

Competing utopias: the relationship between human rights and peace in the policy of the Ford Foundation (1975-2000)

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My research focuses on the tension between the concepts of peace and human rights. At first sight, the concepts of human rights and peace seem to be indissolubly linked: without peace, human rights are violated; without human rights compliance, peace is impossible. Indeed, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) opens with the recognition that "inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world." Unsurprisingly, the Nobel Peace Prize has often been awarded to human rights activists and organizations.

Over time, however, the relationship between the two concepts seems to have changed. Whereas the UN Charter declared as its first purpose the maintaining of international peace, today it could be said that peace has been seized by human rights. Since the 1990s, human rights became a foundation to wage wars,¹ such as in Kosovo (1999) and Iraq (2003). The integration of humanitarian law within human rights law could also be an illustration of how the latter has gained political salience over the former: human rights language could now be used during peace and war times.²

Many scholars have written about the role of human rights in times of peace and war. However, we know little about how civil society itself has defined and used these concepts. Non-state actors, nonetheless, have played an important role in the evolution of human rights and peace. The American anti-Vietnam peace movement, for example, did not use human rights language but many of those activists later became involved in human rights activism.³ The Helsinki Final Act (1975) refers a lot more to peace than to human rights, yet it is remembered for spawning an entire human rights movement.⁴ Aryeh Neier, the retired director of the Open Society Foundation and of Human Rights Watch, even claims that Human Rights Watch took the leading role to integrate the laws of war into human rights.⁵ Therefore, what seems to be missing in current research is a focus on those that practice human rights advocacy.

The transnational turn within International Relations and, more recently, history puts a lot more emphasis on transnational relations of non-state actors.⁶ Most of the time, however, this is done by looking at non-state actors as if they all behave similarly. Just like any other organization, NGOs come in a variety of shapes and sizes promoting different aspects of human rights with different methods. The category 'NGO' is useful to describe in a broad manner non-governmental activities, but as an explanatory category 'NGO' is limited. The abundance of acronyms such as GONGOs (government-organized NGOs), QUANGOs (quasi-NGOs) and many more is just one exemplary illustration of this.⁷ To understand the history of human rights, we need to deconstruct these black boxes and get rid of the cloak of similarity that conceals difference and discontinuity. Therefore, based on the insights gained from my PhD research,⁸ this project uses non-state actors as a lens through which we can examine the concepts of human rights and peace.

One category of non-state actors that has played a pivotal role in human rights and peace activism is the philanthropic foundation. Since 1975 the Ford Foundation, for instance, provided substantial funding to international, regional and local human rights NGOs. With their global scope, institutions such as the Ford and Rockefeller foundations are, therefore, an ideal starting point to examine the relationship between the two concepts in different contexts. Despite their impact, research on philanthropic foundations in general is in its infancy and 'underresearched'.⁹ There are only a handful of book-length contributions.¹⁰ With regard to the human rights program of the Ford Foundation, former Ford Foundation vice-president William D. Carmichael briefly touched upon the foundation's role in the human rights field.¹¹ Although the most insightful so far, William Korey's *Taking on the World's Repressive Regimes* does not offer convincing explanations of how the Foundation developed the program.¹² His chapter on the origins of Human Rights Watch, for example, is biased towards the Ford Foundation leadership. There seems to be no contribution on the human rights programs of the Rockefeller Foundation and Rockefeller Brothers

Fund. The bibliography that the Rockefeller Archive Center keeps on research that has consulted their collections shows that most contributions involve pre-World War II and none about human rights.¹³

My post-doctoral research seeks to fill this gap in foundation research through three interlinked goals. The primary goal is to investigate how the Ford and Rockefeller Foundations have used the concepts of human rights and peace. The two secondary goals are to shed light on the practice of philanthropic foundations and on the relationship between foundation and grantee. To keep the research feasible the geographical scope has been narrowed down to foundations' activities in Europe.

