

Communicative Activism and Human Rights

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I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged in the text.

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Abstract

Presented here is a theoretical, historical and analytical position that re-examines human rights as discursively generated cultural products, introducing a conceptual tool, 'communicative activism', which can be usefully employed to analyse and interpret forms of human rights discourse employed by non-governmental organisations and others who seek to support and promote human rights standards and practices. Theoretically, this is grounded in Habermasian notions of communicative rationality and Foucauldian notions of critique that, although usually positioned as contradictory, are here presented as having an important commonality – an emphasis on inter-discursive modes of cultural knowledge production and legitimisation. Historically, human rights theory and philosophy is positioned in a post-ontological phase, emphasising therefore that human rights are less 'self-evident' or pre-existing and therefore able to be 'recognised' than they are discursive products in an ongoing historical process of re-articulation. Analytically, the concept of 'communicative activism' is provided with a suggested methodological framework and employed to critically engage with some aspects of contemporary human rights discourse through a case study of Amnesty International.