



Talking human rights: How social movement activists are constructed and constrained by human rights discourse

International Sociology
28(4) 409–428

© The Author(s) 2013

Reprints and permissions:

sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav

DOI: 10.1177/0268580913490769

iss.sagepub.com



David Landy

Trinity College Dublin, Ireland

Abstract

Human rights discourse is central for the work of international social movements. Viewing human rights as a context-dependent and socially constructed discourse, this article investigates how it is used by a specific social movement – Israel-critical diaspora Jewish activists – and argues that it can simultaneously challenge and reproduce existing practices of domination. The article applies contemporary critiques of human rights to the case of Palestine, where this discourse has arguably been used to undermine Palestinians’ political subjectivity and collective struggle, and legitimise outside intervention. Nevertheless, transnational groups critical of Israel, particularly diaspora Jewish organisations, rely on a human rights frame. There are several reasons for this: it offers activists a means to achieve ‘cognitive liberation’, to speak about the issue and to frame their activities so as to attract recruits. The article investigates this paradoxical role of human rights, and recommends understanding it as a language which both constrains and enables the practice of transnational solidarity.

Keywords

Diaspora Jews, human rights, Israel/Palestine, social constructivism, social movements, transnationalism

Introduction

The increasing use of human rights language in the international political sphere has led to a growing number of writers critically assessing this discourse. Such criticism has moved on from ethnographically based criticism that human rights is inherently a Eurocentric way of seeing the world (Pollis and Schwab, 1980), to more recent arguments that it is the handmaid to a new imperialism (Brown, 2004; Chandler, 2006;

Corresponding author:

David Landy, Department of Sociology, Trinity College Dublin, 3 College Green, Dublin 2, Ireland.

Email: dlandy@tcd.ie

Douzinas, 2007; Žizek, 2005). These authors argue that human rights discourse reduces its objects to victims for the ‘civilised’ West to dispose of, and stands against the insurgent political projects of these people (Brown, 2004; Rancière, 2004). While there is some validity to this criticism, it misses something crucial to human rights discourse. Though these critics address the question as to who is the subject (or rather the object) of human rights, the advocate of human rights is largely absent. The question is why do those who wish to achieve political change use human rights if it is such an inappropriate means of achieving change? This article seeks to address this question, arguing that by examining the figure of the human rights activist as a social movement actor engaged in local contention, one can come to a more complex understanding of human rights discourse as a negotiation between situated local contention and universalist claims. By situating human rights discourse within local social contexts, sociological epistemologies can contribute to a debate commonly held between legal, political and philosophical disciplines.

Sociologists have critiqued how human rights discourse is often studied in a legalistic and abstracted fashion (Estévez, 2011; Stammers, 2009). Thus in order to answer the above question I focus on a specific, albeit somewhat generalisable instance of human rights discourse, examining the case of diaspora Jewish support for Palestinian rights. While I discuss the criticism of the human rights regime imposed by outside actors on Palestine, this article is centrally about how and why activists wishing to *change* the situation and support Palestinians also use human rights language. I first examine the argument of critics of human rights and how it applies to the particular case of Palestine, contending that we only see a partial picture by concentrating on how human rights discourse is used by Northern elites. Critics, I argue, fail to take the figure of the human rights activist seriously, but rather see him or her at best as a sociological dope and at worst as an ideologue of imperialism. This characterisation fails to capture the reality of situated human rights discourse, which I examine with reference to the process of rhetorical formation among British Jewish critics of Israel.

I discuss the Israel-critical movement among diaspora Jews due to the especial importance of human rights discourse in this movement. Diaspora Jewish opposition to Israel has developed into a recognisable movement after the start of the Second Intifada in 2000. It engages in the usual work of social movements – lobbying, education work and protests. While different organisations have different priorities, the underlying aim is similar – to challenge Zionist hegemony among their fellow Jews and to challenge Israel among the wider public, speaking *as Jews*. Although a very specific movement, its main rhetorical tropes – especially the use of human rights language – are also used in the wider Palestine Solidarity Movement, and thus this movement can be seen as an useful example of how social movements deploy human rights, with a degree of generalisability to other distant issue movements possible.¹

This article is based on research into diaspora Jewish opposition to Israel – primarily a study of British groups from 2006 to 2009, followed up by research into groups elsewhere in the diaspora (Landy, 2011). The largest British organisations are Jews for Justice for Palestinians (JfJFP) formed in 2002 which has about 1600 signatories and Independent Jewish Voices (IJV) formed in 2006 with some 650 signatories. Along with other smaller groups they constitute a small but growing tendency among the quarter of

a million British Jews. I studied this movement through a mixture of documentary analysis (analysing internal minutes, online communication and movement productions as well as material written about these groups), participant observations of events run by these groups and semi-structured interviews with two dozen activists from a variety of groups, selecting less active members as well as those who were centrally involved. I supplemented this data collection with analysis of edited collections of memoirs wherein leading activists presented their motivations for involvements (Abarbanel, 2012; Karpf et al., 2008; Polner and Merken, 2007).

Thirteen of the interviewees were female, 11 male, a sample which reflects the relatively even gender division of those involved (based on signatories to the IJV statement, and on attendees at meetings of JfJfP). Those interviewed were mainly older people, with 10 interviewees under 50 and 14 over 50, indicating the age demographics of this movement and to an extent, an ageing Jewish community. Twenty interviewees lived in the Greater London area, and four elsewhere in the country. This figure is even more skewed than that of British Jewry where about 70% live in the Greater London area, but is very representative of the London-centric nature of organised Israel-critical Jewish activism in the UK. There was no significant difference in responses between London-based and non-London based interviewees, or between those London residents who were originally from London, and those who came from outside London and had been involved with Israel-critical activities elsewhere in the UK (four of my London sample).