During this one-month research stay, I focused on the records of the Ford Foundation. I approached the records using the Ford Foundation human rights program as a starting point. The adopted strategy was to look for documents in which Ford Foundation staff discussed and defined human rights and peace. These were minutes of meetings, reports of staff retreats, memos between staff, and recommendations for grants. If the concepts of human rights and peace were discussed, these discussions should appear in those documents. The Ford Foundation records are, however, a labyrinth in which researchers could get easily lost. The foundation did not have an archival policy that structured its material in a consistent manner. Therefore, the quality of the records depends to a large extent on the ability of the respective staff person to keep documents structured. Obviously, the variety of that ability differed as much as individuals differ from each other, as the following correspondence between foundation officers David Heaps and Craufurd Goodwin reveals:

"I appreciate fully that your historian's training and archival instincts produce an acute traumatic reaction each time you receive an envelope marked 'confidential'. I am therefore compromising on this occasion by marking only the envelope 'confidential' and leaving the memorandum open for whatever

distribution you may wish. You might, however, consider adopting my technique when I receive any Foundation document similarly marked - read it and then tear it up on the assumption that any piece of paper emanating from any institutional authorship has only transient intellectual and no literary significance."¹⁴

Another reason is that the Ford Foundation did not transfer all of its material to the RAC. The RAC currently holds more than 200m² of documents, +10000 microfilm reels and 20m² of audio-visual material, but a sizeable part of the records that are open to researchers (there is a 10-year embargo) is still kept at the Ford Foundation. How much material is hard to say because it is not clear what was actually transferred. The RAC archivists and the Ford Foundation are gradually finding that out.

In the last 40 years, funding for human rights and peace has been placed under different programs and units. A change of Ford Foundation presidents and program officers often resulted in reorganization. This means that the information we are looking for is scattered over different officers' files. However, files of several officers are not at the RAC and it is unclear whether the Ford Foundation still has them.

Fortunately, the grant files provide a backbone to the Ford Foundation records. These are microfilmed files containing financial and narrative reports, grant proposals and correspondence between the foundation and the grantee. More than 40000 grant files are microfilmed.

The analysis of the gathered data is still ongoing, so here I will limit myself to a number of issues that have struck me, starting with the historiography on the Ford Foundation's human rights program. As mentioned above, the history of the Ford Foundation is to a large extent a wasteland yet to be cultivated. There have

been several attempts from within the Ford Foundation to write a history of the organization. The most notorious one is, perhaps, Francis X. Sutton's attempt to write a full history of the Ford Foundation. Sutton, who was a longtime officer of the foundation, accumulated a lot of material and drafts. But apart from two articles,¹⁵ Sutton never succeeded in accomplishing his ambition. With regard to the human rights program, program officer Margo Picken wrote a draft on the history of the program but, like Sutton's attempt, it did not result into a publication.¹⁶ Picken's unfinished work left a gap in the institutional memory of the foundation that, as it turns out, was filled by William Korey. In my archival research, I came across correspondence between Korey and Ford Foundation program officer Larry Cox in which the former requested financial support for his book on the Ford Foundation. Cox welcomed this request because the foundation lacked a history of its human rights program.¹⁷ Korey was the right person because, according to Cox, he could not be more sympathetic to tell the history of the human rights program.¹⁸ As we know, Korey's contribution on the human rights program of the Ford Foundation is written from a sympathizer's perspective. This correspondence adds an extra layer of context as to why this was the case. Although program director Bradford Smith approved the request,¹⁹ Korey does not acknowledge support from the Ford Foundation in his acknowledgments in the book (he acknowledges support from the Joyce Mertz Foundation). It is unclear whether the Ford Foundation did not support Korey in the end or whether this was on purpose. Nevertheless, this finding merits even more so the study of the history of the Ford Foundation human rights program.

