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The Decline of American Power and Donald Trump: Reflections on Human Rights, Neoliberalism, and the World Order

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Abstract

Is American power in decline? What is the relationship between the perceived decline of American power and the rise of Donald Trump and authoritarian politics elsewhere? Understanding the puzzle of American decline and the world order requires the recognition of how capital and wealth are unjustly distributed, entrenched, and sustained across the society. The core argument here maintains that American decline pertains not only to the decreasing economic vitality underscored by the concrete detrimental effects generated through sharpening material inequality within the US. Rather, decline also constitutes its decreasing appeal and legitimacy as a dominant actor in the international system. This paper contributes to current scholarly and policy debates on American power and authoritarianism in three ways. First, it offers a more holistic conception of American power, particularly by highlighting both its materialist and ideational foundations that co-constitute each other during its periods of ascent, consolidation, and decline. Second, it underscores the mutually reinforcing interdependence of domestic and transnational dimensions of US power. Third, while dominant scholarship on American decline rarely address its implications on international human rights, the paper highlights the uniqueness of the Trump presidency and the emerging authoritarian politics elsewhere: while neoliberalism's detrimental consequences to human rights within and beyond the US constitute a relatively long history, Trump and his allies have abandoned the legitimization tactics that their predecessors had so willingly used.

Highlights:

- American power constitutes the mutually reinforcing relationship of domestic conditions as well as transformative changes in the international system— an insight often ignored in dominant International Relations scholarship on American decline.
- The decline of American power constitutes its decreasing appeal and legitimacy as a dominant actor in the international system.
- Examining the status of American power includes its material position and legitimization tactics within the United States and in the international system.
- While neoliberalism's detrimental consequences to human rights preceded the Trump administration, currently emerging discourses have abandoned the legitimization tactics that Trump's predecessors had so willingly used.

Keywords:

Human Rights; United States; Inequality; Neoliberalism; Donald Trump; Rising Powers

1. Introduction

On the 20th January 2017, amidst a dreary weather in Washington DC, Donald Trump was sworn in as the 45th US President, as millions of Americans and people worldwide closely listened to and watched his inaugural address. In contrast to his post-Cold War predecessors, President Trump advocates blatant economic and military protectionism, which aims to supposedly resurrect America's greatness from the fundamental challenges of prevalent poverty in inner American cities, economic degradation, proliferation of crimes and domestic security problems, and the apparent deterioration of US military capacities. As heavy rain poured when Trump commenced his inaugural address, the cloudy skies and chilly temperature somehow prefigured Trump's vision of restoring the US in its former glory. This overarching strategy of the Trump administration for restoring national greatness emerges from the diagnosis that Trump's predecessors systematically disregarded US national interest in favor of bolstering the military capacities and economic development of America's allies. Trump's America First policy suggests that decades-long commitment for liberal internationalism — specifically, global engagement through multilateral forms of governance, commitment to increased economic cooperation through open trade, and promotion of human rights, democracy, and liberal values — have to be abandoned by embracing instead nationalistic and anti-interventionist policies. Those policies, as the Trump administration has repeatedly alluded to, include the dramatic reduction of US foreign aid, the systematic review and eventual withdrawal (if necessary) from the longstanding security guarantees given to US allies, and the abandonment of policies that rhetorically promote democracy, good governance, and human rights abroad¹.

Domestically, several decades of economic stagnation and political crises in recent years underscore more structural problems within the American homeland. While the end of the Cold War in the early 1990s brought a sense of political optimism that humanity is on the road to inevitable progress, with the hope that the appetite for democracy and human rights would unstoppably gain traction worldwide, the 9/11 terror attacks in the U.S. ushered in a new era in American foreign and domestic policies. The Bush administration's global war on terror paved the way for the unprecedented expansion in American security apparatus and bolstered the terror-oriented policies of US allies. Consequently, the growing demand for robust security states in the name of national security systematically undermined the US government's commitment in promoting civil and political rights as well as liberal democracy abroad. Meanwhile, the 2007/2008 financial crisis highlights the fundamental limitations of American exceptionalism; specifically, the growing material inequality and a weakened US welfare state system illustrate how social mobility, as one of core elements of the exceptionalist narrative, is fast becoming an unattainable goal for the majority of Americans.

That climate of uncertainty motivates the following puzzle: Is American power in decline? What is the relationship between the perceived decline of American power and the rise of Trump and authoritarian politics elsewhere? In view of that overarching puzzle, this paper is structured based on the following organizational logic. In the next section, I discuss the assumptions and the theoretical motivations for understanding the puzzle about the current political challenges in the US and world order. I also discuss in this section my overarching arguments on the current status of American power and its implications to international human rights. Second, the paper provides a critical review of the literature on the status of American power as well as the Trump administration's domestic and foreign policies that directly impact human rights. That section constitutes the core discussion of the paper, whereby I discuss the main elements of the decline of

¹ See, for example, the Amnesty International USA's long list of human rights failures and infractions of the Trump administration during its first 100 days: https://www.amnestyusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/trump_first_hundred_days.pdf

American power in world politics; namely, that the decline of American power and the political challenges represented by Donald Trump constitute the fundamental contradictions in the neoliberal logic that governs American politics and the world political economy. The third substantive section, meanwhile, makes the case that the global human rights regime is currently in distress and outlines some of the conditions that facilitated such a situation. The paper concludes by underscoring the prospects for the durability of American power and the conditions under which the global human rights regime could transform in an era of rising powers.

2. The Puzzle and Arguments: United States in a Neoliberal World Order

From the pragmatic idealism of Obama to the blatantly racist, sexist, and crudely nationalist tirades of Trump and his allies, contemporary US domestic and foreign policy strategies appear to have pivoted to another direction. Trump has consistently expressed his admiration for authoritarian leaders elsewhere, including the North Korean dictator Kim Jong Un: “He speaks and his people sit up at attention. I want my people to do the same” (Trump 2018 in Powers 2018). Considering the emerging anti-democratic elements due to the rise of Trump and perceived decline of American power brought by the emergence of China’s development, this paper seeks to address the following puzzle: Is American power in decline? What is the relationship between the perceived decline of American power and the rise of Trump and authoritarian politics elsewhere?

