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Eleanor Roosevelt and the Post-1945 World Order

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In her daily column, *My Day*, on May 9, 1945, Eleanor Roosevelt informed her readers of the end of the war in Europe following Germany's unconditional surrender. She confessed:

> I can almost hear my husband's voice make that announcement, for I heard him repeat it so often […] Europe is in ruins and the weary work of reconstruction must now begin. There must be joy, of course, in the hearts of the peoples whom the Nazis conquered and who are now free again. Freedom without bread, however, has little meaning. My husband always said that freedom from want and freedom from aggression were twin freedoms which had to go hand in hand.

Looking ahead to the conclusion of the war in the Pacific, Eleanor Roosevelt emphasized that achieving a "lasting peace" could not be disassociated from the United States' global responsibilities: "Peace cannot be lasting

unless we accept our responsibilities toward the peoples in Europe and in Asia [...] That means that we must understand our fellow human beings throughout the world and must feel a constant responsibility toward them" (*My Day*, May 11). She warned that this responsibility is a collective one, as she articulated a few days later: "we must realize that being a citizen in a democracy entails greater responsibility than any other type of citizenship anywhere else in the world, for in a democracy there is no way in which you can put upon any other individual the responsibility which you should carry yourself" (*My Day*, May 19).

Eleanor Roosevelt, now a "private citizen," continued to champion the political vision shaped by her extensive involvement in women's movements, peace initiatives, and her role as First Lady from 1933 until Franklin Delano Roosevelt's passing in April 1945. Her commitment was rooted in progressive liberalism, which sought to expand both the internal boundaries of democracy and the global reach of democratic ideals. In many ways, she articulated this vision of a new global order in her seemingly straightforward and "common sense" language, a perspective that resonated with intellectuals, politicians, and activists alike.

As Or Rosenboim argued, "in the 1940's, the 'global' emerged as a new, all-encompassing space. The global was imagined as a point of reference for all other political units, embodying the tension between the oneness of planet Earth and the diverse communities that inhabit it" (272). It became a focal point for an intellectual and political discourse aimed at establishing connections between the realities of different political units while acknowledging the interrelations that would serve as the foundation for new institutional frameworks. Ideally, this should have led to the creation of the United Nations as a manifestation of a democratic global order grounded in the affirmation of universal rights as all basic human rights rather than merely as an institution dedicated to ensuring collective security.

Eleanor Roosevelt was not primarily a political thinker. Nonetheless, her insights offer a valuable perspective for exploring one of the post-1945 hypotheses centered on redefining order through the lens of universal rights. This vision aimed to place such rights at the core of a political order rather than merely a moral one, although it was ultimately destined to fail. Her reflections on rights, the role of the United Nations, and the

democratic global order – as well as her involvement in the early stages of the United Nations, particularly within the Commission on Human Rights – shed light on how the discourse surrounding rights was developed in the emerging landscape following the war. However, this commitment was not without its aporias and contradictions, particularly within a global and varied context. The tensions and conflicts arising within the new international organization, along with the dynamic between grassroots movements and associations on the one hand and national and international institutions on the other, were not only driven by the bipolar conflicts but also shaped by the asymmetrical relationships between the global North and South. Additionally, these dynamics highlighted the processes of exclusion and discrimination that served as significant obstacles to establishing democracies, especially in the United States.

Eleanor had supported the concept of a "New Deal for the World," albeit within a critical perspective, fully aware that issues surrounding race relations and colonialism posed significant obstacles to its realization. Nevertheless, she confidently regarded the signing of the Atlantic Charter on August 10, 1941, with its reference to FDR's Four Freedoms, as a pivotal step toward establishing an international political order that could harmonize social security with national security, protect fundamental freedoms, and expand democratic spaces:

> We all listened breathlessly yesterday when the radio from England gave us a statement of the peace aims, drawn up by the President and Mr. Winston Churchill. There was nothing new, nothing which I had not heard many times before in conversation about our foreign policy. Yet, stated this way to the people of the world, one felt it was an important moment in the history of world progress. (*My Day*, August 16)

The outbreak of war reignited the hopes of internationalist associations and groups eager to seize a "second chance." Eleanor Roosevelt emerged, almost naturally, as a central figure within the intricate network of political leaders, intellectuals, and civic and religious organizations who believed it was essential to lay the groundwork for a future that would foster and sustain peace. Her connections with women's peace groups, fortified

during the battles over the World Court in the 1920s, her associations with organizations that prioritized internationalism, her politically significant role as First Lady, and her increasingly precise and assertive stance against Nazi-fascism – all contributed to Eleanor Roosevelt's importance as an interlocutor. She served not only as a conduit to the President but also brought her independent political stature and the ability to influence public opinion, which was gradually shifting away from its isolationist tendencies.

