

# The Human Life Exchange Rate Mechanism

Liberal Rights, Double Binds, the West, & the Rest

Tom Sykes

2021

In our neoliberal societies, elites like to quantify the worth of human lives in various ways. A telling example is per capita GDP (Gross Domestic Product) that determines the economic contribution each citizen makes to a nation.

Such a view gives succor to Social Darwinists and free-market right-wingers. If some lives are more valuable than others in this formulation then why should those of lower value be aided by the wider community? While few elite figures today would say things like this out loud, similar calculi tacitly inform many political decisions.

When Covid-19 first struck the UK and US, it revealed the devastation done to health and social services by years of privatization and austerity. Poor housing, inadequate financial support for those forced to isolate and other failings have made lockdown intolerable and even lethal for some, as suicide and domestic violence rates have soared. Yet not to lock down would endanger many others with health conditions.

This Sophie's choice between two unpleasant outcomes would be avoidable in a fair society properly resourced to protect all its citizens. But in our decidedly unfair societies, the powerful must come down on one side or another.

In a comment that warrants respect for its honesty—if nothing else—the British ex-judge, Lord Sumption, recently claimed that the life of a woman with advanced cancer was “less valuable” than the lives of other, young and fit people with their futures ahead of them to whom lockdown is “punishing...for the greater good.”

This callously reductionist mode of measuring humans against each other is an arguably more significant and destructive component of Western policies and attitudes towards the non-Western world.

As with the domestic calculations mentioned above, what can be called the Human Life Exchange Rate Mechanism (HLERM), is also produced by inequality, but of a different stripe: between societies on the bases of wealth, development, and the hard (military and economic) and soft (diplomatic and cultural) power at their disposal.

The HLERM predates neoliberalism to at least the early modern period. What American writer Martin Green has called “the nationalist slogan” of that time prompted Shakespeare to have his character Henry V assert that “one Englishman was worth three Frenchmen” in the context of decades of bloodshed between the two countries.

According to the genocidal subjugator of the so-called New World, Christopher Columbus, foreigners unfortunate enough to hail from outside of Europe were worth even less next to Europeans, a logic necessitated by the desire to violently expropriate land and resources from the Americas.

“With a magnification suitable to the greater cultural gap,” writes Green of Columbus’ brutal worldview, “a thousand Indians would not stand before three Spaniards.”

The ideological contradictions of Columbus’ time were not dissimilar from our own. In Renaissance Europe, the HLERM inflicted on allegedly inferior bodies in the colonially oppressed parts of the globe jarred with new humanist ideas about the rights of all men (though not yet anyone else) to freedom, safety and legal protection.

Today, what Australian social theorist M.G.E. Kelly calls the “differential valuation of life” covert in Western globalization and imperialism is incompatible with the rhetoric of diversity, equality and social justice now often

embraced by the very institutions culpable for Western abuses of the rest, from the military-industrial complex to the state-corporate media.

Aside from this chasm between what is opportunistically said and what is sincerely believed, French philosopher Alain Badiou states that Western human rights discourse, which supposedly applies to every human without prejudice, depends paradoxically on casting non-Westerners as not yet eligible for human rights.

This is due to the assumption that “the misery of the Third World is the result of its own incompetence, its own inanity—in short, of its subhumanity.” This highly selective vision of rights is, Badiou argues, the construct of a neoliberal order that frequently resorts to military adventurism (of which Columbus was a pioneer) in “uncivilized” regions to secure its objectives.

The philosophy of neo-pragmatist philosopher Richard Rorty can be seen as an attempt to square the circle of a human rights framework that does not extend to all humanity. Rorty asserts that we tend to privilege the welfare of those other people who belong to our own cultures, nations and communities rather than because “they are our fellow human beings.”

It is understandable to a point if we care more about our relatives, friends and compatriots than about humans on the other side of the world whom we’ve never met. But then how do we form solidarities with those distant others across national, ethnic or other boundaries in order to address problems on a global scale: war, poverty, the climate emergency, and other international problems?

The contemporary HLERM, then, is what we are left with when liberal moral principles intended to be universal clash with the grim realities of liberal capitalism’s conduct on the world stage. In this manner, the HLERM compromises not only reactionaries like Lord Sumption, but certain leftists who are trying to better the world in good faith.

In his recent book, *The New Age of Empire*, the race studies scholar Kehinde Andrews has interrogated a range of current progressive causes that would benefit working people in the West while punishing and exploiting working people outside of the region.

For instance, the so-called “fourth industrial revolution” plans to harness green and digital technologies to democratize Western economies and redistribute wealth within them.

The problem, as Andrews sees it, is that the program’s left-leaning exponents do not acknowledge that the resources (human and natural) needed to drive this new, supposedly more ethical form of capitalism, would have to be extracted from the poorest regions of Asia, Africa and Latin America.

On a slightly different but related tack, we have the contradiction of wokewashing in which Western corporations, public bodies, government agencies and universities say they are decolonizing their practices and making commitments to fighting racism and sexism within the workplace.

But, at the same time, they simultaneously enjoy lucrative financial relationships with the armaments and fossil fuel industries which are complicit in the destruction of the lives and environments of many people of color inhabiting the post-colonial world, a disproportionate number of whom are women.

However well-meaning these projects are, implicit in them is a judgment about the relative welfare and opportunities of those who reside in wealthy countries, and those who do not.

That the HLERM so often leads to having to make agonizing Sophie’s choices raises two enormous questions.

1. What sort of a degraded, unequal world have elites made that limits us so?
2. What should be changed?

If large, authoritarian institutions—governments, militaries, corporations—were dismantled along with the unjust capitalist relations they service, then power could be devolved to autonomous collectives of ordinary people wherever they are in the world, and the pitfalls and double binds of the HLERM would become redundant.

Tom Sykes is the author of *Imagining Manila: Literature, Empire and Orientalism*, published by Bloomsbury. He lives and works in Portsmouth, UK.



Tom Sykes  
The Human Life Exchange Rate Mechanism  
Liberal Rights, Double Binds, the West, & the Rest  
2021

<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/409-summer-2021/the-human-life-exchange-rate-mechanism>  
Fifth Estate #409, Summer, 2021

**[fifthestate.anarchistlibraries.net](https://fifthestate.anarchistlibraries.net)**