

# Human Rights as an Ideology? Obstacles and Benefits

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## Abstract

Sociology has an important part to play in understanding human rights. In this article, I trace obstacles within sociology to theoretically conceptualize human rights as an ideology. These impediments, I suggest, demonstrate the need to recognize the blind spots within sociological research. However, instead of trying to persuade readers why human rights qualifies as an ideology, I attempt to demonstrate why it is beneficial for sociological inquiry to conceptualize human rights as an ideology. Instead of following the widely accepted practice of understanding human rights as a desirable set of values designed to promote a liberal peace, I propose conceptualizing human rights as an ideology which, through its institutionalization, produces coercive organizational and doctrine power. The question of whether its organizational and doctrine power is capable of value penetration in micro-solidarity groups opens up a new prism through which sociologists can assess the successes and failures of human rights ideology on the ground.

## Keywords

human rights, ideology, sociology

## Introduction

Human rights shifted from being a critique of power to becoming increasingly embedded in the structures of power. In this shift of both structures and agency, sociology has an important role to play. However, leading sociologists of human rights (Blau and Frezzo, 2012; Frezzo, 2015; Morris, 2006; Woodiwiss, 2000) have framed social or political problems as human rights violations subsuming the sub-field of the sociology of human rights under the umbrella of the sociology of rights. Limitations of any such approach are immediately obvious: binding human rights to legal remedies leaves a whole range of social issues either neglected, or treated methodologically and theoretically in unsatisfactory ways, with the intent of engaging scholars in a particular world view. In this paper, I propose understanding human rights as an ideology, arguing that applying models of ideology research to human rights may have the advantage of overcoming the blind spots that arise from

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narrowly defining human rights as a struggle over rights. In this exercise in historiography, I provide a meta-narrative of the ways in which the sociologist's relationship to human rights has developed over the years, showing the long-standing refusal within the discipline to address human rights as an ideology. This, as detailed in the first part of the paper, is an outcome of two historical stumbling blocks which together have delayed and prevented sociology theoretically and methodologically framing human rights as an ideology. The first obstacle comes from the Marxist understanding of ideology. From the 19th century onwards, ideologies have evoked emotional reactions and have been almost exclusively understood in a negative light. The second impediment has arisen from the two long-lasting and ongoing sociological debates — the first focused around universalism vs. cultural relativism arguments and the second around value-neutral vs. normative advocacy claims — that have largely contributed to the confusion and disagreements in the research of human rights. These “blind spots” have prevented and discouraged researchers from theorizing human rights as an ideology which, I suggest, could bring fruitful and novel explanations to advance our knowledge on the ways in which human rights norms are being glocalized on the ground. Instead of conceptualizing human rights in a normative fashion, as a desirable set of values designed to bring a liberal peace, in the second part of the article, I will conceptualize it as an ideology, which like any other ideology, can be traced through three long-term historical processes: 1) cumulative organizational power; 2) cumulative doctrine power, and 3) the envelopment of micro-solidarity. The organizational power of human rights, defined as an ongoing historical process that grows through discourses, knowledge and institutions, through its bureaucratic apparatus, involves the constant increase of its organizational capability for coercion. Through its coercive foundation, the organizational power of human rights attempts to institutionalize and mandate content — normative standards understood here as doctrine power. It is precisely this tendency to monopolize and homogenize that places human rights in line with other ideologies. However, the real benefit of conceptualizing human rights as an ideology is the question of whether the organizational and doctrine power of human rights produces effective emotional attachments and solidarity in small groups and whether those attachments can be sustained over the long run. To unlock social problems of large-scale macro-sociological level we need to understand how (and if) the organizational and doctrine power of human rights is capable of creating solidarity in micro-structure encounters. The main purpose of this article is to propose new avenues of sociological inquiry for pushing boundaries and bettering our knowledge of the impact of human rights on the ground.

## **Ideology**

Are human rights an ideology? This question bears much weight, not only because it may define how we perceive human rights, but most importantly because it can define our methodological and theoretical approach towards human rights. Interestingly, human rights have rarely been addressed and analysed through the theoretical lens of ideology. This “omission” is associated with the development and understanding of both human rights and ideologies within the discipline. On the one hand, until recently, sociology was reluctant to deal with human rights but was heavily invested in research on ideologies. On the other hand, while human rights were extensively researched by legal scholars and political scientists, this was rarely through the prism of ideology.