Interviewees who self-identified as 'highly involved' (13 of the sample) were – with one exception – involved in more than one group, indicating the highly networked nature of this movement. Another indication of this network is that nine of the 13 were contributors to Just Peace UK (JPUK), which was formerly an active group in its own right, but which had been transformed into an open online forum. Those who identified as 'moderately involved' or 'slightly involved' were generally active in only one group as one would expect, and tended not to contribute to JPUK. As such, the sample did not simply consist of those involved in the two largest groups. Both the leadership as well as those more peripherally involved in all the key smaller English groups were represented. In addition, these Jewish groups do not exist in a vacuum, but are networked to society-wide Palestinian rights groups in the UK. The sample reflected this involvement, with 10 interviewees involved with non-Jewish groups. The question as to how representative these groups and their discourse around human rights are of Israel-critical Jewish groups elsewhere in the diaspora, and to wider Palestinian rights groups, is addressed in the article's final section. This article draws primarily upon interview material, but also on documentary analysis of the minutes and other documents of JfJfP, from 2002 to 2007, in order to discuss how movement members understood their actions, with particular reference to how they used and understood the language of human rights and related universalist concepts such as cosmopolitanism and justice in their work.

My main argument is that human rights rhetoric should be examined as a socially constructed discourse, rather than a set of abstract legalisms. As such, this discourse, as Stammers (2009) contends, may serve to consolidate as well as challenge existing power relations. Thus, on one hand human rights is necessary for such distant issue activists to successfully conduct their activism among fellow westerners. Nevertheless this talk has shaped their understanding of Israel/Palestine and I discuss this channelling with

reference to the idea of movement actors being shaped by the 'discursive repertoires' they deploy (Steinberg, 1999). I conclude by suggesting that the best way to examine this universalist discourse is as a local discursive strategy which, when translated from the local field of contention, may have unintended consequences.

Palestine and the contemporary critique of human rights

Early attempts to formulate a sociological understanding of human rights generally took the approach that everyone has human rights by virtue of being human, or in Brian Turner's (1993) argument, because of the universality of human frailty. Neil Stammers (1999: 990) has criticised this approach to human rights as relying on 'metaphysical abstraction', and has argued for a more historically grounded and processual approach. This social constructionist approach has directed more recent sociological writings on the issue. According to Estévez (2011), sociology has concentrated on three main areas in this regard: the relationship between human rights and social movements, the construction of human subjects/objects in human rights discourse, and the role of this discourse in reformulating the idea of citizenship.

There can be no doubt as to the usefulness of human rights discourse for social movements. Campaigns everywhere use human rights, in Ronald Dworkin's (1977) disapproving phrase, as 'a trump card' to buttress their claims. This explains why a lack of rights is the most common form of grievance expressed by oppositional groups (Gamson, 1992). More sanguine formulations see human rights as a means for individuals and social movement actors to press their claims against existing power arrangements (Sjoberg et al., 2001). However this aspect of human rights is only one side of the story; Stammers (2009) takes a more critical position in his study of the historical development of human rights, discussing how they often develop from challenges to power towards a means of institutionalising it. This is the inevitable paradox of human rights, and one could argue, of social movements: that 'the drive towards institutionalization has, historically, been seen as a key part of struggles to change relations and structures of power ... [but] once rights are institutionalized, then they are likely to play a highly ambivalent role in respect of power' (Stammers, 1999: 999). In discussing the contention over 'natural rights' in the 18th and 19th centuries, Stammers argues that there is nothing inherent within the discourse of such rights that would lead to them becoming buttresses of power and bureaucratic control (while accepting that they subsequently did so). Rather, the interpretation of rights was subject to contention, with those seeking to advance emancipatory social and political projects in the late 18th century, whether in Haiti, France or the USA, using the language of rights in their movement activism. As such, rights discourse can be seen as capable of simultaneously challenging and supporting existing discourses and relations of power.

Other writers are less forgiving of human rights, accusing it of both undercutting insurgent political projects in the global South and enabling Northern intervention into these areas. The central issue with human rights, according to Wendy Brown, is that 'rights are not simply attached to Kantian subjects, but rather produce and regulate the subjects to whom they are assigned' (Brown, 2004: 459). As for what subjects human

rights produce – the answer many give is that it produces victims (Douzinas, 2007; Rancière, 2004; Žizek, 2005). This is partly, as Brown argues, because the human rights project, when limited to liberal negative rights, rather than positive rights (freedom from the state, rather than the right to eat) ‘carries implicitly anti-political aspirations for its subjects – that is, casts subjects as yearning to be free of politics and indeed of all collective determinations of ends’ (Brown, 2004: 456). The subject thereby produced is decontextualised and individualised, which undercuts the political aims of oppressed peoples. And thus human rights, a political project despite its disavowals, ‘stands as a critique of dissonant political projects, converges neatly with the requisites of liberal imperialism and global free trade, and legitimates both as well’ (Brown, 2004: 461).

