

# DOCTORAATSONDERZOEK - DOCTORATS

BART DE SUTTER

## **The Paradox of Virtue. Helsinki Human Rights Activism During the Cold War (1975-1995)**

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Human rights activists are devoting their time, knowledge and often their own money to a cause in which they have no direct and immediate benefit. In doing so they practice virtue. Interested in the fate of people far away they are guided by the principle of promoting human rights everywhere for everyone. But just like anyone else they have to deploy their precious time, staff and funding carefully and strategically to achieve their goals. No NGO is capable of addressing all human rights violations no matter how much funding it has or how well-equipped it is. Moreover, there are thousands of NGOs promoting universal human rights. All of them have to judiciously select their goals and are in competition with each other. The hypothesis of this study is that in order to be effective, human rights activism has to fit into the interests of those actors that provide resources.

So far, the literature on human rights activism takes the (uncritical) views of involved actors for granted or lack empirical analysis. Therefore, based on a combination of Pierre Bourdieu's reflexive sociology and resource mobilization theory, this dissertation has chosen to conduct thorough archival exploration to explain why certain types of activism were successful and others were not.

The case study of the dissertation is the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights (IHF), a federation of so-called Helsinki

groups that monitored their governments on the compliance of the Helsinki Final Act that was signed in August 1975 by the US, Canada, the European states except Albania, and the Soviet Union. Established in 1982, the IHF was formed at the initiative of Helsinki Watch, the predecessor of Human Rights Watch, and was funded primarily by the Ford Foundation, the American philanthropic organization. In joining the IHF, these Helsinki groups engaged themselves in promoting the human rights principles of the Helsinki Final Act and were at the same time involved in a competition for resources.

Parsing the history of Helsinki human rights activism from 1975 to 1995, each chapter analyzes a point of crystallization in which the tension between principles and interests came to the fore. The empirical analysis starts in chapter 2 with a discussion on the formation of Helsinki Watch and encompasses the period 1975-1982. In contrast to what the literature states, Helsinki Watch was not the first and certainly not the only American NGO interested in the Helsinki Act. What we remember today as the American Helsinki committee was the project that survived the various conflicts that existed within the human rights field.

Chapter 3 examines the reasons for Helsinki Watch to form a European-based federation of Helsinki groups in September 1982. As was the case with the formation of Helsinki Watch, the establishment of the IHF had more to do with conflicts of interests than with principles. The ongoing tension with the Ford Foundation, the inauguration of the Reagan administration, and the coming to halt of the Helsinki process all threatened the survival of Helsinki

Watch. It came up with a two-way solution: expansion towards Europe with the IHF, and expansion towards Central- and South-America with the Americas Watch. Moreover, there was already a European initiative called the European Helsinki Group/International Helsinki Association with very similar goals. By finding out why this European group was ignored, we understand how Helsinki Watch handled the tension between principles and interests.

The next chapter discusses in three parts how the IHF and its members developed during the years 1982-1988. By looking at the relations with Helsinki Watch and the Ford Foundation, we trace why the IHF had difficulties integrating within the European human rights field. The chapter also discusses the ambivalent relation between Helsinki Watch and the Reagan administration and how it gradually developed its global ambitions that resulted into the formation of Human Rights Watch. The third part goes deeper into the failed attempts to create IHF-member committees in the UK and Belgium. The analysis of these stumble blocks make clear what principles fitted which interests.

The last empirical chapter examines the consequences of the end of the Cold war for the IHF. Due to the geopolitical transformation, the federation underwent an identity and financial crisis during the years 1989-1995. While in 1989 the IHF still depended on American money and knowledge, in 1995 it was almost completely Europeanized.

These empirical chapters confirm the hypothesis that the promotion of human rights depends on the struggle for scarce resources.

The paradox of human rights activism is, thus, that beneath the principles there is an inevitable struggle that inevitably leads to the distortion of these principles.