BEYOND DEVELOPMENT: HUMAN RIGHTS, PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY AND THE SEARCH FOR MEANING
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Abstract:
Despite the concept of human rights being ubiquitous in development discourse (remaining powerful in its ability to find strong and persistent political and activist support globally and locally), academic critique continues to challenge the core of its validity, to render it ironic in tone and substance and process. In this article I argue for the rescue of human rights through a sequence of cascading propositions: (1) Human rights are a powerful and necessary focus for challenging injustice; (2) but they are undermined by persistent and contemporary critique in particular when associated (as they are so centrally) with development discourse and its association with neo-colonialist and imperialist epistemologies and practice; (3) part of the problem is the conjunction of two inter-related afflictive factors: the apparent absence of a cohering and consistent moral foundation for human rights, and the increasing abrogation of responsibility for human rights realisation to national, inter-national or even corporate institutions; (4) ironically, the passing of responsibility to these institutions induces a process of ‘othering’ which can and has made human rights an enemy even for those for whom they purportedly act, reinforcing the critique that human rights are the creatures and tools of the powerful whether or not they might benefit the powerless from time to time; (5) to remedy this double affliction, I argue first that the search for a moral foundation should be sought even though there may be good reasons for denying any universal conceptual underpinning, and second, that it is the individual commitment to respond to, and accept responsibility for, known human suffering which provides a plausible counterweight to the institutional domination of development and human rights. At its most basic level this might be satisfied by the adoption of témoignage or bearing witness as a positive obligation. In other words, there is an individual responsibility to uncover, to see and then to speak about injustices observed even in those circumstances where action seems unfeasible.