A related critique of human rights is that by labelling people as individualised victims, it is a discourse which enables Northern organisations to intervene in the global South. Human rights, in this aspect, becomes a linguistic signifier akin to ‘development’, one which produces decontextualised, atomised and depoliticised victims who need outside assistance, an attractive discourse for outsiders seeking justification to intervene, but of limited use to the objects of human rights. Containing within itself both colonising North and colonised South (Yiftachel, 2009), Israel/Palestine can be seen as a prime example of this application of human rights discourse. In the occupied Palestinian territories, human rights are used as a reason for intervention by all non-Palestinian actors, including Israel. In order to explain this, attention has been drawn to the liminal legal and political position of Palestinians in the Occupied Territories (Makdisi, 2008). Here, it has been argued, Palestinians have been reduced to the level of Agamben’s *homo sacer*, or bare life stripped of political rights (Lentin, 2008). Lentin draws on Hannah Arendt’s (1973) observation that only those who fall outside the protection of states are offered the poor consolation of weakly enforced human rights, to explain why human rights language has been so assiduously applied to Palestinians.

The legal scholar Raef Zreik (2004) has taken up the blindness to context within human rights discourse, arguing that by focusing on law at the expense of historical context, this language has failed to address the Palestinian question. The key Palestinian question, according to Zreik, lies in redressing their historical loss – the fact their land was taken over and they were alternately expelled (the refugees outside Israel), placed under military occupation (those in the Occupied Territories) and subjected to discrimination (Palestinians inside Israel itself). The language of human rights addresses the status quo situation of these disparate groups, thereby retaining the fragmentation imposed on them by Israel. As Zreik puts it, while the core of a solution to the problem lies in addressing collective historical loss, ‘[f]ocusing on legal redress implies renunciation of the historical context and therefore renunciation of the right to address in some fashion the wider losses’ (Zreik, 2004: 78). He does not demand a rejection of human rights language but rather that it ‘be used in a way that reintroduces the totality of the Palestinian experience that was fragmented in 1948’ (Zreik, 2004: 78).

The actions of international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and aid bodies in Palestine demonstrates where the renunciation of context may lead. These organisations have incurred a growing body of criticism for depoliticising struggle, contributing to a normalisation of the Occupation, enabling the growth of unrepresentative Palestinian elites and furthering a foreign neoliberal agenda for the Occupied Territories (Challand,

2009; Hanafi and Tabar, 2005; Jad, 2007; Merz, 2012). Their humanitarian discourse has been especially singled out for criticism; Ilana Feldman has written of Gaza's 'humanitarianism problem', echoing Wendy Brown by arguing that 'humanitarianism has been utilized as a tool in struggles against Palestinian political aspirations' (Feldman, 2009: 28), partly by evacuating the historical frame, and partly by turning Gaza into a 'humanitarian space'. Israel, which enthusiastically promotes the humanitarian frame has, with the complicity of international organisations, turned Gaza into 'a space where, aside from military actors, the only people who can be there are those who are part of a humanitarian operation, whether as victims or as aid workers. In this sense, it is not only Gaza as a space, but Gazans as a people, that can be further isolated by the humanitarian frame' (Feldman, 2009: 33).

As Feldman writes, the problem in Gaza is primarily political, and viewing it as a humanitarian issue obfuscates this fact. This conflict between the political and humanitarian frames can also be seen with reference to the torture of Palestinian prisoners, and how treating this practice exclusively as a human rights issue has a depoliticising effect. Audrey Bomse (2006) charts how widespread torture is in Israel/Palestine and how Palestinian NGOs working on the issue see these abuses as playing a crucial role in enforcing military control, through intimidating the entire Palestinian population of the Occupied Territories. However, according to Bomse, Israeli human rights NGOs shy away from linking torture to the political/historical context, preferring to frame it as a flawed police procedure. Bomse criticises what she sees as a narrow legalistic focus, as this serves to veil torture's role in maintaining military occupation and to 'lend the Occupation its veneer of legality' (2006: 209). Israeli groups are allowed to adopt this stance because many international human rights groups share the same language and non-political approach in order to justify their own interventions.

This indicates that there may be two separate ways of framing Palestine – the political/historical frame and the humanitarian one. The former focuses on the collective political goal of Palestinian political freedom grounded in a sense of historical injustice, while the latter ignores this historical context and focuses on redress to Palestinians from within the present political status quo. Yet while there may be conflicts between the humanitarian and political frames, there is also convergence. For instance, claims for the right of return for Palestinian refugees are framed as both an inherent human right under the Geneva Conventions, and also an overturning of a historical injustice. One can see these two ways of framing Palestine as corresponding to the two modalities of human rights which Stammers identified – the humanitarian framing relates to the deployment of human rights to buttress existing institutional power structures, while the political one relates more to the subversive nature of human rights discourse. These modalities do not necessarily contradict each other, as the case of the Right of Return indicates, but often do lead to different political routes.

The particular way human rights discourse has been applied to Palestine especially by state actors is clearly not the only one. Legal documents are 'intertextual', as critical legal scholars have argued; and the interpretation of human rights is dependent on social and political contexts (Baxi, 2003). In certain political contexts – as has been argued in the case of Latin America – human rights discourse can be used not to disavow and undercut collective political struggles from below, but to advance them (Estévez, 2008;

Rothman and Oliver, 1999). To claim then that ‘human rights have been turned from a discourse of rebellion and dissent into that of state legitimacy’ (Douzinas, 2000: 7) is to overstate and simplify the issue.

