



Master's Thesis Evaluation Form

Student's name: Anna Libová

Thesis title: Changing Attitudes towards Human Rights in Europe: Perceptions of Czech Non-Profit Organisations

Name of the supervisor: Ondřej Císař

Name of the opponent: Paul Blokker

What are the strengths and weaknesses of the thesis? Please give your reasons for the suggested grade in detail below.

1. *Does the author show understanding of one or more theories, and use theory to generate a hypothesis or to make the problem area more understandable.*

Comments:

The theoretical framework developed in chapter two is fair and interesting, and points to important issues regarding human rights in contemporary times. It suffers, however, from an approach that is too much grounded in standard, institutional (UN) definitions of what human rights are and do. Admittedly, the author does refer to the idea of three generations of human rights taken from Karel Vašák, but this idea is not taken much further, nor is there a discussion of the main theories in the sociology of human rights, such as to be found in the work of, e.g., Judith Blau, Lydia Morris, Kate Nash, or Bryan Turner or even T.H. Marshall. In this regard, I find the thesis is less robustly developed in its theoretical approach, in that it fails to discuss different sociological approaches to human rights, and different sociological dimensions of human rights (as political claims, as universally valid norms, as institutional instruments, as means of integration). What comes through in the thesis is an understanding of the (development) of human rights as an increasingly prominent discourse and institutionalized practice from 1945 onwards, but there is no sociological and critical reflection on how human rights have been contested from the start (in particular regarding the European Convention on Human Rights), nor on why rights have now become a widespread legal-political language throughout the world. What emerges from the thesis is a singularistic understanding of human rights, and social forces as being either in favour or against. I feel this is too simplistic. In a related sense, the thesis does not discuss alternative views to the main thesis proposed, that is, that in current times rights are under threat. Many scholars have argued opposite opinions, that is, that human rights have become an increasingly robust part of national and inter- and transnational arrangements in the last two decades or so.

2. *Is the research question articulated clearly and properly? Is the research question sufficiently answered in the conclusion?*



Comments:

The research question is fair and rather appropriate in its exploration of the relation between human rights and non-state actors and activists, but could have been elaborated more. What I find somewhat problematic is that the research question does not identify the following dimensions: 1) why social actors are increasingly engaging with human rights, since two decades or so?; and 2) what is the basis of the presupposed changes in attitudes towards human rights? (in other words, the research question takes for granted that there are changes, but it should make this object of investigation).

3. Is the thesis based on relevant research and literature and does it accurately summarize and integrate the information?

Comments:

The thesis is based on relevant (qualitative) and original research and on sound literature (but with the important caveat mentioned under 1.).

4. What is the quality of the data or the other sources? Are the sample method, data collection and data analysis appropriate?

Comments:

The selection of the organizations and interviewees seems to me appropriate. Also, the choice to do semi-structured, qualitative interviews seems to me highly appropriate in this research. What appears to me less fleshed out is the analytical approach to the data. It does not become clear to me why the specific dual dimension is taken towards the presupposed changes in attitudes. Two main dimensions, and 8 sub-dimensions are mentioned, but these are partly overlapping and it is not clear where the dimensions come from. I suspect that one problem is the lack of sustained discussion of sociological theories of human rights, which means that the two dimensions have not been robustly theorized. Dimension 1 seems to indicate a political-scientific, realist or a legal-realist approach that assumes that (hegemonic) political power and rights are strongly linked, but this is debatable. Dimension 2 refers to legitimacy, but there is no sustained discussion of forms of legitimacy (normative, sociological).

In terms of the empirical data produced in the thesis, I have some problems with their relation to the main object of investigation, that is, human rights. It seems to me that too often the relation is not clear, and that questions and answers are related to different matters. Many of the questions are rather addressing issues of the operation and functioning of the interviewee's organisation. Also, there is a tendency to equate values with rights.



5. *Are the findings relevant to the research question? Are the conclusions of the thesis based on strong arguments?*

Comments:

The findings are mostly relevant to the research question, even if sometimes in an indirect way, and some interesting insights are being put forward, e.g., on the role of formal politics and politicians in the change in attitudes towards human rights and also regarding the opening up of societies due to globalisation as a challenging factor.

The final section of the conclusions is problematic, though, in that a kind of evolutionary/civilizational argument is put forward, in that the critique on human rights is part of a ‘natural stage in the development of the world’. I am unsure of where this comes from and how it is supported by the research in the thesis. I also feel that the idea that human rights being challenged as being part of a later stage of the development of rights is a historically problematic reading of the emergence of rights in the first place.

6. *Are the author’s thoughts distinguished unambiguously from the borrowed ideas?*

Comments:

The author very clearly discussed when she uses ideas from others, and how such ideas are used in the thesis.

7. *Is the thesis containing original/innovative research (in terms of topic, approach, and/or findings)?*

Comments:

The thesis contains an original and important research topic (I am not aware of extensive research in these issues in the Central-Eastern European context) and original research data (the gathering of extensive, qualitative interview data on the topic).

8. *What is the quality of style and other formal requirements?*

Comments:

The style of writing and the set-up/structure of the thesis are fine. There are some minor issues with the English language.

9. *Are there any other strengths and weaknesses of the thesis, which are not included in the previous questions? Please list them if any.*

Strengths

- A great strength of the thesis is its topic selection. There are few in-depth analyses of the relation between human rights, on the one hand, and social actors, movements, and NGOs, on the other.



- The conclusions point to an increasing polarization of Czech society and also to a political factor in changes of popular attitudes of human rights. These seem to me relevant and important insights for further (comparative) research.

Comments:

10. *What topic do you suggest for the discussion in the thesis defence?*

Comments: The specific role of non-profit organizations in the promotion of human rights (distinctive discourse, specific instruments and strategies, the defence of specific (minority) groups)

Overall assessment of the thesis:

(Please, state clearly whether the thesis is or is not recommended for a defence and write the main reasons for the recommendation).

I recommend this thesis for defence. The topic is original and of great relevance in the current European and Central-European context. The thesis constitutes a coherent whole. It addresses important issues in what is an increasingly important field of research in sociology, that is, the sociology of human rights. In addition, the thesis contains rather extensive empirical data gathered by the student, and the analysis of the data.

Proposed grade: good

(*excellent, very good, good, fail*)

Date: 14 June, 2017

Signature: Paul Blokker