Understanding the puzzle of American decline and the world order requires the recognition of how capital and wealth are unjustly distributed, entrenched, and sustained within the US and the international system. I outline and discuss the macro-conditions that have facilitated the decline in American power, with a particular focus on the neoliberal logic that it has persistently upheld domestically and abroad. While I admit that the “idea of universal human rights is indeed headed for hard time” (Forsythe 2017, 7), a sense of cautious optimism and a reform strategy are needed to prepare for even the worst and the most fundamental challenges to the post-World War 2 global human rights order.

For the analytic purposes of this paper, I define American power as the generation, in and through domestic and transnational interdependence, of outcomes that influence the capacities and perceptions of actors and institutions to determine their situation (Barnett and Duvall 2005, 39). My conception of American power is more holistic because it refers to the US, as a state, in its projection of *both* the objective materialist capabilities such as military strength and economic performance *and* also its intersubjective elements such as legitimacy, moral appeal, and reputation (Bridoux 2017) *within and beyond* its formal territorial borders.

The scholarly debates on American decline is not unique to the contested presidency of Donald Trump (Regilme and Parisot 2017, 8). Yet, this debate can be roughly divided into two camps. The first camp includes those who maintain that US global dominance is likely to be sustained in the foreseeable future (Panitch and Gindin 2012). Starrs (2018, 817), for instance, contend that “despite the declining global share of United States GDP from 40% in 1960 to below a quarter from 2008 onward”, American firms remain dominant in many important and highly competitive fields. Recognizing the challenges posed by emerging powers to American empire, Parisot (2013, 1171) argues that “they have made moves against empire, they remain deeply embedded within it, and probably will be for many years to come”. Ikenberry (2018) echoes this argument of further entrenchment of rising powers within an American-led international system. That system, accordingly, allows for integration of other states within its institutions and rules, provides possibilities for leadership, shares the benefits widely, and accommodates diversity.

On the other hand, a broad range of scholars and commentators maintain that American power has indeed declined. As the sociologist Ho-fung Hung (2018, 40) accurately describes, “plenty of people on the left and the right agree with the judgment that ‘America is in decline’ underlying the “Make America Great Again” slogan” — the diagnosis shared by many left- and right-leaning commentators and scholars. Even before Trump, Arrighi (2007) contends that the American ‘war on terror’ represents a ‘terminal decline’ of United States hegemony, while Wallerstein (2009) diagnoses the 1970s as the start of slump and the 9/11 terror attacks highlighted

America's vulnerabilities. Similarly, Julian Go (2012, 211) identifies the mid-1970s up to the current era as the period of American decline, characterized by militaristic aggression, territorial occupations, and air strikes, while Wallerstein (2009, 1) predicts that "the economic, political, and military factors that contributed to U.S. hegemony are the same factors that will inexorably produce the coming U.S. decline". Other scholars, meanwhile, contend a more moderate position. Although he believes that the American-led international order is declining, Acharya (2018) maintains that the emerging system will be increasingly shaped by a diverse array of actors including new actors as well as old and new powers.

Considering that debate, my core argument maintains that American decline pertains not only to the decreasing economic vitality underscored by the concrete detrimental effects generated through neoliberalism vis-à-vis the sharpening material inequality within the US. Rather, decline also constitutes America's decreasing appeal and legitimacy as a dominant actor in the international system. The latter element becomes much more visible especially in the case of the Trump presidency when racist, sexist, and blatantly nationalist discourses that have become so normalized in global and national mainstream public spheres. Various structural deficiencies and injustices that are entrenched in the US neoliberal political economy — a governance model that many countries worldwide have adopted in varying scales and extent of localization— have facilitated this decline of American power. Specifically, the Trump administration has accelerated neoliberal policies coupled with authoritarian discourses and practices in ways that have meaningfully undermined the legitimating foundations of American power. Therefore, the puzzle on American decline is not only a problem of discursive legitimation as punctuated by the horrendous rhetoric of Trump. Rather, the logic of wealth accumulation through neoliberalism has engendered severe distributive injustice within the US and in the world economy, and Trump unabashedly championed that logic without instrumentally invoking discourses on human rights, democracy, and rule of law.

This paper engages with the aforementioned opposing stances on American decline in three exploratory ways. First, I offer a more holistic conception of American power, particularly by highlighting both its *materialist* and *ideational* foundations that co-constitute each other during its periods of ascent, consolidation, and decline². Many scholars in those two opposing stances underscore only the materialist elements of American power, as demonstrated by military prowess and economic indicators, and unfortunately, sidelining the importance of moral appeal and claims for legitimacy of American power. Amid the increasing material strength of rival powers such as China, the Trump presidency reinforces the decline of American power as it has blatantly eschewed its justificatory and normative underpinnings that his predecessors had quite consistently invoked, as the case maybe with the discourses on democracy, human rights, rule of law, and the purported shared benefits accrued from increasing economic globalization.

Second, I underscore the mutually reinforcing interdependence of domestic and transnational dimensions of US power. Scholars in the decline debate usually highlight the transnational dimensions of the American power compared to other states in the international system. Yet, that analytic emphasis fails to recognize the two faces of American power, particularly its domestic and transnational elements. Indeed, the contradictions of neoliberalism as the core element of the domestic and transnational foundations of American power have facilitated its further decline. Domestically, the sharpening material inequality within the US generates pervasive internal social conflicts, and as research shows in the field of democratization studies, could lead to democratic backsliding or other forms of political instability (Rapley 2004; Regilme 2014; Boix 2003). At the transnational level, neoliberalism, as a constitutive paradigm of American power, shows that unregulated financial markets, the pervasive commodification of human life, and the weakening of public goods provision undermine the legitimacy of American power — an outcome that becomes more pronounced especially when other rising powers discursively provide alternatives to the current world order³. As the US promotes neoliberal principles and unfettered wealth accumulation within and beyond its formal borders, its long-term domestic political and

² Refer to the work of Julian Go (2012) on a compelling comparison between British and American empires based on three periods: ascent, maturity, and decline.