The literature on ideology has been long fragmented and compartmentalized. I will not try to review the entire history of the concept. An excellent sketch is available in Heywood (2003). Instead, I will highlight the points that are most useful for situating ideology and human rights within the field of sociology. The notion of “ideology” as a separate area of research concerned with ideas, was developed in 19th-century France and was first used in public in 1796, by the French-Scottish philosopher Antoine Destutt de Tracy who was interested in the “ideological” as

opposed to “psychological” sides of humanity. His universal, technical and value-neutral meaning of ideology was gradually turned into its opposite. The very concept of ‘ideology’ as a key political term comes from its use in the writings of Karl Marx. Marx was the first, and to date the most important, social and political thinker to historicize the notion of ideology. Consequently, the prominence ideology enjoys in modern social and political thought in general and Marx’s understanding of the term in particular, can largely be explained in terms of the later generations of Marxist thinkers. For many decades, sociologists were among the most enthusiastic users of the concept of ideology, whether as advocates, critics, or simply as commentators. However, social sciences in general, and sociology in particular, was burdened with — and in many respects still suffers from — the Marxist understanding of ideology, adopted from Engels’ notion of “false consciousness”, which is understood as a set of false ideas which help to legitimate a dominant political power. For Marx and his followers, ideology is primarily about delusion and mystification. Ideology is tied to different economic systems and the dominant modes of production and is seen as a form of social pathology — the product of false consciousness. Following in his footsteps, social scientists predominantly understood ideology as a manifestation of power. Despite the fact that the Marxist notion of ideology can only be understood in terms of the connected notions of alienation, mystification and reification (Birnbaum, 1960), many continued analysing ideology as a form of power domination and class stratification. Antonio Gramsci (1971/1948), Italian Marxist and social theorist, used cultural hegemony to explain why the working classes have a false ideological conception of their best interests. Building on some of Gramsci’s ideas, Louis Althusser (1971: 162), a French Marxist philosopher, tried to shift the emphasis further from the repressive machinery of the state towards what he terms ‘ideological state apparatus’ saying that ideology is a ‘representation’ of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence. Hannah Arendt, political theorist, thought that ideology is the ruthless logical working-out in the real world of the implications of a single, simplistic premise. According to this usage, ideologies are secular religions, which, by claiming a monopoly of truth, refuse to tolerate opposing ideas and rival beliefs; they possess a ‘totalizing’ character and serve as instruments of social control, ensuring compliance and subordination (Arendt, 1951). The works of Adorno, Horkheimer, Benjamin, Lukács, Fromm and other Frankfurt School theorists, the works of Goldman, Lévi-Strauss, as well as Althusser: these were the names and texts that dominated discussion, all deeply inspired by the Marxist conceptualization of ideology. A massive sociological literature exists on the subject, especially in the period from the 1950s to the early 1980s.

Karl Mannheim, a Hungarian sociologist and a founder of the sociology of knowledge, was one of the earliest sociologists to attempt to construct a non-Marxist concept of ideology — attempting to substitute the intellectuals for the proletariat (Kumar, 2006). As opposed to the Marxist reading of ideology, in *Ideology and Utopia* (1999/1936) Mannheim described ideologies as thought systems that serve to defend a particular social order, and that broadly express the interests of its dominant or ruling group. Later, Clifford Geertz, one of the most influential American anthropologists, together with his followers, developed a symbolic theory of ideology that shifts the attention from the neo-Marxist focus on the function of ideology towards the content of ideological messages.

In opposition to the Marxist way of understanding ideology, the so-called anti-foundationalists, such as Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze and Ernesto Laclau, take truth claims to be always contingent, discursive and motivated by power and control. Despite their differences, they all share the view that “discourse analysis with its emphasis on language use and construction reveals more about the structuring of the social order than any ideology critique does” (Malešević, 2011: 337). The cognitivist approach tries to overcome relativism, and claims that all truths are equal and incommensurable (Freeden, 1996; Mann, 2004). One way of dealing with this problem, following Michael Freeden (1996), is to highlight the morphology of an ideology in terms of its key concepts.

Each ideology is therefore characterized by a cluster of core, adjacent and peripheral concepts, not all of which need be present for a theory or a doctrine to be recognized as belonging to that ideology. However, the recent innovative strands of post-Marxism, in the hands of Lacan and later of Žižek and Laclau, have attempted to revitalize thinking about ideology by welding psychoanalysis to notions of semantic social control and distortion and in so doing have discovered that those two components doubly disable it from conversing fruitfully with analytical political philosophy (Freeden, 2006).

