on the staff of the Foreign Affairs Committee where the issues he worked on included human rights, death squads, arms embargoes, and peaceful and democratic reconciliation. At Wisconsin, he introduced courses on "The Politics of Human Rights" and "The Politics of Freedom." His most recent book is Political Transitions in Dominant Party Systems.