³ A new world order could be defined as that of ideological diversity, which Charles Kupchan (2012) describes as 'no one's world', or an order increasingly defined by China as America's most credible competitor (Schweller and Pu 2011).

social stability are at risk, which in turn, undermines America's material capacities and legitimacy to project its power abroad. This means that self-regulating market and socio-political stability are inherently incompatible (Polanyi 2001). Referring to the 'trilemma paradox', Dani Rodrik (2012) underscores the fundamental contradictions in the contemporary international system: that the simultaneous pursuit of democracy, economic globalization, and national self-determination is a recipe for disaster. This broader argument is further supported by quantitative research on the political effects of neoliberal globalization among advanced industrialized democracies since the 1960s. Particularly, "more trade and FDI [foreign direct investments] are associated with a turn to anti-internationalism and anti-globalization", while "social welfare spending also seems less and less able to mitigate this relationship" (Milner 2018, 40). This backlash against increasing economic interdependence through neoliberalism has generated deep-seated feelings of exclusion and profound material suffering for many people, who are unable to reap the benefits of globalization.

Third, while the dominant International Relationship scholarship on the decline of American power rarely address its implications on international human rights, I provide some preliminary insights on their relationship. While neoliberalism's detrimental consequences to human rights within and beyond the US constitute a relatively long history (Klein 2014), the Trump administration has abandoned the legitimation tactics that his predecessors had so willingly used. In building those arguments, I commence my analysis by zooming into the underlying conditions that undermine American power.

3. American Power and Contemporary Challenges

With the American imperium as its fulcrum (Katzenstein 2005), the current international system is experiencing a global political pandemic, whereby many electoral and constitutionally liberal democratic systems worldwide face severe problems of legitimation (Zürn 2018). The American political economy reflects the fundamental weaknesses of the neoliberal paradigm of national and global governance. In this paper, neoliberalism pertains to the "political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade" (Harvey 2005, 2). Thus, the state assumes responsibility towards the polity, with a particular emphasis on the committed protection of a system of private property rights, the integrity of monetary governance, and the maintenance of external and internal coercive apparatuses and institutions — all of which are necessary to effectively enforce the logics of wealth accumulation and unrestrained market exchanges. Yet, neoliberal governance neglects crucial areas of social provision including high-quality and accessible education, health care, and other forms of social safety nets. Over time, electoral democratic societies with extreme levels of material inequality are more likely to experience political instability, and given the right conditions, could possibly lead to democratic decay or even collapse (Regilme 2014).

In recent decades, the legitimacy of American power rests not only upon its coercive power underwritten by its robust military and security apparatus. Instead, the US exceptionalist narrative — hinged upon human rights, electoral democracy, and free markets— has served as the foundational and broadly appealing justification for its dominant position in global governance. Yet, the Trump administration's policy rhetoric has undermined US moral exceptionalism through blatant sexist, racist, discriminatory, and exclusionary tirades that have consistently proliferated domestic and international media. This grim picture of the legitimacy of American power emerges amidst the increasing political confidence, military power, and economic growth of non-Western states — especially China, and to some extent Russia, in flagrantly asserting their interests in world politics. Prior to Trump's anti-democratic discourses, American foreign policy has generally upheld democracy promotion and human rights as important, although, in a lot of cases, those goals have been used in sinister ways to justify disastrous military interventions (Forsythe 2011). While US President Barack Obama campaigned for strong human rights protection, actual policies did not usually match the discourse, as exemplified in the increased number of human casualties killed by drone operations and the continued undermining of privacy rights through the expansion of state surveillance. Despite those deficiencies, Obama "never stooped to the kind of open disdain of human

rights concerns that is feared from Trump” (Roth 2017, 1). Even the Bush administration instrumentally invoked democracy promotion and human rights in the deadly conduct of the ‘war on terror’. What made Trump unique, in this regard, is the congruence of his discursive rejection of human rights norms with concrete and detrimental policy actions. Those actions include the following: threatening the staff of the International Criminal Court with travel bans and financial sanctions, pulling out of the UN Human Rights Council, withdrawal from the deliberations of the Global Compact for Migration, cancellation of its membership from UNESCO, and the elimination of US aid to the UN Reliefs and Works Agency, amongst many others (Finoh 2018; Human Rights Campaign 2017).

Indeed, the US has championed neoliberalism in many countries worldwide, most especially after the Cold War in the form of the ‘Washington Consensus’ (Gore 2000). What are the key features of this paradigm? The first feature, on the one hand, pertains to its procedural elements of legitimation, particularly by using electoral processes, institutional checks and balances, and separation of powers between key branches of the government. Its constitutional order, at the minimum, upholds competitive elections as well as generally open and free political contestation as necessary in selecting key government officials and legislators. The second feature meanwhile, pertains to neoliberalism as the organizational logic of political economy. That logic undermines the role of the state in the equitable distribution of public goods, empowers the private sector in social life, and supports deregulation and austerity politics. Over time, in a democratic neoliberal capitalist society, the private sector creates extremely powerful coalitions of materially wealthy elites, who then reconfigures the constitutional order in their ultimate favor (Piketty 2014; Reich 2010). In doing so, those elites recapture the state in more straightforward ways so as to accumulate more wealth — which, in turn, facilitates massive transfers of public goods into private coffers in the service of the elites’ uncontrollable hunger for wealth accumulation. Across generations, this process creates dangerous levels of inequality between the haves and the have-nots, thereby galvanizing social insecurity, fostering distrust in the political order, and weakening public goods provision systems (Piketty 2014). That situation could push those at the margins to upend the system in less conventional ways — perhaps using political violence, as conventionally legitimate modes of political dissent become more ineffective. Contemporary US politics demonstrate these exclusionary processes; that is, elites instrumentalize state institutions to further accumulate wealth, while marginalized individuals remain sidelined in public policy processes. In the context of electoral democracy, the neoliberal disregard for distributive justice becomes fatal to the constitutional order’s durability; that is because material sufficiency is the minimum requirement for all human individuals to function in the civic and political processes of an effective democracy. For example, the American billionaires Charles and David Koch pledged to spend 400 million USD during the 2018 midterm elections, in addition to their expansive network of projects espousing their interests in universities, think tanks, and other non-profit initiatives (Elliott 2018). That example demonstrates a unique development in early 21st century politics where billionaires and millionaires find it more effective to build their own network of political organizations in order to shape electoral and policy processes in ways that better reflect their interests than one-time donations to specific politicians (Hertel-Fernandez et. al. 2018).