Despite the significant distance traversed by social sciences since Marx, for sociologists, the heart of the study of ideology has remained the distinction between appearance and reality, between error and ‘truth’, between a necessarily distorted subjective consciousness and an objective world (Kumar, 2006: 171). This serpentine road the research of ideology has taken in the past century has been heavily burdened by the prevailing negative connotations of the term ideology. These, coupled with the moral imperatives of human rights, disabled any significant research of human rights as an ideology. Simplistically put, mixing the negative connotations of ideology with the positive and highly moral intentions of human rights feels like and is often perceived as a blasphemy. And here, the stress is on “feels” — since one of the biggest obstacles for researchers in social sciences when approaching human rights and analysing them through the prism of ideology is the researchers’ emotional and moral stakes. Portraying human rights as an ideology, often resonates as if it implies that human rights are yet another trickery of *false consciousness*, therefore, “polluting” human rights with the notion of ideology means not only an immediate critique of human rights but in fact goes against the very humanity, against the very purpose, of sociology itself.

### **Sociology and Human Rights**

The history of social sciences testifies to the study of ideology being filled with negative and emotionally-engaging connotations. When it comes to human rights within the discipline of sociology, the problem magnifies. In sociology, there has been a lasting debate as to whether human rights are to be considered as a part of the sociological field and if so, what is the proper way to articulate a theoretical framework that will make sociological sense out of current human rights discourse and practice? The matter of human rights has been the focus of extended discussion and debate within the emerging world community for well over half a century. Two major debates within the field of sociology have caused delays and distortions in the ways in which sociologists have dealt with human rights. The first issue has to do with the ongoing debate on universalism vs. cultural relativism particularity in human rights and the second with the age-old issue of the relationship of morals to social inquiry.

The universalism vs. cultural relativism dialectic stands as one of the most debated issues in the theory of human rights and it echoes loudly across the social sciences. Simply put, universalism refers to the notion that human rights are universal and should apply to every human being, while cultural relativism is a set of doctrines that imbue cultural relativity with prescriptive force. However, from the very beginning, the stated core principle of human rights being universal regardless of geography, culture, race, nation, ethnicity, religion or gender, was uncomfortable for sociologists (and even more so for anthropologists). The critique of the idea of universal rights was prominent in the works of Marx, Durkheim and Weber and by the time human rights started gaining momentum, the rejection of universalism was already well embedded in sociological thinking. In his 1844 article ‘On the Jewish Question’, Marx attacked proponents of the universal rights of man, arguing that the rights of man exemplify individualism, whereas individuals are still bound to material constraints on freedom by economic inequality and the wider social class relations of capitalism. In mainstream sociology, both Durkheim and Weber also emphasized the specificity of

laws and morality in relationship to particular societies, leading to a critical attitude towards universal rights claims. In fact, in 1947, the Executive Board of the American Anthropological Association, under the guiding influence of Melville Herskovits, formulated a “Statement on Human Rights” that was sent to the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, which was drafting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The statement rejected the validity of a universal declaration of human rights on both empirical and ethical grounds (Goodale, 2006). Similar to Durkheim’s discussion of comparative ethics, anthropologists pointed out that normative humanism assumes the assertion of a single dominant ethical principle which tends toward a kind of moral imperialism that results when the disciplinary power of human rights discourse is employed in the service of transnational capitalist relations of production (Goodale, 2005). In this, the anthropologists, while acknowledging certain cultural universals, championed the principle that each culture must be understood (and respected) in its own terms and in a way set the tone for sociologists as well.

Universalists are often accused of neo-imperialism through the global enforcement of Western de-historicized and de-contextualized values (David, 2017a). Universalists, on the other hand, blame cultural relativists for being essentialist and for approaching culture as if it is static and homogeneous, whereas culture is, in fact, a range of deeply contested symbols, practices, and meanings over and with which members of a society constantly negotiate and struggle. Cultural relativists ignore or misplace politics and, in their attempt to defend different cultures, they often end up romanticizing and glorifying the past that — even if it ever existed — is no more.

Amongst sociologists, Bryan Turner (1993) was the first to take the lead in conceptualizing the nature of human rights. He does so in terms of “human frailty” and the precariousness of the institutions that cope with frailty, which he later on developed into the notion of “universal ontological insecurity” (Turner, 2011) in order to ground human rights without appealing to traditional natural law theory. Turner envisages human frailty as a modern surrogate for the older conception of natural rights in that the former provides a justification for why human rights are an essential basis for the contemporary social and cultural order. In his groundbreaking 1993 article ‘Outline of a Theory of Human Rights’, Turner critiqued the key founding theorists of sociology — Durkheim, Weber and Marx — calling for the destruction of natural law theory and for a normative recognition of human rights as a universal need for protection and empathy for others in relation to citizenship rights. Turner’s contribution to sociology was first and foremost in opening up the subject of human rights to sociological inquiry.

