Welfare State Internationalism? Socio-Economic Human Rights in Scandinavian UN Diplomacy
Project Presentation
Seminar, 18.09.2019
Human Rights Studies
Lund University

Note to the Reader:

The following document is the ‘content’ part of the proposal I submitted for my Marie Skłodowska-Curie Fellowship. Please ignore the ‘proposal lingo’ and references to other sections of the proposal. The text serves as the bases for my presentation at the seminar next week. In my presentation, I will also comment on how I came to be interested in the project and how I intend to conduct the research. Naturally, the proposal is merely a draft outline for the project and I am very open to input on how to develop it further. It is my hope that the seminar can help get the project off to a good start and I look forward to your comments and suggestions.
EXCELLENCE

1.1 Quality and credibility of the research/innovation project; level of novelty, appropriate consideration of inter/multidisciplinary and gender aspects

This proposal, called ScanRights, provides the first examination of the role of economic and social rights in the multilateral diplomacy of the three Scandinavian countries: Sweden, Norway, and Denmark at the United Nations (UN) from 1970 to 2000. Since the 1970s, human rights have emerged as the dominant moral language in international affairs, but the economic and social rights that constitute an integral part of the human rights framework has continually been contested and downgraded. This development has coincided with a rise in global economic inequality as neoliberalism has replaced welfare statism as the dominant political economic paradigm.

While most Western countries have cut back on their welfare states in the last quarter of the 20th century, the Scandinavian countries have upheld highly egalitarian societies that provide extensive economic and social rights. Abroad, they have emphasized poverty reduction through a substantial increase in their spending on development aid and have demonstrated a strong commitment to human rights and a rules-based international order anchored in the UN. Through a transnational approach to multi-national archival research, ScanRights seeks to understand why the Scandinavian countries increased their support for poverty reduction and economic and social rights at a time when egalitarian politics were on the decline elsewhere in the West. In doing so, the project furthers our understanding of multilateral Scandinavian human rights diplomacy and the wider history of human rights and economic inequality. Lund University (LU) has been chosen as the host institution because it provides the optimal intellectual infrastructure for both the project’s research and training, allowing me to broaden my scientific profile and strengthen my professional development to help me obtain my career goal of a permanent academic position (1.2, 1.3, 1.4, 2.1).

In recent years, human rights history has emerged as one of the most vibrant and fastest growing subfields within historical research, casting new light on major developments in the 20th century. This new human rights history has provided important historical foundation for human rights research in other disciplines such as law, philosophy, development studies, anthropology, and political science. Yet, historical scholarship has focused almost exclusively on civil and political rights while neglecting economic and social rights, causing a flawed understanding of the history of human rights in international politics. Addressing this flaw is one of the main challenges in the field today. Fortunately, a nascent scholarship is emerging on the history of economic and social rights, including their relationship to development, decolonization, and neoliberalism. This new focus has contributed to a vigorous interdisciplinary debate on the relationship between human rights and economic inequality. Representing two opposing positions, law professor and UN Special Rapporteur Philip Alston argues that extreme economic inequality is a human rights violation, while historian Samuel Moyn insists that human rights as law and movement has nothing to say about economic inequality. Informed by this debate, Lena Halldenius at LU, and the supervisor of this project, is examining how the concept of human rights needs to be understood if it is to serve as a critical resource for assessing economic inequality. She argues for human rights as a framework for political and social justice rather than a set of minimal provisions, and that economic inequality can count as a human rights violation given its harmful political and social consequences.

The expanding human rights history frequently makes references to the Scandinavian countries as leaders in the development of international human rights. Yet, there are few fine-grained empirical examinations of Scandinavian contributions to the history of human rights and hardly any studies are based on multi-archival research across Scandinavian borders. Recently, a group of younger historians have addressed this gap, illustrated by the newly formed Nordic Human Rights History Network (NHRHN) and a forthcoming special issue in The