The apparently intractable social conflicts fueled by material insecurities constitute one of the key elements of the decline of American power, considering that such a model of governance is not purely an American phenomenon, but also projected across various national constitutional orders worldwide. As Carla Norloff (2018, 64) rightfully argues, the “challenge confronting the United States today is not an international redistribution problem but a domestic redistribution problem, which ‘America first’ will only make worse of the available gains to create more severe distributive pressures”, and she further contends that the uneven material gains in what is supposedly the international order is further reinforced by the uneven domestic distribution economic gains within the US. In the long-term, the sustainability of a state’s claim to world dominance depends on its ability to effectively manage internal socio-political unrest, which is often triggered by increasingly unmanageable economic inequality and the perceived lack of social mobility. As recent empirical research show, severe material insecurities in a society could generate various transformative forms of political instability, such as military coups (Houle 2016), ethnonationalist

civil wars (Cederman et. al. 2011), and various kinds of internal conflicts (Lessmann 2016; Krieger & Meierrieks 2016).

There are some indications that the Trump presidency has accelerated America's trajectory towards potentially transformative forms of political instability. Recognizing that "deepening polarization and radicalization of the Republican Party" have debilitated America's democratic institutions since the 1980s, several scholars predict that the Trump administration could facilitate the emergence of "competitive authoritarianism — a system in which meaningful democratic institutions exist yet the government abuses state power to disadvantage its opponents" (Mickey et. al. 2017, 20). The Trump presidency advocate unregulated markets and the absence of domestic state interference in the national economy only to the extent that allies are given undue advantages (Stokes 2018: 135; Kang 2017, 2). Trump resisted to divest from his corporate interests, opposed openness to full disclosure of his wealth, strongly favors elites with clear interest in influencing governments policies in exchange for holding events and engaging in transactions in Trump-related businesses (Yglesias 2018). Even so, the Trump administration has been committed in punishing wealthy capitalists who publicly criticize him. For example, Trump threatened to use antitrust laws to punish Amazon, in retaliation to the billionaire Jeff Bezos, who also owns *The Washington Post* that has been persistent in its investigations of Trump's scandals (Heer 2018).

The decline of American dominance in the international system represents the inability of the current global and national constitutional orders to legitimize itself using its own moral logic as well as the endogenous mechanisms for self-correction. For example, emerging liberal democracies in the Global South regularly elect their ruling leaders at various levels of government. Yet, abusive elites have manipulated electoral processes and institutional checks-and-balances in their respective democratic societies in ways that state agents could openly and systematically abuse their power and undermine the individual rights of the governed populations — a process that can be blamed for the democratic recession that the world has experienced since 2005 (Diamond 2016). Even before Trump, big corporate interests and established political dynasties have persistently dominated federal and state levels of US politics.

The emergence of Bernie Sanders and the eventual political success of Donald Trump — both of whom are widely considered as outsiders of their own respective political parties— demonstrates the profound dissatisfaction in the often saturated and predictable policy positions of establishment politicians, who control either the Republican or Democrat parties. Yet, there are two key factors that facilitated the recent rise of Trump and Sanders in mainstream American political imagination. The first factor pertains to the "growing distrust of the formal institutions that organize social, economic, and political power within" individual states, while the second aspect refers to the "discontent with systems of power that appear to preserve and entrench prevailing class structures" (Hadiz and Chryssogelos 2017, 400-401). Hence, the rise of Trump reflects the "the erosion of the legitimacy of political elites, representative institutions and the globalist orientation that has long dominated US politics" (Chacko & Jayasuriya 2017, 121). In other words, the rise of authoritarian neoliberal politicians worldwide demonstrates a fundamental decline in the legitimacy of the American imperium. The second dimension, meanwhile, refers to the economic aspects of the contemporary decline of American power. I refer to the increasing economic inequality within many national political systems worldwide. While the extremely rich national and transnational elites continue to accumulate scandalous levels of wealth, a large number of people worldwide are suffering from extreme poverty. The continued slimming down of welfare states in the global North has made it more difficult for the most vulnerable citizens to escape from the systemic vicissitudes of poverty. Many Western states face severe pressures in sustaining their programs primarily because of their stagnant economic growth and weakened levels of economic competitiveness relative to the emerging economies in the global South and the complex challenges posed by neoliberal globalization (Bromund 2018; Razin and Sadka 2005). Although some European politicians are considering the implementation of the unconditional basic income for all citizens, as a necessary measure for the threats posed by automation of many types of jobs in the future, the fundamental question remains, particularly on the reliability of the welfare system (Van Parijs 2013). Indeed, American power's sustainability depends on its internal domestic stability, whereby economic growth and robust welfare provisions foster satisfaction and undermines social conflict.

Yet, domestically, the Trump administration unashamedly overturned the universal healthcare reforms that the previous administration fiercely struggled to implement amidst highly contentious politics across party lines. In the face of peaceful resistance brought by the majority, who are disadvantaged by neoliberalism, electoral democratic states have evolved to becoming what is now called by some scholars as “authoritarian neoliberalism”, which is constituted by two precepts: (1) coercion and criminalization of political opposition and (2) deployment of the state’s apparatuses that deters any form of external resistance against neoliberalism (Tansel 2017; Bruff 2013).

With the US as its epicenter, the 2007/2008 financial crisis highlighted the more fundamental failures of the American political economy that systematically privileges the logic of capital accumulation regardless of their domestic consequences to human rights. This political-economic logic becomes more evident when one looks into how Western states, including the US federal government, generously and unhesitatingly doled out billions of dollars as bail-out funds for failing financial conglomerates. More recently, even though Trump’s rhetoric highlights an economic nationalist strategy, business elites within and beyond the United States, as it was shown in the 2018 World Economic Forum in Davos, have somehow discarded Trump’s sexism and racism. Accordingly, “much of the moneyed elite who pay the bills for many Davos festivities are willing to overlook what they portray as the American president’s rhetorical foibles in favor of focusing on the additional wealth he has delivered to their coffers”, especially that Trump “has made good on his words, having slashed corporate taxes and ditched regulations they view as anti-business” (Goodman 2018, 4 and 5).