However, research on human rights was not only inhibited by the universalist–cultural relativist debate, but it was also further delayed by the lack of interest in morality as a subject of sociological inquiry, with morality only becoming a popular topic for study by sociologists in the 1990s. Frezzo (2011: 204) describes sociology departments in the 1980s and 1990s as being torn by “the thorny debates on humanism and anti-humanism, [...] the contradictory legacy of Enlightenment thought, the successes and failures of the project of human emancipation”. This tone, however, was set already with the classics of sociology. Although recognizing that moral issues may enter into the formulation of a sociological problem, the Weberians contend that the scientist’s worldview should call for value neutrality in the actual investigation of social and cultural orders. In a similar vein, Durkheim believed that there is no universal morality for humanity, since each society creates its own set of moral rules over time, which can vary dramatically from one society to another. Value neutrality and opposition to any normative and engaged claims actually lies at the very heart of sociological research. Contrary to that stand, Bryan Turner emphasized that sociology required a normative grounding for human rights in order to endorse human rights while studying them.

The field of the sociology of human rights has only recently been established, starting when the British Sociological Association Study Group in the Sociology of Rights held its first workshop in

2009. Subsequently in 2010, the XVII International Sociological Association (ISA) Annual Conference dedicated a section to the Sociology of Rights. Modules that bring the study of human rights into sociology programmes and degrees have been proliferating in the UK, Europe, Asia and the Americas, with the Sociology of Rights leading to the emergence of the distinct field of the 'Sociology of Human Rights'. However, from the beginning, the ISA and ASA defined the sociology of human rights as a twofold endeavour: to analyse the construction, diffusion, contestation, and transformation of rights by a variety of social actors, and to *advocate* for human rights. Some of the most prominent sociologists such as Judith Blau (Blau and Moncada, 2007) and Michael Burawoy called for *public* sociology arguing that "the purpose of sociology is not only to analyse social inequalities, but also to *advocate* remedies for social inequalities" (Frezzo, 2011: 208; emphasis added). Those views correspond with Zygmunt Bauman's (1998) notions of morality, which claimed that responsibility is the core of morality and the necessary condition to think sociologically about morality. This shift from value neutrality to advocacy and activism brought to the fore cleavages and gaps in the ways in which sociologists grappled to overcome the tension between the analysis of, and advocacy for, human rights. Though this transition needs deeper analysis, a possible way to understand the position reversal is that certain necessary historical and social conditions were to take place that led to the rise of an active moral demand to address others' suffering. The moral demand to act in order to lessen the suffering of distant social actors became a focus of sociological engagement from the 1990s on, which became possible only in the intersection between 'humanitarianism' and the emergence of liberal society, with its distinctive features of capitalism (the market) and democracy (civic equality and citizenship) (Sznajder, 1998: 118).

This blurring of the boundaries between analysis and activism often made sociologists of human rights not only concerned with developing principles, methodologies and empirical findings, but primarily with promoting the human rights agenda, identifying solutions and actively engaging with the public to promote a change. Most sociologists of human rights see duty rather than harm in such engagements and are often blind to the slippery slope of activism which frames research in normative terms of achieving a particular world view. The alteration from value-neutral to normatively-engaged sociology remains highly disputed. Hynes et al. (2010: 16) rightly pointed out that sociological research "should not be confused with normative commitment but be grounded in theoretical and methodological rigour". Yet, most of the current sociological research on human rights, if not often explicitly stated, is designed to promote the human rights world view. This, though noble in itself, often comes at the expense of understanding social reality as it is, and not as we would like it to be. Ideological participants do not make a good analysis of their movement because they analyse it through the categories promulgated by that movement. Only by viewing the entire historical process with greater detachment is it possible to make a sound sociological contribution.

### Human Rights as an Ideology

This short history of the obstacles faced by the sociology of human rights has been presented to show why researchers in sociology find the notion of binding human rights with ideology hard to process. Carrying legacies of the Marxist understanding of ideology as a false consciousness, together with the universalism vs. cultural relativism debate and the value-neutral analysis vs. normative activism debate, shaped the sociology of human rights as a highly contested field of research.