This indicates a key problem with the writings of those who Stammers has labelled the ‘uncritical critics’ of human rights, in that they uncritically accept that human rights can be reduced to their institutionalised forms, thereby ignoring the role of social struggles in shaping human rights and human rights’ consequent ambiguous relationship with power (2009: 103). While such critics have successfully outlined problems with the foundationalist approach to human rights, they have sidestepped the questions which more constructivist approaches ask, and fail to address why people use this discourse. Actual human rights advocates rarely appear in their critiques; when they do, they take the form of simple folk who do not understand where human rights discourse leads or devious intellectuals who understand it all too well; government bureaucrats or elite intellectuals who use the silky language of ‘preventing suffering’ to justify imperialist invasions (Brown, 2004). Those well-meaning individuals involved in human rights movements appear to be classic sociological dopes blindly fulfilling a social function and enthusiastically contributing to treating the majority world as a helpless victim. As Alain Finkelraut declaims: ‘The humanitarian generation does not like men – they are too disconcerting – but enjoys taking care of them ... it prefers handicapped people’ (2000: 91). Such assertions are, to say the least, insufficient. It would be surprising if activists who deploy human rights were so blindly apolitical or cynical, or as unreflective of their use of human rights as such critiques imply.

By focusing on these advocates, I am heeding Upendra Baxi’s (2000) call for a ‘genealogy of human rights’. Noting the many ways that human rights constitute different constellations of meaning in different times to different subjects, he concludes that it is not in fact one thing, one discourse, but a multiple means of claims-making and narrative building. This being the case, he recommended that researchers attend to the moment of human rights discourse – how it is deployed by the specific people who deploy it – to understand what it means. Thus, a full exploration of human rights with regard to Israel/Palestine would not simply examine its use by Israel and western elites, but also by Palestinians and foreign solidarity activists. In the next section I do so, investigating how a particular group of activists, Israel-critical Jews, deploy the language of human rights and the effect this language has on their activism.

The situated use of human rights

In exploring how these movement activists negotiate dominant discourses to achieve change, I draw upon two theories of actor agency common in social movement theory – frames and discursive repertoires. Frames are ‘emergent action-oriented sets of beliefs that inspire meaning and legitimate social movement activities and campaigns’ (Benford, 1997: 416). They are more than cognitive frameworks people possess; fundamentally they are directive ideas – concepts which movement participants deploy in order to achieve their aims. This emphasis on functionality is one of the chief strengths of frame theory – it enables us to assess how actors consciously and actively engage in the contestation of meaning (Benford and Snow, 2000).

While frame theory highlights actor agency in manipulating discourse, it only tells half the story since actors are also influenced by, and do not reside outside these discourses. Movement actors should be seen as engaging in a situated process of co-constructing a set of 'discursive repertoires' with hegemonic powers, since 'collective actors are partly captives within the discursive fields that they seek to manipulate' (Steinberg, 1999: 772). Unlike frames, which can be characterised as marketing strategies which materialise fully-formed from the head of social movement entrepreneurs in order to target audiences, discursive repertoires emerge in dialogic contention through the process of struggle within structured settings. Social movement actors, to paraphrase Marx, re-cognise reality, but not within cognitive frameworks of their own choosing. Such actors can be seen as being embedded in the discourses they are trying to change, or in Pierre Bourdieu's terminology, they are captive within their fields of practice (Bourdieu, 1990). The question is to what extent they unwittingly accept the dominant discourses of the field (as Bourdieu would assert), and to what extent they are enabled to challenge and change the field as Steinberg maintains. In the particular case I investigate, a dialogic tension exists on multiple levels, with human rights language both enabling and constraining political and solidarity work.

Thus, when examining how movement actors deploy the language of human rights I seek to understand first how they use it as an action frame within their domestic activism and second, how they themselves and their understanding of Israel/Palestine are channelled by human rights language. This contributes towards an understanding of how framing and discursive repertoires are used by social movement actors, as well as how the specific discourse of human rights is operationalised. The aspect of human rights I examine in the next section is primarily its use as a universalist discourse in domestic contention, since this specific aspect of human rights enables individuals to engage effectively in movement activism. I thematically divide their use of human rights into three related areas, although these areas often interconnect. I argue that human rights language is used first to achieve cognitive liberation, second to grant Israel-critical Jews the right to speak on this issue, and third, to engage in effective negotiation and contention with Zionists and fellow Jews. After looking at *why* activists use human rights in domestic situations, I examine the effect of this language on their relationship with Palestinians in the following section, arguing that the two main modalities in the language of human rights identified in the above discussion – the humanitarian/institutionalised mode and the political/subversive one, often intertwine in these relationships.

Human rights and cognitive liberation

Doug McAdam first proposed the term 'cognitive liberation' to describe how students from the Northern US states, by being involved in Freedom Summer activities in Mississippi in 1964, managed to 'free their mind' from hegemonic common-sense understandings of race they had grown up with (1988). McAdam emphasised the importance of experiencing the conditions of life in Mississippi in order to achieve this liberation. While such experiences are important, cognitive liberation also needs the presence of contextually relevant frames in order to overcome 'informational haze' and ambiguity

(Futrell, 2003). Human rights discourse offers such a liberatory framing mechanism for critics of Israel.