What also has struck me is the impact the Ford Foundation must have had on human rights activism. As one of the few non-governmental sources of funding of human rights activism, it supported and supports numerous organizations such as Human Rights Watch, Human Rights First, the International League for Human Rights and many others. But how significant was its impact? One way to measure the impact is by looking at the funding. As the Ford Foundation regularly reorganized its programs and units, human rights grants are difficult to

track, but a rough estimate indicates that since 1975 the foundation has spent more than two and half billion dollars (in 2015 terms) on human rights.²⁰ As this figure might suggest, the Ford Foundation must have and still has quite an influence in human rights advocacy. How much and in what way, however, we cannot infer from figures only. That is something this project would like to contribute to.

With regard to relationship between peace and human rights, it seems that at the start of the human rights program in 1975, the Ford Foundation officers did not seem to make an explicit link between peace and human rights. In his information paper that initiated the Ford Foundation's human rights program, David Heaps tried to explain the Ford Foundation's past activities in human rights and why the Ford Foundation did not have a proper human rights program before. Heaps wrote that the Ford Foundation had faith in the right to self-determination and/or anticolonialism so that citizens of new states would provide rights to themselves.²¹ The Ford Foundation also put faith in economic development that would bring freedom to developing societies,²² although it turned a blind eye to repression and dictatorship, Heaps admitted. With regard to the Soviet Union and communist Eastern Europe there was no hope change would come at all. Instead, the Ford Foundation focused on protecting European countries against communism.²³

However, there seems to be an ambiguity between civil rights and human rights in Heaps' arguments. On the one hand, he paints a picture of an early Ford Foundation that hoped that the world would develop towards adherence to human rights through state action. Now that it had become clear that states failed to guarantee civil rights, the foundation would step up efforts and move to human rights. On the other hand, we should be careful for post factum appropriations. What Heaps ignored is that the term 'human rights' was largely absent in the preceding years. Right at the beginning, in the Report of the Trustees of the Ford Foundation of 1950, the Ford Foundation used 'human

rights' in a similar fashion to how we understand them today. "[M]an is endowed with certain unalienable rights and must be regarded as an end in himself, not as a cog in the mechanisms of society or a mere means to some social end," the report said.²⁴ Also, according to the trustees one had to choose between two options: "One is democratic, dedicated to the freedom and dignity of the individual. The other is authoritarian, where freedom and justice do not exist, and [p. 16] human rights and truth are subordinated wholly to the state."²⁵

The trustees declared five areas of action of which the first two referred to human rights and peace (the others covered education, economy and science). The first area was that "The Ford Foundation will support activities that promise significant contributions to world peace and the establishment of a world order of law and justice."²⁶ In its second area of action the Ford Foundation would support activities that would "secure greater allegiance to the basic principles of freedom and democracy in the solution of the insistent problems of an ever-changing society."²⁷ Thus, at the beginning of Ford's active philanthropy, it seemed to promote rights that went beyond citizenship of a particular state.

Nevertheless, the emphasis seemed to have been on peace. The 1950 Report of the Trustees said: "Among all problems in human relations, the greatest challenge is the achievement of peace throughout the world. There is vital need for adequate military preparedness to protect the free nations of the world against aggression, and for concerted effort to mitigate current tensions. But there is also the greater long-range need for unremitting efforts to remove war's basic causes and to build a world-foundation for permanent peace. This is the greatest single issue of our times. In the balance is the very survival of man."²⁸ The next year the Ford Foundation officers followed through this line by contributing to peace by "assisting people in some critical areas to achieve a better standard of living; by advancing better understanding among peoples through the exchange of ideas and the exchange of persons; by reducing tensions; and by supporting the activities of international agencies."²⁹ The 1951 annual

report singled out as examples for peace initiatives the International Rescue Committee for providing relief to exiles;³⁰ the East European Fund that provided relief to Soviet exiles in the US and translated books into Russian through the Chekhov Publishing Company;³¹ activities that today would be categorized under 'human rights'. The second area of action was translated into 'Strengthening Free Institutions' to support freedom of speech, of the press, of worship and of association.³² For this area, the officers funded, among others, the Free University of Berlin; the national student center in Manila, or the International Press Institute. Although the Free University of Berlin or the International Press Institute remained grantees in the following years, the emphasis on human rights and freedoms disappeared. Indeed, a content analysis shows that 'human rights' or 'freedom of' was used only in the annual reports of the early 1950s and then disappeared for almost 20 years to resurface again in 1975. Peace, on the contrary, remained present in almost every annual report.