The negative connotations of conceptualizing human rights as an ideology are evident and well-embedded in the sociology of human rights. In fact, those who bring together human rights and ideology are seen as "radical sociologists" (Hynes et al., 2010). "Radical sociologists", such as Immanuel Wallerstein (2004) who conceptualized a 'world-system' with United States hegemony,

regard human rights as part of an ideology which obfuscates underlying capitalist economic relationships shaped by colonialism. This line of critique is followed by other “radical” thinkers such as Chomsky, Herman, Peterson and Žižek. Chomsky, Herman and Peterson understood human rights as politics in which “political economy of human rights” (Herman and Peterson, 2010), a conspiracy-like theory in which powerful states, first and foremost the United States, use human rights ideology for personal gains (Goodale, 2006). Although taking different approaches, all of the above questioned whether the West, via human rights, is seeking to impose its categories onto the rest of the world. The term “ideology” as a foundation for a critique used by “radical” thinkers is often employed in its derogatory meaning, as a form of bashing, but *not* as a theoretical model.

There were several other attempts to link human rights and ideology. Alain Pellet, Professor of International Law, in 1989 coined the term ‘human-rightism’ that has been sporadically used since then provoking adverse reactions within the community of human rights advocates. With the notion of human-rightism, Pellet (2000) tried to warn of the costs and dangers of the slippery slope of activism within the arena of international human rights law. ‘Human rightism’ was immediately ascribed pejorative meanings and was used to express different forms of critique when it came to human rights. For example, in 2012 Václav Klaus,<sup>1</sup> the Czech President, warned against the dangers of Human Rightism, claiming that human rights are, in fact, a revolutionary denial of civil rights. Similar to Arendt’s arguments, developed several decades ago, he claimed that by denying civil rights, human-rightism calls for the destruction of the sovereignty of individual countries, arguing that human rights ideology has nothing in common with practical issues of individual freedom and of free political discourse, but is about entitlements.

As opposed to previous thinkers who often equated ideology with dogma, Louis Henkin (2000), a Director of the Human Rights Institute at the Law School at Colombia University, takes a more neutral approach to ideology, claiming that human rights became a political ideology on the American continent and in France towards the end of the 18th century. Samuel Moyn (2010), a Yale professor of law and history, takes a different approach, arguing that the blossoming of human rights since the 1970s should be explained and understood against the backdrop of the global realization that ideology has actually died. However, Makau Wa Mutua (1996), a Kenyan-American professor of law, was among the first to grasp — both theoretically and empirically — the interconnectedness between ideology and human rights, developing the proposition that human rights and Western liberal democracy are virtually tautological. Kabasakal Arat (2008), a political scientist, promotes the same idea that human rights should be understood in terms of a distinct ideology which is embedded in the International Bill of Rights. The assessment is made by analysing the extent to which human rights ideology is able to oppose the concentration of political, economic, and social power that is defined in relation to the positions taken on the state, property, and discrimination to promote equality in dignity. This has been probably, so far, the most serious effort to prove that ‘human rights’ qualifies as an ideology.

### **Human Rights as an Ideology: The Importance of the Model**

So, are human rights an ideology? In his 1987 article “The elements of the concept of ideology”, Malcolm Hamilton identified 27 different components in definitions of ideology. Probably the most basic and yet profound difference in the ways in which researchers define ideology is understanding ideology as a belief system as opposed to viewing it as a form of discourse (Schull, 1992). To avoid dispute, I choose to use here Andrew Heywood’s (2003) definition precisely because it is neither original nor novel and is entirely in line with the social-scientific usage of the term. Following Heywood’s definition of ideology, human rights are an ideology because a) they offer an account of the existing order, a world-view, meaning they offer (relatively) clear moral

boundaries of the world as it should be; b) they advance a model of a desired future, a vision of 'good society'; and most importantly c) they explain how political change can and should be brought about.

In other words, this definition suggests that the organizational power needs to be in place, meaning institutions that promote and legitimize certain doctrine power, a normative system of beliefs to advance a particular world-view. As with other ideologies, human rights offer a set of ideas that provide the basis for organized political action, which may be intended to preserve, modify or overthrow the existing system of power. However, what is omitted in Haywood's definition is how those organizational and doctrine powers are translated, understood and internalized in small-group encounters that are essential to push for political change. Those three levels are interconnected and the impact human rights have on the ground cannot be understood properly when looking at those levels separately. This is important since, I argue, it is exactly how human rights ideology operates.

