The Paradoxes of Human Rights

May 19, 2015

Location:
Date: Tuesday May 19
Time: 1.30pm to 3.30pm
Venue: Australian Catholic University, Council Room – Level 16, Tension Woods House, 8-20 Napier Street, North Sydney

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Abstract
The absence of appeals to human rights in recent resistances around the world give us an opportunity to revisit their theoretical and political premises. Human rights are perhaps the most important liberal institution but liberal philosophy has failed badly in its treatment. Two hundred years of social theory are absent and, as a result, jurisprudence returns to the 18th century and updates the social contract with ‘original positions’ and ‘veils of ignorance’, the categorical imperative with ‘right answers’, ‘ideal speech’ situations and fundamental discourse principles.

The mainstreaming of human rights coincided with the emergence of what sociologists have called globalisation, economists neo-liberalism and political philosophers post-democratic governance. Is there a link between recent moralism, aggressive capitalism and bio-political governmentality? This talk presents an alternative approach to human rights built over a long period of campaigning and scholarship in a number of books. It follows the insight that the term human rights with its symbolic capital has been co-opted to a large number of relatively independent discourses, practices, institutions and campaigns. As a result no global ‘theory’ of rights exists or can be created. Different disciplinary approaches and theoretical perspectives are therefore necessary. The talk will offer a short history of humanity and brief political, legal, philosophical, economic and psychoanalytical parts presenting a radical alternative.

Bio
Costas Douzinas joined the Institute for Social Justice as a Professorial Fellow in 2015 and is currently Professor of Law, Director of the Birkbeck Institute for the Humanities, Birkbeck London University and member of the Greek Commission on Human Rights. Costas was the founder of the Birkbeck School of Law and the Institute for the Humanities. He is the editor of Law and Critique and managing editor of Birkbeck Law Press. His books, translated in 14 languages, include Postmodern Jurisprudence; The End of Human Rights; Nomos and Aesthetics; Human Rights and Empire; Critical Jurisprudence and Resistance and Philosophy in the Crisis and the collections Law and the Image; Adieu Derrida, The Idea of Communism, The Cambridge Companion to Human Rights Law, and The Meaning of Rights. He is frequent contributor to the Guardian and Open Democracy and writes a fortnightly column entitled Philosophical Current in the Athens Newspaper of Journalists.

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This public lecture is part of the Sydney School for Critical Social Thought