This is because universal concepts such as human rights, peace and justice can be used to transcend particularistic nationalist narratives, something which was necessary for many Jewish critics of Israel, due to their previous Zionism. Most of my interviewees', 18 of the 24, ' had had a specific concrete commitment to Israel, whether this was involvement in Zionist youth groups or previous emigration to Israel. Thus, they needed the conceptual tools to free themselves from that commitment.² This is not specific to my set of interviewees; a popular style of book within the broader Jewish diaspora movement comprises edited collections of Jewish critics discussing why they support Palestinian rights, after having previously been supportive of Israel. In talking about this 'coming out' process, these former Zionists often describe how human rights and universalist language provide the framing necessary to free themselves from their adherence to Israel (esp. Abarbanel, 2012; Polner and Merken, 2007). Likewise, among interviewees who had been former Zionists, universalist concepts provided a key to cognitive liberation. For instance:

*Justin:*³ I think for me, Israel and Zionism was kind of quasi-religious. And then when I went there, I realised it was an ideology that could be thought through and critiqued in a way that any other ideology could, and that really nationalism didn't fit into my ideological mindset at all.

This anti-nationalist trope was also recognised by interviewees who had not been Zionists previously. As one of them joked about these former Zionists:

Frances: It's all this stuff about 'I believed in an Israeli state and I got there, and perhaps I don't believe in any state'.

The sudden perviousness of Zionism to criticism once Israel/Palestine had been visited underlines McAdam's point about the importance of experience for cognitive liberation. 'Seeing Palestine' both legitimates and authenticates criticism of Israel/Palestine, and allows people to find numerous specificities to criticise. However, for most activists, what underpins this ability to think critically about Israel is a framing of the situation as a human rights issue.

Finding a voice through human rights language

For those who oppose Israel's actions, especially Jewish activists, the universalist nature of human rights language makes it an especially useful means of conveying their message. Jewish activists deploy the language of human rights to justify criticism of Israel, as others do. They also use it to engage in what Mitch Berbrier (2002) calls stigma transformation, the challenging and claiming of a previously stigmatised identity.

The first issue involves using human rights language as a means of conveying a plausible and politically effective criticism of Israel. All supporters of Palestinian rights in Europe have to justify sidelining a dominant narrative which portrays Jews as a persecuted people

who finally found sanctuary in their ancient homeland. The decontextualised language of human rights offers the means to do so, a discourse about Israeli human rights abuses that makes Jewish nationalist narratives redundant. In addition, critics of Israel face routine and damaging accusations of anti-Semitism (Bourne, 2004), and to defend against this, critics are inclined to use the neutral language of human rights. The operationalisability of human rights is also of importance. There is an 'indexical' quality to human rights discourse; it enables activists to point to specific abuses in order to indicate the broader problems they seek to solve. It is a language which enables activists to present easily understandable problems which stir the emotions, an important aspect of all social movement activity (Goodwin et al., 2001) especially when explaining complex foreign situations to a domestic population. In short, human rights language allows its speakers to concretise universalism in a manner conducive to activism and in a language attractive to their public.

In terms of stigma transformation, building a positive identity is vital for people in this particular movement, since Zionists have long tried to silence Jewish critics of Israel by claiming that Jewish critics of Israel are self-hating deviants and/or anti-Semitic fellow travellers (Alexander and Bogdanor, 2006; Rosenfeld, 2006). These attacks go beyond the printed page into people's everyday relationships, with many interviewees speaking of needing to overcome a fear of speaking critically about Israel/Palestine. While most interviewees reported some form of disagreement with friends or family over their views, at times this goes beyond 'normal' arguments over politics. Nine of the 24 reported serious and extended contention with their family – this was especially the case with the younger generation. In this contention, the deployment of normative universalist language was often used to counter claims of self-hatred, anti-Semitism and so on, as well as to deal with the common Zionist claim that critics of Israel 'unfairly single out Israel'. Typical here is the comment by a 30-year-old woman about the difficulty of conveying the importance of supporting Palestinian rights to her family, who supported human rights in Zimbabwe and elsewhere in the world:

Leslie: Even my family who, they're not rightwing, and they're not close-minded, and who – if I was telling them about the situation in Zimbabwe, they would have got it. But I was telling them about a country that they believed in and they didn't want to hear it was actually kind of rotten from the inside.

This extract indicates how Israel-critical activity is seen by activists as part of a more general concern they have for global justice – indeed, over half of the interviewees were actively involved in other global justice issues. Such a framing of the activist and the Israel/Palestine situation can be seen more as stigma transfer than stigma transformation, since it demonstrates that it is not the critic of Israel who singles out Israel, but rather their defenders who do not allow the same universal criteria to be applied to it. This leads to the third way in which human rights is deployed in enabling activism.

Universalism as a means of engaging in 'adversarial framing'

The universalist and human rights frame through which critics of Israel understand the situation enables them to engage in the 'adversarial framing' of opponents, a process

particularly important for groups engaged in identity contention (Hunt and Benford, 2004: 443). In this case it enables movement members to characterise supporters of Israel as being parochial and non-rational. The growing ability of activists to speak on the issue seems to proceed hand-in-hand with the concomitant silencing of their erstwhile Zionist interlocutors. This can be seen in the following extract, where an interviewee discusses her relationship with her parents, who support Israel:

Elaine: I don't tend to argue with my father, but he does avoid Israel with me – talking about America and Israel – because we just have completely different world views. And he knows I've had a much broader education than him and I've gone to university. But he has very strong beliefs about it ...

Interviewer: It's an argument your parents avoid?

Elaine: Well I know more than them. And it's what they believe. My mum believes that Jews should have somewhere to go. What would happen to myself and my brother if the Holocaust happens again? And it's like, well maybe there are other human rights agreements we could work on, rather than take away people's homes.