Also, a part of this decline in American power constitutes the severe budget problems that the US federal government has been facing. Mick Mulvaney, the most senior official on budget management issues in the Trump administration, confirmed that the “challenge of great stakes” refers to the fact that “\$20 trillion national debt is a crisis, not just for the Nation, but for every citizen” and that “each American’s share of this debt is more than \$60,000 and growing” (Office of the President of the United States/Office of Management and Budget 2017). In order to purportedly resolve the budget crisis, the Trump administration embraced a pro-business strategy by easing taxes for businesses and the rich people as the preferred policy strategy, while equitable economic growth remains outside Trump’s policy agenda (Office of the President of the United States/Office of Management and Budget 2018, 15). This commitment to lift the tax burdens of the elites have detrimental consequences to the already unreliable US welfare system.

In a more alarming sense, even before Trump, the Obama administration faced severe challenges in building a moral consensus amongst politicians and their constituencies that it is the state’s obligation to guarantee an effective healthcare system, which can be reliably accessed by all Americans. Unsurprisingly, the Trump administration, during its first year, quickly spent its political capital in publicly vilifying and trying to dismantle the Affordable Care Act (ACA). Yet, it failed in fully repealing the ACA, and the White House has now focused in gradually introducing provisional amendments instead. This breakdown in political consensus that is needed for building and sustaining a robust social safety net system emerges amidst the Trump administration’s efforts to eliminate regulatory measures and to reduce, if not totally eliminate, the tax burden of wealthy business actors. In fact, during the early months of the Trump administration, the Republican Party tried to repeal the Obamacare and proposed instead the American Health Care act. In effect, the proposal constituted abolishing the health insurance of millions of US citizens while the US Congress pushed for 600\$ billion worth of tax cuts for the richest 0.1 percent of the US population — an outcome that would save the most affluent Americans almost 200,000 USD worth of tax obligations each year (Matthews 2017).

What does the problem of the neoliberal-induced weakening of the domestic American welfare mean for American power? First, the increasing economic inequality within the US and its constitutive entrenched patterns of racial and gender stratification pose enduring difficulties for the federal government to effectively govern the polity. This means that domestic and foreign policy proposals evade open, deliberative, and representative discussions involving diverse constituencies across the American society. Essentially, governance becomes an exclusively elite undertaking rather than a truly democratic and deliberative task of the diverse sectors of the American polity. Second, the continuous weakening and perhaps eventual dissolution of a system of state-supported

welfare entitlements could further increase the level of public distrust of state institutions, an outcome that further delegitimizes the domestic authority of the US government. Third, the prospect of serious political instability in the US tarnishes the global moral appeal of open and democratic societies and consequently bolsters alternative models of governance, including authoritarian modes of governance. Based on the 2018 Gallup World Poll survey, the US registered a remarkably low 30% median approval rate across 134 countries (was previously 48% in 2017 under the Obama administration), which places it with China (31%) and Russia (27%) in the same interval group (Ray 2018). This low approval rating suggests that it would be difficult for the US to project its economic and political interests in its bilateral relations with other states as well as in various global governance institutions. Perhaps this low rating could also be attributed to the global public sphere's dissatisfaction of the US as an exemplary governance model.

At the transnational level, the remarkable deterioration of the US economy and its failure to equitably distribute wealth across the society has radically undermined American power abroad. The sharp decline of US relative productivity and share of world merchandise since the start of the millennium increase the probability that rival states could use their expanding relative economic growth in challenging the already fragile American imperium (Mandel 2012). Meanwhile, China, the world's second largest economic power, boasts an average of 10 percent GDP annual growth in the last two decades — although this growth rate is expected to decline in the short-term at around 7 percent. During the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party in Beijing, President Xi Jinping proudly declared that China contributes 30 percent of global economic growth and, most notably, laid out his “three-decade road map toward great power status, saying by 2050 the country would be a global leader in innovation, influence and military might” (Bloomberg News 2017). Also, other non-Western countries have continued to enlarge their share in the world economy including Russia, Brazil, Indonesia, and many others in the global South (Regilme & Parisot 2017b; Regilme & Parisot 2018.; Hameiri & Jones 2015; Gray & Murphy 2013).

The rapid economic growth of non-Western powers poses new challenges and uncertainties in what used to be a world economic system that has been usually underwritten by American imperium. To further expand or at least sustain their economies, emerging markets from the global South have to project their political and military influence in various global governance institutions and geostrategic areas in ways that could facilitate such an expansion— and those efforts could, at times, clash against American interests. An example of this is the highly contentious rivalry between the US and China in the development aid sector in the African continent, whereby Beijing uses foreign aid to gain access to the valuable African natural resources and commodities that are needed for the continued growth of the Chinese economy (Regilme and Hartmann 2018). To the extent that such clashes could be detrimental to US power is an open question, although emerging powers in world politics tend to use their newly acquired economic wealth to fund their coercive apparatus that would then be used for further expansion of its political and economic power (Shlapentokh 2004). For instance, since 2012, the Chinese government under Xi Jinping has been rapidly constructing and developing artificial islands in and militarization of the South China Sea (SCS), where 60% percent of economic goods pass by in this particular trade route (Graham-Harrison 2015; Regilme 2018a). This unprecedented Chinese interest in that maritime area shows the ways in which Beijing systematically discarded the territorial claims of other states including the Philippines and Vietnam. By flexing its military might in this highly contested maritime region, China has effectively declared that American dominance in Southeast Asia— underpinned by its naval and aerial military support to its allies and partners in the region— has to end. For China, future economic growth also requires its ability to rewrite the terms and conditions of the key global maritime trade routes through which China's economic lifeblood flows.

What does a weakened American power mean for the future of world politics? First, multilateral cooperation as a crucial mechanism of global governance could be undermined in favor of blatant and crude nationalist interests firmly entrenched in Trump's “America First” paradigm as well as in the programs of other similar politicians in Europe and elsewhere. If reemerging powers such as India, Russia, and China, among others, continue to exert their influence in their immediate home regions and in global governance and justify such actions through the prism of blatant nationalism, then we are likely to see a world system with “multiple power centers, with the principal actors stressing the objective of vindicating their own national interests” (Carpenter 2017,

43). Second, the rise of blatant nationalism could severely undermine basic principles that protect individuals against abuses both from state and non-state actors. In contrast to authoritarian nationalism that has recently gained traction, liberal internationalism represents one of the key principles of the post-1945 world order, and it “embodies many bi-partisan principles: support for freedom, democracy, human rights, a free press, as well as an open world economy for the movement of goods, services, people, and ideas” (Chaudoin, Milner, and Tingley 2017, 1). If authoritarian nationalist politicians including Donald Trump continue to gain widespread support in various places worldwide, then arbitrarily defined notions of national interests — which are often abusively instrumentalized by domestic political elites — become bases of justification for increased domestic state repression of individual rights and welfare.