Regardless of how we understand human rights on the spectrum of Mannheim's (1999/1936) 'particular' or 'total' conceptions of ideology, Seliger's (1976) 'fundamental' or 'operative' levels of ideology or Freedman's (1996) 'fully fledged' or 'thick' ideologies, the real question is *why does it matter* whether we understand human rights as an ideology or not? I argue here that it matters greatly, because understanding human rights as an ideology offers us the analytical tools to systematically evaluate the evolution of the Western-led global institutionalization of values and norms. What is even more important is that understanding human rights through the prisms of the institutionalization of organizational and doctrine power, may advance our understanding of how human rights are internalized across different socio-political strata.

The power and the potency of human rights lies in the world polity where human rights are promoted and maintained through global linkages by powerful nation-states vis-à-vis other nation-states. Human rights ideology draws its power and legitimacy from the macro-level of a world polity system. One way to understand the institutionalization of organizational and doctrine powers of human rights is to see it through neo-institutional lenses. Neo-institutionalists understand the world polity as a global system capable of creating values and norms through the collective conferral of authority (Boli and Thomas, 1997; Meyer et al., 1987). According to them, human rights ideology operates as "a single global social system" (Berkovitch, 1999) in the world polity meaning that states adopt human rights (often as window dressing) to comply with norms, ideas and practices at the world polity level. For example, Elliott (2014) showed that, through tracing the widespread institutionalization of human rights since the mid-19th century, an important component of the expansion of human rights is the rise of the universal, egalitarian individual as the primary entity of social organization in world society. In a similar fashion, Koo and Ramirez (2009) analysed the adoption rate of human rights institutions since 1966 to 2004 at the national level, convincingly demonstrating that the enactment of the human rights affirming nation-state model indicates a global trend of an increasing number of human rights organizations and treaties worldwide. Under the assumption that "the widespread dissemination of a human rights discourse enables oppressed groups to translate events and policies into rights discourse and to appeal to courts, politicians and the media in order to seek remedies for their grievances" (Gordon and Berkovitz, 2007: 244), political sciences and political sociologists such as Finnemore (1993, 1996), Risse et al. (1999), Sikkink (1993), and Ancelovici and Jenson (2013) to name but a few, studied and continue to study the processes of the institutionalization of human rights and the impact human rights norms and ideas have on international and domestic politics. These actors tend to comply with external standards and structures, consequently, the diffusion of this structure has led to a phenomenon coined as "isomorphism" (McNeely, 2012). Isomorphism points to the ongoing process of world-wide patterns of standardization, institutional homogenization and norm imitation where "models and norms that are institutionalized at the world level acquire



taken-for-granted status over time” (Levy and Sznajder, 2006). According to DiMaggio and Powell (1983) three processes — coercive, mimetic and normative — lead to the isomorphic outcome. This, however, should be taken with great caution, because evidence shows that, at times, those isomorphic mechanisms in fact support processes of divergence (Beckert, 2010) and once glocalized, they produce various results on the ground.

Furthermore, the institutionalization of human rights should not be misunderstood as being a linear process and it would be incorrect to ignore the historical and political dimension of human rights, as powerfully described in Joas’ (2013) *Sacredness of Person* or Moyn’s (2010) *The Last Utopia*. A wide range of scholarship demonstrates the importance of the role of non-state actors, such as voluntary civic associations, faith-based organizations, non-governmental organizations, community-based organizations, professional organizations, corporations, universities and transnational advocacy networks, that have pushed for certain agendas to be included in doctrine power. However, their work would hardly be possible or at least more fragmented in its success, without the legitimacy that human rights as an ideology has gained at the world polity level. In other words, the power which the human rights ideology receives as a moral system is a result of its position in the formal hierarchy within international arenas (Donnelly, 2004). This is significant as the source of power can tell us a lot about the dynamic of organizational and doctrine dispersion and the ways in which ideology is being institutionalized. For example, in nationalist-centred ideology, the nation-state is the main source of power and legitimacy. Siniša Malešević, a sociologist of nationalism, notes that over the last three centuries mass ideological doctrines have played a crucial role in justifying the existence of most powerful organizations such as the nation-state. He claims, furthermore, that ideological messages transmitting the potency of nationalism are generated by centrifugal ideologization. Centrifugal ideologization refers to:

an organizationally generated, mass scale process whereby specific ideological doctrines gradually start to permeate diverse social strata in different societies. The ultimate outcome of this process is a greater ideological unity among disparate individuals inhabiting the same social or political space. This historically contingent, uneven and contested process is expressed in the way that different social strata became highly receptive not only to ideological justification of particular forms of social action but also for ideological mobilization in the pursuit of such action. (Malešević, 2013: 26)