This goes beyond the stigma transformation discussed previously. In this case a dichotomy is established between the knowledge of the critic in contrast to the unexamined beliefs held by supporters of Israel. In interviews, the dichotomy between experientially based knowledge and irrational belief was regularly raised when discussing supporters of Israel, with human rights or other universalist discourse used as a frame to contain this knowledge. This is not necessarily seen as a victory, but often a painful process: while critics can now speak about Israel/Palestine, they cannot speak to their family about it.

Nevertheless, this self-understanding as rational figures with an appreciation for universal values does provide a frame to enable their activities and render them able to criticise Israel. It is difficult for other Jewish people to argue against such universal values as human rights owing to their discursive normativity in wider society. In addition, there is a strong thread in modern Jewish thought asserting that Jews, by virtue of their diasporic existence, have universalistic dispositions and that seeking to heal the world (*tikkun olam*) is an inherently Jewish characteristic (Goldberg, 2006; Polner and Merken, 2007). Thus, universalism is paradoxically an important part of the particular identity of diaspora Jews. This placing of universal concerns within a Jewish structure enables participants to characterise their criticism of Israel as having evolved from their particular Jewish background, rather than betraying it (e.g. Karpf, 2007; Marquese, 2008).

It also allows interviewees to characterise those Jews who still support Israel as being trapped within a bundle of ethnonationalist contradictions. If critics of Israel can claim, in the title of Abarbanel's book, to have moved 'beyond tribal loyalties', this contains an implicit condemnation of supporters of Israel for not having done so. Several interviewees criticised Zionists for being emotional and tribalistic and operating in bad faith, something which was seen as contributing to a level of aggression. This was a common trope among interviewees of all ages and backgrounds, for example:

Frances: Talk about the tribalism! They can see it, they don't want to see it, and that's where the violence comes from.

The 'it' which they both can and cannot see is Israeli human rights abuses. Similarly, another interviewee who had been a long-term activist in the movement talked about the struggle being 'about tribalism as against cosmopolitanism', a frame echoed by both Abarbanel as well as Antony Lerman's typology of 'universalist' versus 'particularist' Jews contending for the soul of British and European Jewry (Lerman, 2008). This is not to claim that this characterisation of Zionists is true – many supporters of Israel also believe themselves to be motivated by rational-liberal world views, supporting Israel as a liberal, democratic state. Nevertheless, characterising Zionists as anti-universalist and anti-human rights plays an important part in the adversarial framing this movement undertakes in order to constitute itself. It places activists at a discursively superior level compared to Zionists they know, and indeed compared to the Zionists they often once were, justifying and enabling their activism. The following quotation offers an example of this, the tactical way human rights is deployed both *among* and *against* other Jews. The interviewee is describing the activities of an Israel-critical Jewish student group:

Justin: We published a statement and it started off saying: 'We believe in peace and human rights etcetera etcetera.' Liberal platitudes. And then we sort of said, 'And the acts that Israel has been doing is against that.'
So it was not so much that people objected to the specific accusations, but also that people were saying, 'well, you are saying that you believe in peace and human rights. That means you believe the rest of JSoc [university Jewish society] doesn't believe in peace and human rights.' And well: 'Actually, that is the case!'

Human rights in this form exposes the cognitive dissonance of many diaspora Jews who consider themselves in favour of peace, human rights and justice and yet have to square this with support for a militarised, racial state founded on ethnic cleansing (Pappe, 2006; Yiftachel, 2006).

Human rights actors and Palestinian subjects

Freeing themselves from prior Zionist beliefs, giving themselves a language with which to speak, providing a defence for their opinions and a persuasive way of disagreeing with supporters of Israel – these are clear and compelling reasons for Jewish critics of Israel to deploy human rights language. This indicates the importance of the universalist aspect of human rights discourse for social movements contending against established institutions. Yet while human rights discourse lends itself to subversive political contention in the domestic sphere, when is applied to Palestinians, the arguments of critics of human rights has some validity. This section discusses how activists understand the limitations of human rights talk in the domestic sphere, but also how Palestinians are constructed by social movement actors when they speak of human rights. Returning to Stammers, one

can see two main modalities in the language of human rights – the first is the humanitarian/institutionalised mode of understanding it, the second is the political/subversive deployment of this language. While the latter aspect of human rights discourse is used in domestic situations, when relating to Palestinians the former largely predominates. The reason for this dual face of human rights discourse is that though I talk about how critics of Israel ‘deploy’ the human rights frame, they do not reside outside this frame but are influenced and inhabited by it. Recalling Steinberg’s characterisation of dialogic actors being inhabited by the discourses they manipulate, such channelling appears inevitable. Bourdieu (1993) has argued that the *illusio* of the field – the tacit entry stake which everyone pays to take part in field discourse – ensures that all, even the heterodox, are committed to the perpetuation of field doxa. This explains how social movements tend to reproduce dominant discourse even while fighting for change. However Bourdieu has been criticised for depicting actor institutionalisation within fields of practice in such a way as to leave no scope for them to change these fields rather than dispositionally strategise their way through them (Lovell, 2000). As Steinberg points out, the borders of the discursive field is fuzzier than Bourdieu would allow and there is some scope for actor autonomy from the field.