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ScanRights project addresses this gap through two specific research objectives within the overarching aim to examine economic and social rights in multilateral Scandinavian human rights diplomacy at the UN. First, it examines Scandinavian contributions to the debate on The New International Economic Order (NIEO) from 1974 to 1982 (O1). Second, it examines Scandinavian diplomacy on the Right to Development in the 1980s and 1990s (O2). The project will examine these objectives through a set of closely linked research questions: What were the Scandinavian contributions to the debate on the NIEO from 1974 to 1982 and why did they function as bridge-builders between other Western countries and the Global South? What were the Scandinavian contributions to the debate on the Right to Development in the 1980s and 1990s? To what extent did the Scandinavian countries invoke economic and social rights in these debates and why? In doing so the project seeks to determine the degree to which Scandinavian human rights diplomacy was motivated by the ideology of domestic governments, national security interests, economic interest, public opinion, attempts to promote the Scandinavian welfare model or other factors? The examination will be situated within the broader human rights history and the dominant debates on development, human rights, and economic inequality. Addressing these objectives, the project makes three important contributions to the existing scholarship. First, it addresses the neglect of economic and social rights in the history of Scandinavian human rights diplomacy. Second, it adopts a transnational multi-archival approach that goes beyond the national histories. Third, it provides an examination of Scandinavian human rights diplomacy that is absent in international scholarship. This will make the project interesting to the wider field of human rights history and neighbouring disciplines concerned with human rights, including the relationship between human rights and economic inequality. Furthermore, the research will also be relevant to policymakers and to the general public as it may help explain the successes and failures of recent human rights diplomacy. (2.3).

The ScanRights project will consist of five main work packages (WP 1-5), planned to examine the two research objectives outlined above while integrating training, archival research, analysis, writing, teaching, supervision, dissemination, and communication in a coherent work plan. After an initial start-up stage (WP1), WP2 focuses on my integration at the host institution, a literature review, and preparation for archival research. WP3 consists of archival research and preliminary analysis in Geneva (CH), Copenhagen (DK), Oslo (N), Stockholm (S), and New York (US). WP4 focuses on writing and teaching as well as grant applications. Finally, the results from WP 2-4 are gathered in a general analysis, addressing the project’s main objectives (WP5) (3.1).

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1.1.2 Research methodology and approach

The project adopts a transnational approach through multi-national archival research in the three Scandinavian countries and UN archives. In Sweden, Norway, and Denmark the focus will be on the archives of the foreign ministries, development aid agencies, and national missions to the UN and to a lesser extent relevant NGOs concerned with human rights and development. At the UN, the focus will be on the archives of the General Assembly, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and the United Nations Commission on Human Rights (UNCHR) at the UN libraries in New York and Geneva. (WP3). The multi-national archival research makes it possible to trace processes and decision-making at UN institutions into the national governments of the Scandinavian countries. Because of records on Scandinavian attempts to coordinate diplomatic efforts, it is possible to examine the motivations behind their official positions at the UN. Such multi-institutional and multi-national archival research offers the best approach to examine the meaning policymakers ascribed to social and economic rights and to historicize these concepts in Scandinavian diplomacy.

Transnational approaches redirect the framework of historical inquiry away from the nation state to focus on connections and circulations of people, ideas, technologies, and processes between polities and societies.14 Emerging in the field of American Studies, transnational approaches have become increasingly popular in historical research, where the “transnational turn” has been one of the most widely debated historiographical trends in the past decade and produced some of the discipline’s most innovative scholarship including in international history.15 Transnational approaches are particularly appropriate for this project. First, such approaches are especially well suited for studying the transmission of ideas such as human rights across borders, including their impact, how they are received, and how they change. Existing research, including my own, demonstrates the benefit of transnational approaches to the study of human rights, which are by their very nature inherently transnational.16 Human rights historiography has even been portrayed as a “paradigmatic site for the new transnational history.”17 Second, they lend themselves well to the study of international organizations such as the UN because these bring together different national, regional, and global processes.18 Given that the Scandinavian countries sought to operate as a cohesive unit within the UN, a transnational approach offers the best way to examine their activities.19 Finally, it is difficult to understand the period in question, which was characterized by increased globalization and the proliferation of NGOs and social movements, without adopting a transnational approach.

1.1.3 Originality and innovative aspects of the research program

The project’s transnational approach through multi-national archival research constitutes an innovative research program that promises to make significant historiographical contributions. Examining the connections and circulations between the Scandinavian countries as they sought to coordinate their human rights diplomacy gives a better understanding of their collaborative efforts as well as new insights into the individual countries. Multi-national archival research allows for crosschecking and comparisons of explanations for actions, helping us to better assess the impact of different factors driving motivations of policymakers. The on-going declassification of archives of the period under investigation makes it possible to reassess existing scholarship. The innovative approach, newly declassified material, and the focus on the neglected history of economic and social rights allow the project to make truly original contributions to both Scandinavian and international human rights history.