Instead of talking about centrifugal ideological power, when it comes to human rights, the term ‘fractal doctrine power’ seems more appropriate. The doctrine power is duplicated across macro, mezzo and micro levels, forming a never-ending pattern of diffusion of human rights. The term fractal is used here as a metaphor, but it has qualities that help us understand the ways in which human rights organizational and doctrine power grow. Human rights ideology aims at duplicating and multiplying itself like fractals, infinitely complex components, yet these components are marked by self-similarity across different scales. Though human rights ideologies are positioned differently in historical and geographical terms, just like fractals they are created by a simple repetition process. In the case of human rights, this process occurs via discourses, practices and infrastructures, repeated over and over again in an ongoing feedback loop — a claim of universal human rights. In a way, just like natural fractals such as trees, rivers, clouds, mountains or coastlines, human rights aim at being perceived as natural, above politics, a one-for-all-universal-fit. The fractal nature of human rights points to an illusion through which one can understand the Mannheim paradox of ideology that is also well embedded in the field of sociology of human rights: the fact that one cannot maintain a position that all worldviews are ideological without simultaneously accepting that one’s own position is ideological too. I suggest that understanding the generative and accumulative force behind the organizational and doctrine power of human

rights and their ability to replicate and perpetuate moral forms and norms across diverse cultural and societal settings is essential for the research of human rights.

However, both organizational and doctrine penetration are necessary but not sufficient preconditions to transform any ideology from a poster ideology to a mobilizing one. The persistence and the success of any ideology requires organization (Collins, 2008) and lies in its capacity to ideologically and organizationally bind together and translate micro-solidarity into a recruiting ideological action. It is vital to understand the impact that the processes of meaning-making at the micro-solidarity level have and “their capacity to ideologically and organizationally penetrate the micro-world and to link disparate pockets of micro-solidarity into a relatively coherent, all embracing, macro-narrative of ideological unity” (Malešević, 2013: 30). As a microlevel phenomenon, solidarity has been conceptualized as prosocial behaviour across different situations, avoiding breaches in situations of trust, and moral repair when violations have taken place. Starting from Durkheim (1964/1893) onwards, sociologists posit social solidarity as a universal, trans-historical and, for the most part, uniform phenomenon. Most forms of genuine durable solidarity entail a substantial degree of microlevel contact and face-to-face interaction. Micro-solidarity matters greatly because it ultimately shows how certain values, ideas and norms recruit people into a moral, value-based action.

The potential of stripping away our normative lenses and recognizing human rights as an ideology brings to the fore, first and foremost, questions that were not previously introduced and researched under the sociology of rights. Since Bryan Turner, a great number of sociologists have invested significant efforts in recognizing the interconnectedness that exists between the sociology of rights and the sociology of human rights. These sociologists are increasingly conceptualizing poverty, global economic inequality, and social inequalities of race, class, gender, age and sexual orientation, even memory, not as social problems, but rather as human rights abuses. Though many of their studies have made a significant impact and expanded our knowledge on human rights abuses, they all tend to understand human rights in a normative fashion, as a desirable societal outcome. Furthermore, although it seems implausible to openly deny that the human rights corpus is the construction of a political ideology, the discourse’s major authors present it as non-ideological (Mutua, 1996). Hence, the focus on human rights abuses shrinks sociological research by omitting, blurring and covering up important sociological questions.

Omitting the conceptualization of human rights as an ideology inevitably leads to ignoring the fact that human rights, just like any other ideology, tends to homogenize and monopolize the vision of the world as it should be. In that sense, the “success” of human rights as an ideology can be measured precisely by the degree to which certain meanings and practices are almost universally seen as innocent, natural, clear and apparent. Having said that, and contrary to Ritzer’s (2013) “McDonaldization Thesis”, those processes of homogenization in fact produce multiple, overlapping but also significantly different results on the ground that often lead to greater inequality and social stratification. It is wrongly assumed that “more human rights” betters equality, therefore, it is crucial to bind together organizational and doctrine power with micro-solidarity to establish whether, how, and when people and groups internalize and act upon human rights norms and values.

Hence, using this three-dimensional model of organizational power, doctrine power and micro-solidarity as an analytical tool can help us bring together largely separated bodies of work to better understand how those levels interconnect and what are the mechanisms in place that push social actors into change. When, for example, can the routinization of organizational powers within civil society serve as an important source of power? Or what is the impact of the decrease of the organizational power of human rights, as in the case, for example, of the United States’ withdrawal from the Human Rights Council? Why is certain content included/excluded

from human rights ideology — for example, what are the political and societal processes that lead to the adoption of a “facing the past” agenda as a core pillar of the human rights memorialization agenda (David, 2017a) or what are the consequences of the partial inclusion of the “right to self-determination” for the globalization of justice and the ways in which human rights ideology mobilizes social movements (Omer, 2009)?