Certainly in this case, activists are not blindly directed by the institutionalised modality of human rights discourse but manage to evince a certain degree of autonomy from it, as attested by Justin’s near-cynical deployment of human rights rhetoric. Those who described themselves as ‘highly involved’ were most likely to be sceptical and dismissive about how human rights has been co-opted, or even worse used to excuse Israel’s actions. The ‘human rights type of people within the Jewish community’, as one such interviewee put it, were treated as irresolute and faint-hearted, somehow not understanding, or else deliberately trying not to understand what Israel is doing. As another ‘highly involved’ interviewee commented about the form of denial mobilised by the liberal Zionist writer Linda Grant:

Ian: Really she knows, but she doesn’t want to admit it, and so she takes refuge in humanist truisms which I don’t disagree with, but which are true of any conflict ... I mean it’s worth saying as some sort of a footnote, but it’s not a political position, it’s an evasion of a political position.

This juxtaposition of political and humanitarian modes of cognition demonstrates a complex interaction with human rights discourse, indicating that while this discourse is adopted in the process of local contention, such contention can also lead to an understanding of its limitations.

Yet while participants are aware of its limitations domestically, human rights remained the dominant frame through which Palestinians are understood. Being more specific, it is the humanitarian modality of human rights discourse through which Palestinians are discussed. The reduction of Palestinians into objects of humanitarian distress which the outside human rights activist rescues is a clear tendency within these groups. Taking JfJfP – while it has engaged in cooperation activity with both Israeli and Palestinian groups, support for the latter was almost exclusively in the form of humanitarian support rather than political solidarity. In the minutes of JfJfP, Palestinians were primarily treated

as occasional objects of humanitarian and financial support rather than political allies, as seen in the following appeal from 2004:

We need the help of decent people from all over the world to prevent the threatened expulsion by Israel of a powerless community of herders and farmers who live in caves in the Occupied Territories, with little connection to the outside world.⁴

This image of Palestinians as disconnected powerless victims reinforces their invisibility, lack of political subjectivity and fixes their status as objects to argue about.

Even when human rights is seen as advancing political struggle, some interviewees deployed this discourse as a silencing mechanism, specifically to sideline and silence those aspects of Palestinian narrative – religious and nationalist teleologies – they are uncomfortable with. Thus, one long-term activist framed human rights very much as a political tool, talking of using human rights clauses in the Euro-med trading agreement between Israel and the EU so as to pressure Israel. Yet in relation to Palestine, she used human rights in order to deny legitimacy to Hamas, the winner of the 2006 Palestine Authority elections. Referring to them she stated:

Julia: ... it's kind of a very basic contradiction to go to try to fight a human rights struggle alongside an organisation that doesn't support human rights.

Ironically, it is the very qualities in human rights discourse that allow Jewish diaspora activists to turn away from Zionist narratives which cause a corresponding blindness to Palestinian ones. It is perhaps a deliberate blindness; this language allows some activists to avoid Palestinian demands they are uncomfortable with. But even if it were not deliberate, the universalist pretensions of human rights discourse creates a dynamic whereby the actions of those seeking liberation are judged with the same yardstick as the actions of those preventing it. The extent to which this is, then, as Wendy Brown contends, inimical to projects for liberation, needs to be addressed.

In order to do so properly, one would need to investigate how Palestinians themselves use human rights discourse – for many Palestinians do characterise their cause as a collective struggle for human rights. However, as the earlier discussion on torture indicates, Palestinian NGOs appear to operationalise a different interpretation to Israeli groups and many international NGOs as to what 'human rights' involves. In addition, owing to how human rights have been deployed in Palestine by international organisations, the language is regarded with a degree of cynicism if not hostility, something which Isla Jad (2007) argues has been a factor in the growth of Islamist groups among Palestinians. One example of the contested nature of this discourse is the 'Freedom Riders' media event in November 2011, where six Palestinian activists aimed to emulate the Mississippi Freedom Riders of the 1960s and board a settler-only bus to Jerusalem. The purpose was to demonstrate the segregation and lack of rights accorded to Palestinians in the West Bank and the event garnered respectable media coverage as well as enthusiastic support among western solidarity activists. However, Palestinians themselves were ambivalent about this event, tailored for western audiences rather than to the specificity of their struggle. There were worries that the Freedom Riders were

simply seeking equality under Israeli law, when it was argued that the struggle was not to seek equality with foreign occupiers but to end the occupation (Alsaafin, 2011). The event has not been repeated.

Yet while the internal Palestinian debate over human rights deserves extended study, it has limited effect on the understanding of foreign activists, due to the ability of foreign groups to choose which Palestinian groups to work with, itself a function of power imbalances between western activists and Palestinians under Israeli control. Western groups understandably choose to work with groups they feel comfortable with and which share a similar outlook. Thus, organisational links have been established with human rights organisations, and on an individual basis, several of the interviewees had links with Palestinian and Israeli human rights groups such as Al Haq, the Palestine Centre for Human Rights, B'tselem and so on. While undoubtedly fruitful, such links focus more on Palestinian suffering than their active resistance, irrespective of the discursive strategies of Palestinians themselves.

Such close links and human rights framing are not confined to British Jewish groups. While the situated nature of human rights discourse means one should be cautious about generalising from this one case study, some generalisability is possible – first, to other diaspora Israel-critical Jewish groups and second, to the wider Palestine solidarity movement. In some countries, Jewish groups do adopt an anti-colonial rather than a human rights framing. This is certainly the case with the main French group, Union Juive Française pour la Paix (UJFP), and to a smaller extent with the Canadian umbrella body, IJV Canada (Landy, 2011: 102–103, 114–117). However, in the United States, home to the majority of diaspora Jews, the dominance of the human rights framing of the situation is unquestionable. Small radical organisations such as IJAN (International Jewish Anti-Zionist Network) may frame the situation in an unequivocal anti-colonial, anti-apartheid fashion. However their small size and limited reach only demonstrates the dominance of the human rights framing. Taking the two major grassroots organisations, Jewish Voice for Peace and American Jews for a Just Peace, both their mission statements and activities frame the situation in such a way to highlight human rights and humanitarian issues. This ‘moderate’ framing is even more the case – as one would expect – for lobby groups such as J Street or Peace Now. Individuals in these groups may well understand Israel/Palestine as a colonial issue but their groups’ representations and public presentations – which is the key issue – stay firmly within the human rights framing of the situation.