1.1.4 Interdisciplinary aspects of the action

ScanRights is highly interdisciplinary in both its research and training program. Positioned in the field of human rights studies and informed by transnational approaches employed in multiple disciplines, the project is well positioned to benefit from and contribute to interdisciplinary research. At the LU History Department, I will present and participate in the interdisciplinary Human Rights research seminar, the Global History seminar (transnational approaches) and the History of Knowledge seminar (1.3.2). I will participate in the multi-disciplinary research network Lund Human Rights Research Hub (LHRRH) (www.humanrights.lu.se), which gathers more than 70 scholars from history, international law, political science, philosophy, sociology, and area studies, organizes seminars and workshops and coordinates human rights research throughout the university and the Raoul Wallenberg Institute (RWI) (www.rwi.lu.se). Conducting ScanRights in this research environment allows me to learn from and contribute to interdisciplinary research on human rights, building on my interdisciplinary experience

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(CV, 1.4). Through the contributions listed above (1.1.1), ScanRights improves the historical foundation for research in other disciplines.

1.1.5 The gender dimension in the research content

Scandinavian women made significant contributions to the UN from its inception, including on economic and social rights and Scandinavian countries have been among the most forceful advocates for women’s rights internationally, identifying women as a key recipient group of their development aid. In international debates on development and human rights, women’s rights and gender have often played an important role. In the case of the NIEO, for instance, several leading feminists were initially supportive of the demands from the Global South, but they grew increasingly critical after NIEO proponents sought to highjack the UN Conference of the International Women’s Year 1975 for their agenda. By examining Scandinavian human rights diplomacy in relation to such debates, the project will contribute to our understanding of the relationship between human rights and gender.

1.2 Quality and appropriateness of the training and of the two-way transfer of knowledge between the researcher and the host

The training in the ScanRights project will focus on improving my knowledge and skills in the areas that are least developed in my CV as well as transferable skills in order to help me achieve my career goals. All training and knowledge transfer will be detailed in the Career Development Plan (CDP) completed in month one (D1):

1.2.1 Training and transfer of knowledge to the experienced researcher at the host

A. New scientific knowledge. With history and human rights as its two core subjects, LU’s History Department is the optimal environment in which to supplement my existing knowledge of U.S. human rights policy with a focus on Scandinavia and a stronger interdisciplinary component. Halldenius will train me in human rights theories in relation to socioeconomic inequality through personal mentoring sessions. Historians with specialties in Swedish human rights history such as Lina Sturfelt, Andreas Tullberg, and Malin Arvidsson will provide feedback on the empirical research and lawyer Olof Beckman will help me gain expertise in international human rights law, in areas relevant to the project through 1:1 sessions. Tullberg’s work on Sweden’s human rights diplomacy at the UN is particularly relevant and we will explore options for collaboration on joint publications. In addition, I will gain exposure to other disciplinary approaches through the LHRRH, where I, for instance, will discuss the project with political scientist Magdalena Bexell, who is currently doing research on the UN Sustainable Development Goals. This training and mentoring by leading human rights scholars from different disciplines will strengthen my scientific knowledge of human rights studies, giving me a broader scientific profile:

B. Teaching and supervision: While I have substantial experience with teaching and lecturing, including the creation of new courses, I need to gain more experience with supervision. As part of the project, I will therefore supervise students in the new MA program in Human Rights Studies and, subject to a relevant PhD project, co-supervise a PhD student with Halldenius. I will also teach elements of the following courses of the same program: “Human rights in the global world: agents, indicators and institutions” and “Human rights in the history of politics and philosophy.” In addition, Halldenius and I will develop and co-teach a research-based course on human rights and economic inequality for the MA program and PhD students (Teach/Supervise). Finally, I will strengthen my teaching skills by taking the course Teaching and learning in higher education (T2). This teaching and supervision experience along with the training will greatly increase my ability to apply for tenure-track positions:

C. Transferable skills. To further my professional development and increase my career prospects, I will take a number of courses to develop new transferable skills. This includes the course Postdoc Career Success designed to motivate and support career structuring through training in time management, productivity improvement, network building, publishing strategies, peer-mentoring groups, and career planning (T1). This training will be a useful supplement to the hands-on project management skills gained from ScanRights by, for instance, planning archival research, developing the teaching course, and arranging seminars. A grant-writing course aimed at obtaining a European Research Council (ERC) Starting Grant (T3) combined with grant-writing supervision by Halldenius will prepare me to apply for future grants. I will take Swedish language courses offered to foreign researchers at LU to improve my ability to read Swedish archives, further my integration at the host institution; and increase my chances of getting a tenure-track position at a Swedish university (M2). I will also gain experience with research coordination by organizing a workshop within the NHRHN, bringing together Nordic human rights researchers (W1). I will gain considerable hands-on experience with dissemination and communication under Halldenius’ supervision (2.2, 2.3). The transferable skills gained through courses and practical experience will help me reach professional maturity.

1.2.2 Previously acquired knowledge that will be transferred to the hosting organization

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21 Burke, "Competing for the Last Utopia?.”

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