For the sociological research of human rights, it is of utmost significance to assess the organizational and content power of human rights as that of an ideology encompassing an emancipatory potential, which is instinctively attractive to subjugated people — yet some important features of this process have remained largely unrecognized (and ignored) within the sociology of human rights. How and under what conditions do human rights produce inequalities? For example, how does human rights ideology shape inequalities through the hierarchies of victimhood in post-conflict settings (David, 2017a), how does it push people to overjump their health priorities and deeper racial and class inequalities (Hochschild, 2016) or why were economic rights excluded from its doctrine power (Moyn, 2018)? How can the politics of human rights (Bob, 2005; Perugini and Gordon, 2015) explain generative sociological processes over the long run, and the link between post-nationalist solidarity and democracy (Misztal, 2010)? I suggest that once human rights are conceptualized as an ideology we may be able to comprehend issues surrounding human rights in a new light, through timely and exigent questions such as whether, if, and when human rights ideology is capable of mobilizing masses into violent action, when it serves to obscure political realities on the ground, or under what circumstances human rights ideology deepens poverty and racial inequality.

Finally, whereas organizational and doctrine power relate to the structure and content of the cumulative and coercive power of human rights ideology, at the end what matters is the experience of solidarity in small groups and how it builds on interpersonal ties. Here, the rich scholarship on human rights as practice, such as in the works of Mark Goodale and Sally Engle Merry, James Griffin and Fuyuki Kurasawa, to mention only a few, that bring to the fore a bottom-up approach to examine how individuals internalize human rights, can shed new meanings once we understand the interconnectedness of the organizational power, content power and micro-solidarity. How are human rights understood in face-to-face and mediated interactions? How and when do they create symbols, mark boundaries and exert pressure towards conformity? Why do they sometimes bring distant people together and sometimes just fade in indifference? In other words, the actual recruiting power of an ideology in the long run is always reflected in small-scale societal groups. Extensive research, such as that of Michal Mann, Omer Bartov, Randall Collins, David Laitin, Siniša Malešević, Rogers Brubaker and Danny Caplan, shows the importance of micro-social attachment and individual motivation to ideological mobilization. It is precisely in those small societal pockets that the might of ideology to effectively promote values can be captured. While we have some idea why, for example, soldiers fight in wars or how small group attachments may produce terrorists, we have little idea why some people are motivated to help on some occasions while in others they stay indifferent. More strikingly, we lack any significant research on how those whose lives are heavily impacted by human rights infrastructures and values, such as refugees, internally displaced persons (IDPs), victims of violence, etc. understand human rights. Do they internalize human rights in the long run? How will their experiences of solidarity, filtered through a particular interpretation of symbols and history, impact their social attachments? Do those who become a subject of human rights interventions become more supportive of human rights? Are human rights capable of forging solidarity across different societal pockets in the long run? These are crucial questions and any light they may shed may be of tremendous benefit, possibly altering the ways in which we understand human rights. Conceptualizing human rights as an ideology matters as it can help us understand and assess if and why human rights values are being successfully embedded in

micro-solidarity groups and whether such human rights-centred solidarity is capable of mobilizing masses into social action.

## Conclusion

Understanding human rights as an ideology shifts the focus from the normative framing of rights and the desired realities on the ground and opens up a new avenue for evaluating how human rights beliefs and values generate change and affect societal structures that are shaped by historical, political and cultural processes. The model of human rights ideology that can be traced through a process of institutionalization of human rights ideology — perpetuated, promoted, sustained and diffused through coercive and cumulative organizational and doctrine power — may help us shed new light on whether human rights ideology is capable of producing solidarity at the micro-level to the extent of mobilizing social actors into human rights-based actions. Finally, I argue that understanding human rights through ideology can bring some groundbreaking and fruitful insights, in particular in areas that are under-researched because of the current focus on rights and wrongs instead of human rights potency as an ideology. Questions such as whether human rights ideology produces new forms of inequalities, when it perpetuates violence, and what are the mechanisms for sustaining human rights ideology on the ground are good places to start.

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## Note

1. Václav Klaus, Mont Pelerin Society General Meeting, Prague Castle, Prague, September 7, 2012: <http://islamversuseurope.blogspot.ie/2012/09/czech-president-warns-against-ideology.html>

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