This section examined the key elements that underpin the current decline of American power. I maintained that neoliberalism, which underpins the US domestic political economy and foreign policy strategies, has consistently reinforced the interests of the richest elites, while broad sections of the society remain hopeless without the support from a supposedly reliable US welfare state system. I hypothesized herein some of the plausible implications of the crisis in US domestic political economy, an outcome driven by neoliberalism. I emphasized that the continued neoliberal policies and authoritarian discourses of the Trump administration have undermined the moral appeal of American imperium. The next section discusses the implications of the US domestic crisis to American foreign policy and international human rights norms.

4. Human Rights in the Era of Authoritarian Politics

The neoliberal crisis, as shown by the failures in the US political economy, suggests that the current international human rights regime is in the midst of a critical juncture. Particularly, the four key organizing principles of world order — human rights, multiculturalism, and tolerance — are in distress. First, authoritarian politicians and social movements that explicitly and consistently uphold racist, sexist, and discriminatory political discourses and policy strategies have gained traction both in the public sphere and also in the corridors of power. Facilitated by neoliberalism, the global tidal wave of nationalist crony capitalism— constitutes a “reaction to social dislocations tied to processes of neoliberal globalisation”, emerged from the “new kinds of social marginalisation, precarious existence and disenchantment with the broken promises of liberal modernity” (Hadiz and Chryssogelos 2017, 399). As a key pillar of American dominance, the European Union’s (EU) self-proclaimed identity as a ‘normative power’ (Manners 2002; Regilme 2013)— or as a key global promoter of democracy and human rights— has yet to make a formidable defense of such norms against some its most discriminatory politicians from within its domain. The far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) political party in Germany in 2017 won almost 13 percent of the votes and has now 92 seats in the German Parliament or the Bundestag — thereby making the AfD the third largest party in the EU’s most influential member-state. In France, although Marine Le Pen’s *Nationale Front* (NF) lost to Emmanuel Macron’s *En Marche!* during the run-off elections, the NF has aggressively promoted anti-EU sentiments, nationalism, economic protectionism, and racism. Even the Netherlands, which is usually touted as one of the world’s most tolerant societies, was unable to escape from the tidal wave of illiberal populism. Although Geert Wilders of the anti-Islam and racist Freedom Party (PVV) did not succeed in becoming the Prime Minister of the Netherlands, he still remains in power as a parliamentarian and his PVV party won 20 out of the possible 150 seats in the House of Representatives — thereby making Wilders’ party as the second largest in the current formation of the Dutch government. Such challenges from these movements can also be seen in other key countries within the EU, including Austria, Hungary, Sweden, Bulgaria, and Slovakia, among others. Thus, within the global North, many racist, sexist, and intolerant politicians and public figures have gained traction not only in the mainstream public sphere. Many of these political movements have now occupied important positions in the ruling government of some of the largest electoral democracies in the world. A key US ally in the Asia-Pacific region, Thailand, after the fall of the corrupt regime of Thaksin Shinawatra in 2006, has now entered a period of political recession where a military junta has effectively replaced a system of competitive elections and a state that

effectively upholds civil liberties and rights (Regilme 2018b; Chachavalpongpun 2011). The Philippines' Rodrigo Duterte, meanwhile, has unashamedly abandoned the country's human rights commitments and democratic reforms, in favor of killing poor people, harassing and detaining political dissidents, and empowering new and traditional elite groups. Those dynamics are also replicated in Turkey, where the Erdogan-led government has radically pursued his neoliberal economic policies through authoritarian measures and dismantlement of democratic checks within the Turkish state. Thus, even some of the American allies in the global South are now caught by this pandemic of authoritarianism.

Second, American power has consistently failed to uphold the moral principles of material equality and global justice. American foreign policy — through its wide range of aid programs and vigorous public diplomacy — has championed the role of the state as a guarantor of free markets, property rights, and capital accumulation, which paved the way for other states worldwide to entrench further inequality while emboldening the political power of economic elites. In many global South countries, a robust welfare state tradition did not exist as US global dominance in the era of decolonization did not champion the principles of material justice — to the extent of advocating for equitable material distribution within and across newly formed national constitutional orders. Rather, US power has contented itself with civil and political rights as organizing principles within subservient states, while substantive issues of global governance focused only upon free trade, deregulation, and capital accumulation. As the human rights historian Samuel Moyn accurately notes, “the age of human rights has not been kind to full-fledged distributive justice, because it is also an age of the victory of the rich” (Moyn 2018, 2). No wonder, even Philip Alston (2017, 9), the former UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial and arbitrary executions, contends that “economic and social rights must be an important and authentic part of the overall agenda” (Alston 2017). Alston's experience in the UN Human Rights Council is telling: a very small percentage of all self-professed human rights nongovernmental organizations in the Council have any specific substantive focus on economic and social rights. Indeed, the dominant global human rights narrative has parochially focused only on the procedural elements of legitimation rather than the more pressing and morally compelling issues of material inequality and global justice.

Nonetheless, the Trump presidency represents a new kind of departure in human rights rhetoric in US policy. Donald Trump's political rhetoric reflects profound disdain for peaceful political opposition, competitive electoral processes, and constitutional checks-and-balances within the state. Despite the failures of neoliberalism, Trump's predecessors somehow effectively concealed them through the legitimating discourses of procedural democracy and civil and political rights. Trump, on the other hand, shamelessly threw away those legitimation discourses and has consequently embraced authoritarian neoliberalism — although the full panoply of its material consequences has yet to fully unfold within and beyond the American society.