More research is necessary but one reason for this disappearance might be a shift of the Ford Foundation towards domestic issues. In 1952, the foundation established the Fund for the Republic that would "support activities directed toward the elimination of restrictions on freedom of thought, inquiry, and expression in the United States, and the development of policies and procedures best adapted to protect these rights."³³ Perhaps, the so-called Second Red Scare—the heightened repression of communists in the US—forced the Ford Foundation to put the American house in order first.

When we fast-forward to the 1990s, a different picture emerges. At a 1992 staff retreat Ford Foundation program officers discussed the program consequences of the end of the Cold War. Remarkably, with regard to peace and security the Ford Foundation staff seemed to advocate the use of force. During the Cold War the goal was to prevent a nuclear conflict but with the disappearance of the Soviet Union as a superpower numerous small-scaled conflicts appeared. According to the staff, security concepts such as deterrence, arms control, or alliances were

now outdated. A new approach on the use of force was necessary, it was proposed. "Are there situations in which armed intervention could be viewed as problem-solver?" ³⁴ the staff wondered. Although they left the question unanswered, compared to the 1950s, it reveals a very different relationship to peace.

New issues emerged. At the same staff retreat, the Ford Foundation officers discussed how they could address ethnic conflict and minority rights issues. Their human rights work, they said, helps to prevent ethnic conflict. In the case of Yugoslavia, however, the focus was on the prevention of war and not on the prevention of ethnic conflict.³⁵

Approaches from the past had been transformed into problems of the present. Once, the Ford Foundation hoped that self-determination would bring justice. In the 1990s, the right to self-determination emerged as a new problem. To deal with this, the staff suggested focusing on individual rights as a basis of group rights.³⁶ For them, the progress gained in individual rights should not be 'diluted' by group rights.

Also, providing relief was no longer part of the foundation's core business, it seemed. The staff was worried about the directions human rights organizations were going. There was a sense of "diversion of the human rights discussion into humanitarian concerns." ³⁷ HROs involved themselves in war and relief, something the Ford Foundation staff was unhappy with. "This contradicts basic Ford Foundation principles," they said, "as the Ford Foundation is not a relief organization."³⁸

The role of NGOs brings us to our goal to shed light on the relationship between foundation and grantees. Human rights organizations were not spared of criticism. At a 1997 meeting on "Strengthening Peace" the participants wondered how NGOs could adopt a more constructive role in which they would move

beyond merely condemning and do more educating.³⁹ What was needed was that human rights organizations would leave their "role of critics to take on the role of helping to build societal institutions in post-conflict period."⁴⁰ Moreover, according to Ford staff, many human rights grantees had difficulty adapting to the post-Cold War reality.⁴¹ The Ford Foundation saw its role as strengthening weak organizations and clarifying agenda and issues.

During my PhD research it became clear that the Ford Foundation did not shy away from controlling its grantees. The foundation forced upon the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights (IHF) years of restructuring. It was not clear whether this was an exception but the findings in this research stay suggest that it was rather the rule. In 1995 the foundation gave substantial funding to the Management Assistance Group—no less than \$1,500,000—to strengthen grantees in the Rights and Social Justice program in their management, planning, fundraising and communications.⁴² This shows the proactive role of the foundation. One should wonder who is making the agenda: the human rights organization or the funder.

More systemized analysis is necessary but what these snippets reveal is that the Ford Foundation defined the relationship between peace and human rights very differently in different eras. Whereas the Ford Foundation seemed to have started with a pronounced focus on peace and a complete absence of human rights, in the 1990s the relations seemed to have reversed. However, we should also take into account that what we would call typical 'human rights' issues, were once perhaps categorized under different signifiers. As the early actions of the Ford Foundation might indicate, 'peace' or even 'welfare' could have incorporated human rights before it became a norm on its own.

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