Truman appointed Eleanor to the official US delegation for the inaugural United Nations assembly in London in 1946. This decision was partly intended to signal to segments of American civil society advocating for establishing a world organization founded on democratic principles, including a commission on human rights. However, the former First Lady soon confronted the reality that her aspirations for a unified world and the potential to create an international order grounded in the ideals of the Rooseveltian "four freedoms" would collide with the stark opposition between the United States and the Soviet Union. Additionally, there was the pressing need to appease nations like France and Great Britain, which were intent on preserving their imperial dominions.

Her tenure at the United Nations tested her ability "to feel free" and her ambition to advocate for the needs of civil society and the "little people" amidst the constant challenge of reconciling idealism with the harsh realities of policies often driven by national interests.

Not coincidentally, Eleanor Roosevelt, who served as the chairwoman of the Nuclear Commission of Human Rights and as a US delegate until 1952 – when she resigned following Dwight Eisenhower's election – transitioned from a stance of "realist pacifism" to one of "realist internationalism." This shift was shaped by her awareness of national security demands and obligations arising from the Cold War. From 1950 onward, with the formation of NATO, the Korean War, and escalating tensions within the UN General Assembly concerning colonial issues, Eleanor Roosevelt grew increasingly apprehensive about the waning of US leadership on human rights. Furthermore, she adopted a more critical stance toward the choices made by the Eisenhower administration and its Secretary of State, John

Foster Dulles, particularly regarding the US disengagement from the treaty ratification process, starting with genocide.

The "New Deal for the World"'s vision encountered its most significant challenges at the intersection of race and anti-colonial relations within the context of bipolar confrontation. Eleanor Roosevelt consistently cautioned that racial discrimination could undermine US objectives, emphasizing the link between domestic and international realms:

> We are going to live in a world where people of many races are going to be close to us and are going to have equal economic opportunity whether a small group, temporarily powerful here, wishes them to have it in this country or not. […] These men [those who opposed the policies of racial equality] are making enemies for us at the present time – not just of minority groups in this country, but of large majority groups throughout the world. (*My Day*, July 5)

On the other, she firmly believed that the United Nations, as recognized by African-American associations, could serve as a powerful platform for visibility and a source of pressure against prevailing national tensions, rigidities, and discrimination. However, just as it became evident in 1947 – when the NAACP and W.E.B. Du Bois presented their document *An Appeal to the World! A Statement of the Denial of Human Rights to Minorities in the Case of Citizens of Negro Descent in the United States of America* to the Commission on Human Rights, without the explicit endorsement of Eleanor Roosevelt – it became clear that the demands of power politics overshadowed the promotion of human rights. Her aspiration to amplify the voices of civil society within a democratic space, which should have been a hallmark of the new political landscape post-1945, had to concede to a reality that she increasingly perceived as a new constraint, perhaps even more formidable than the one she faced while serving as First Lady.

Despite the challenges that indicated the initial fractures in constructing the liberal order, Eleanor consistently urged President Truman and Democratic administration officials that the true struggle would unfold in Asia and the emerging post-colonial landscapes. She emphasized the importance of fostering relationships that could diminish the deep-seated mistrust and hostility stemming from years of colonial

rule. In her correspondence with Truman, she conveyed: "The race question has become a very vital one since much of the feeling is that the colored races are? against the white race. We are classed with the Colonial Powers" ("Letter to President Truman" 1015-16).

As noted previously, in 1952, following Eisenhower's victory in the presidential election, Eleanor Roosevelt chose to step back from her role out of a sense of fairness, having supported his opponent, Adlai Stevenson. In the initial draft of her resignation letter, she emphasized the vital need for the United States to promote human rights: "In spite of our inadequacies the United States is at the forefront of the countries in the world in observing basic human rights and freedoms ("Letter to Eisenhower" 486). This leadership was to be carried out without undermining the strength of the United Nations. For Eleanor, the UN represented the essential platform for dialogue and communication, enabling a participatory exercise of American leadership within a diverse framework where the US hegemony would derive from the power of moral and political example rather than through the imposition of economic and military might. The United Nations provided the ideal space, as the progressive inclusion of new states allowed for tensions to be addressed there, which, if redirected outward, could ultimately lead to prioritizing power struggles over politics, particularly in the form of military conflict.

Unfortunately, her perspective remained largely unheeded, and failure to follow her recommendations may have contributed to the challenges faced by US leadership from after World War II until the present day.

AUTHOR'S BIONOTE

Raffaella Baritono is a full professor of US History and Politics in the Department of Political and Social Sciences at the University of Bologna. She serves as the coordinator of the Departmental Center for US Studies (LAB-USA). Additionally, she is a member of the scientific-editorial committee of the journal *Ricerche di Storia politica* and of the editorial board of the journal *Scienza&Politica*. She is also affiliated with the Il Mulino Association. Her research interests focus on US history and political culture, with an emphasis on the American state, the presidency, and the connection between social sciences and politics. Some of her most recent publications include: *Eleanor Roosevelt. Una biografia politica* (Il

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