There are several behavioral patterns that show how Trump departed from his predecessors' human rights commitments both in terms of *discursive rhetoric* and *actual practice*. First, Trump has openly and proudly articulated his admiration for authoritarian leaders such as Xi Jinping, Vladimir Putin, Rodrigo Duterte, and Recep Erdogan (Beauchamp 2017). For example, Trump's discursive rhetoric has consistently suggested his preference for the use of violent repression over peaceful means (Calamur 2018). In April 2017, when the notorious Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte boasted that he was directly involved in the killings of suspected drug dealers during his time as a city mayor, Trump fervently congratulated Duterte. Second, Trump and his cabinet officials have persistently discredited the legitimacy of Washington DC's press corps and established news media agencies by incorrectly alleging them as promoters of ‘fake news’. Third, Trump's foreign and domestic policy strategies have seldom invoked human rights as a foundational basis of public policy (Margon 2017). During his time as America's top diplomat, Rex Tillerson systematically avoided media coverage of his foreign diplomatic missions, and more tellingly, his absence during the launching of annual Human Rights Report produced by his office suggests the low priority placed upon American human rights promotion abroad. In the landmark America First Document, which is the first federal budget strategy of the Trump White House, any reference to human rights was non-existent (Office of the President of the United States/ Office of Management and Budget 2017). Moreover, the 2018 budget strategy also mandates severe cuts on foreign aid and

contributions for multilateral institutions, many of which have been conduits of US interest in promoting human rights abroad. In summer 2017 and more recently, the US Ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley unashamedly threatened that the US may withdraw from the UN Human Rights Council “unless reforms are ushered in including the removal of what it sees as an “anti-Israel bias”” (Nebehay 2017, 1). Indeed, it is unprecedented for the White House to directly and explicitly use its longstanding commitment in global human rights institutions as a pawn in exchange for geostrategic considerations such as its relationship with Israel. Finally, the Trump administration has asked the US Citizenship and Immigration Service (USCIS) to form a task force that will review cases of naturalized US citizens who lied in their citizenship applications — a policy that has long been introduced yet was rarely implemented during the Obama era. That same dynamic can be seen in the horrifying Trump policy of separating child immigrants caught at the US-Mexico border from their parents. Suggesting a sense of continuity from his predecessor, this policy from Trump “opens the door to him using a tactic Obama used in 2014: the wide-scale detention of immigrant families for as long as it took to complete their immigration cases and deport them” (Lind 2018, 2). Though Obama rhetorically committed himself to human rights, albeit falling short in practice, the Trump administration miserably failed both in human rights rhetoric and practice — and was particularly proud in doing so.

Notably, Trump’s bellicose rhetoric and quite consistent disregard for human rights discourses does not fully constitute an unprecedented rupture on US foreign policy. Rather, such changes should be regarded as a continuation of the US-led war on terror’s disregard for civil liberties and physical integrity rights. In doing so, US officials and their neoliberal elite allies invoke military security as the justificatory premise to quell political dissidence and claims for material justice in favor of wealth accumulation. Especially after the post-9/11 war on terror, state officials and elites worldwide instrumentalized human rights to justify violence, political killings, and enforced disappearances of both civilians and armed individuals. Rebecca Sanders (2018, 2) calls this discursive tactic of authoritarian actors as the ‘plausible legality’ of highly controversial policies, whereby they use “evasive language, they manoeuvre through and around legal rules in order to justify human rights abuses, claiming that law means what they want it to mean”. That strategy has been quite evident since the post-9/11 global war on terror, when the US and its allied states deployed intensified violent repression not only to kill terror groups but also to quell peaceful political dissidence as a way of consolidating their fledgling domestic authority. Even before Trumpism, authoritarian nationalist discourses have been on the rise in the last few years, and the post-9/11 security climate has conditioned many people worldwide that public security can only be achieved through state’s intensification of political violence. No wonder that even after the end of the Bush presidency, there seems to be a “constant drumbeat of comments demanding a return to methods of interrogation” (Alston 2017, 3). That is why, in the broadest sense, Trumpism is not necessarily a radical rupture in post-Cold War world politics; instead, it represents the evolving culmination of a global political crisis of human rights that started since 9/11.

To be clear, the US has been quite inconsistent “regarding human rights in foreign policy, practiced by not only the Obama administration from the start, but at the end of the day by all administrations”, (Forsythe 2011, 767)— not perhaps in terms of rhetoric and diplomacy but in terms of tangible policy outcomes. There are three plausible factors for such an outcome in US human rights policy abroad. First, in a highly competitive, nation-based world order, the US still perceives (unfortunately!) its compelling national interest as foundationally based upon military security and facilitating a neoliberal economic order upon which US capital and trade interests would thrive. Second, US foreign policy agenda has to thrive amidst competing interests of nation-states, numerous intergovernmental organizations, and various binding international human rights commitments. Third, a wide array of domestic and foreign pressures within the US federal government and beyond makes foreign policy unstable and unpredictable rather than persistently fixed in actualizing its human rights commitments. Thus, as David Forsythe (2011, 768) rightfully describes it: “administrations may aspire to realist, liberal, or ultra-nationalist (neo-con) goals in foreign policy, but in the end, they have inconsistent records on human rights issues” (see also Renouard 2016; Regilme 2018c). Lobby groups funded by wealthy elites and interest groups made it possible for domestic and foreign policies of the US less committed to human rights than it should have been (van Apeldoorn & de Graaff 2014).

While procedural democracy, political liberalism, and neoliberalism constitute the US-dominated world order (Brown 2006), those principles are bound to fail due to its fundamental contradictions (Bridoux 2013). What Trump's presidency and the rise of authoritarian populism reveal are exactly those inherent weaknesses of the global order's organizing logic. Hence, I agree with Lora Viola (2017, 1) who contends that "Trump's election and his foreign policy are not sui generis but the result of ongoing transnational structural transformations, including the failures of globalization and relative hegemonic decline". First, despite the collapse of formal European colonialism and subsequent era of decolonization, the current world order constituted by material inequalities within and between nation-states is unlikely to be sustainable — and, that, exactly is the ontological defect that the American-dominated world system is built upon. As the theorist Michael Zürn rightly argues (2018, 96), "if the powerful founders (established powers or incumbent states) have institutionalized inequality from the beginning, and if there is no separation of powers to control this inequality, a shift in the underlying power constellation leads to contestation from the rising powers". Several reemerging powers — especially China, India, Russia, Turkey — have been more assertive in articulating their national interests and the distributive inequalities within the current world order, particularly in terms of the distribution of power in various global governance institutions. That contestation — fueled by material grievances and identity-based insecurity brought by hierarchical differentiation — could lead to decay and instability of societies, especially in established powers such as the US and its rival states, especially China.

Second, perceptions of systematic hypocrisy in US foreign policies and the political-economic strategies of the Global North, especially in the policy areas of democracy and human rights promotion, have been gaining traction to the extent that they diminish the legitimating appeal of American power. For example, although the US Democrat Party complains that the rise of Trump was brought by the surreptitious yet systematic interference of the Russian government under Vladimir Putin, whose main objective was to destabilize the US from within, American power has always been interventionist — and, in many occasions, have systematically used organized violence upon civilians in order to further militaristic, geostrategic, and capitalist objectives.

Third, American power has promoted a very shallow notion of human rights that undermines the emancipatory hope that dignity should be enjoyed by Americans regardless of their socio-economic backgrounds. Within the US, the racial wealth gap remains at an abominable scale, whereby the US Census Bureau's 2017 Population Survey reported that "black families in America earn just \$57.30 for every \$100 in income earned by white families", or "for every \$100 in white family wealth, black families hold just \$5.04." (Badger 2017, 1). Based on 2016 data, American women only earn "an average of only 79 cents for every dollar earned by a white man", while "single women own a mere 32 cents for every dollar that single men own" — and such a gap becomes much sharper when classified along racial backgrounds (Mahathey 2016, 1-2). Amidst these problems of material justice, governments of the global North have wholeheartedly supported the bail-out of failing corporate banking behemoths using ordinary people's hard-earned money paid to the state as taxes. Those hefty billion-dollar bailouts proceeded amid the scandalous levels of reductions in state support for welfare goods such as education, healthcare, and other basic social services.

This section argued that the fundamental contradictions in the relationship between electoral democracy, minimalist version of human rights⁴, and neoliberal capitalism have undermined the global human rights regime and the moral appeal of American power. Recognizing those challenges, the concluding section offers some preliminary ideas and strategies for rethinking, and hopefully, reforming the global human rights regime.

5. Conclusions: Human Rights Reform in a Multipolar World

My primary goal in this paper is to reflect upon the problem of American decline in the current world order and the rise of Trump as well as authoritarian politics elsewhere. Yet, that puzzle

⁴ I refer to the civil and political rights as well as physical integrity rights. In this minimalist version, the state does not fully commit to upholding socio-economic rights through a sustainable and comprehensive system of welfare provision.

raises the important question that many conventional International Relations scholars systematically discard: Is there a world order to begin with? It depends on one's positionality: order and stability exist for those who are in a position of power; existential insecurity and death await, meanwhile, to those who are left at the margins. Neoliberalism has normalized routinized suffering, life-threatening inequalities, extreme poverty, and governments that are wholeheartedly willing to throw away huge amounts of money to save corporate behemoths rather than actual people's lives. The political crisis brought by Trumpism — amidst the rise of neo-Nazism in Germany, Erdogan's authoritarianism in Turkey, Geert Wilders' racism in the Netherlands, and Rodrigo Duterte's ongoing genocide of poor people in the Philippines — is a crisis of our political economy. Trump, like his predecessors, has used his privileged position and his presidential powers to enrich himself. Europe's crisis emerges from its accelerated speed of neoliberal regional integration amidst a shrinking welfare state and a weakening commitment to public goods provision. Racist, sexist, and authoritarian politicians blame marginalized groups and identity politics as the main culprit — rather than neoliberal capitalism that has facilitated Trump and his peers elsewhere. Trumpism is distinctive only to the extent that it has unmasked the underlying logics of American power since 1945, albeit in very unconventional ways through blatantly offensive discourses and publicly supporting policies that favor wealthy elites — tactics that were not systematically used by Trump's predecessors. In other words, as Inderjeet Parmar accurately describes it, the US-led liberal world order is 'imperialism by another name' (2018: 151-172). This imperial logic constitutes racialized differentiation and hierarchization, gendered exploitation, and authoritarian discipline underpinned by the logic of wealth accumulation.

Although reforming the global human rights regime is a complex task, I provide herein some preliminary thoughts of how we can move forward from this crisis. First, human rights activism may need to zoom into the quintessential issues of material equality and sufficiency as the foundational bases for human dignity. In doing so, tangible problems — such as extreme poverty, absence of an affordable and high-quality health care system, mass unemployment, and so on — should be reframed as problems of global material justice. The dignity of all human persons can only flourish in societies where everyone's material needs have been sufficiently fulfilled, while material insecurities remain tolerable (if not totally absent) to the extent that such gaps do not hamper the meaningful exercise of one's stake in the deliberative governance of public policy problems.

Amidst the underlying contradictions in US neoliberalism and the minimalist version of human rights promotion, emancipatory social movements may have to imbibe a conception of humanity that includes everyone as equal, indispensable, and non-tradeable (Chernilo 2017; Regilme 2018c). Neoliberalism has commodified human beings as tradeable entities in a market ruled by the logic of capital accumulation. That has to stop, and human rights movements should resist, by all means, any policy that upholds the logic of commodification of humanity — ranging from healthcare to education and even human organs. This logic of commodification has systematically killed millions of financially underprivileged people, with women, disabled individuals, and persons of color heavily bearing the brunt. While emancipatory movements remain local in their activism and advocacy, transnational cooperation and coalition-building should constitute as important tactical modes of pressuring national and global institutions for transformation. This tactic of emancipatory globalism should be imbibed in the spirit of parity, ethical curiosity, and deliberation instead of the persistent attitude of the so-called human rights organizations in global North to be patronizing and sometimes authoritarian when they deal with their counterparts in the global South. Calling for a sense of leftist internationalism, Michael Walzer (2018,8) urges American emancipatory movements to “write and argue in support of our[their] friends and comrades in other countries and in opposition to the enemies of democracy and equality, wherever they are”. While the democracy and equality have always been framed in terms of the concerns of the present generation, emancipatory politics has to be *transgenerationalist* in terms of temporal perspective. That means that emancipatory politics seriously considers the consequences of its actions not only to the present constituents of humanity but also to future generations thereof. If the global human rights regime has to save itself from the current crisis, then imperial modes of thinking and governance practices have to vanish — and perhaps that means the dissolution of

neoliberal logic upon which American power and imperium have faithfully depended upon for decades.

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