This is no surprise; discourses are structured by the political realities which the discourse holder is trying to affect. Thus, it is not only Jewish critics of Israel for whom it makes sense to deploy the image of Palestinians as helpless victim, which they ought to protect. Such pressure exists on wider solidarity groups too. Elsewhere I have discussed a tendency among international activists to construct Palestine as a place of despair in order to grant themselves interpretative mastery over it (Landy, 2008). In such a construction, the language of human rights, which portrays activists as ‘the moral rescuer’ plays a central role (Douzinas, 2007: 69). Thus, while human rights are an important component of the discursive repertoire these social movement actors adopt so as to contend within local fields and promote the ‘Palestinian cause’, they may also serve to efface Palestinian political subjectivity.

As such, human rights talk can be seen as one element, albeit an important one, in a broader structural tension between distant issue movement activists and the distant objects of activism. However, it bears repeating that human rights discourse is fundamentally a locally situated discourse, and one cannot automatically translate the attitudes of one group of political activists existing within a particular situation to all Palestine solidarity activists, still less to all distant issue movements. More research needs to be done on the discursive repertoires of these groups. At the same time, one can state that the use of human rights to efface the subjectivity of the object of solidarity is a *tendency* that distant issue activists face.

Conclusion

This article has advanced a situated analysis of how human rights is used by practitioners, seeking a deeper understanding of how social movement actors negotiate this discourse. Accounts of human rights which focus on its inadequacies often fail to take into account the processual aspect of this discourse – how and why actual practitioners use it. In this instance, human rights provides the framework to enable Jewish people to free themselves of Zionism and engage in activism, as well as providing the language which makes this activism acceptable and even attractive to the target population. In view of the ubiquity of human rights arguments by the wider Palestine Solidarity Movement, and similar forces operating on this movement (the need to speak to the public in an ‘acceptable language’, to frame movement enemies, to justify one’s own involvement, etc.) it appears that a similar process of construction and contention may obtain for these activists as well. This is something which further study would determine. The issue with human rights discourse is that it may be used to uphold as well as challenge power, paradoxically in the same situations and at the same time. Specifically, this discourse can be said to have affected the relationship between Northern activists and Palestinians. If Palestinians are not unequivocally treated as voiceless victims to save, this may in fact be because of the equivocal relationship activists have with human rights discourse – or rather, the equivocal relationship that this discourse has with projects for collective political liberation. While a critique of human rights as a form of liberal interventionism may not hold for other parts of the world, it is a valid portrayal of how it has been put to work in Israel/Palestine, even when accepting that this discourse may well be the least bad available option for many Palestinians as well as western solidarity activists to work with.

Just as it is insufficient to treat the deployment of human rights from within an exclusively legalistic framework, it is also not enough to treat it with exclusive reference to the local context in which it develops. Inherent within human rights is a universalising tendency, it may originate from social struggles in one place, but is used to offer an explanatory framework for social struggles everywhere. Thus, it seems productive to view human rights discourse as a process of localised moments of cognition and contention translated into a universal language – a language which both constrains and enables the practice of transnational solidarity. Studying human rights in this way provides a framework to think critically about its effects while at the same time recognising its constructive attributes.

Funding

This research received funding from the Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences (IRCHSS).

Notes

1. Distant issue movements are those movements concerned with issues geographically or socially distant from the activists involved (Rucht, 2000).
2. This is not simply a Jewish issue; many within Palestinian solidarity have become involved because of a prior interest in and sympathy towards Jewish history (Landy, 2008).
3. Names have been changed to maintain confidentiality
4. JfJP mailout, 5 September 2004.

References

- Abarbanel A (2012) *Beyond Tribal Loyalties: Personal Stories of Jewish Peace Activists*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Alexander E and Bogdanor P (2006) *The Jewish Divide Over Israel: Accusers and Defenders*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books.
- Alsaafin L (2011) Are the Freedom Rides a detour for the struggle? The Electronic Intifada, 23 November. Available at: electronicintifada.net/content/are-freedom-rides-detour-struggle/10616 (accessed 6 June 2012).
- Arendt H (1973) *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Baxi U (2000) Suffering between movements and markets. In: Cohen R and Rai S (eds) *Global Social Movements*. London: Athlone Press.
- Baxi U (2003) *The Politics of Reading Human Rights*. London: UCL.
- Benford R (1997) An insider's critique of the social movement framing perspective. *Sociological Inquiry* 67(4): 409–430.
- Benford R and Snow D (2000) Framing processes and social movements: An overview and assessment. *Annual Review of Sociology* 26: 611–639.
- Berbrier M (2002) Making minorities: Cultural space, stigma transformation frames, and the categorical status claims of deaf, gay, and white supremacist activists in late twentieth century America. *Sociological Forum* 17(4): 553–591.
- Bomse A (2006) Torture and the occupation. *Guild Practitioner* 63: 200–212.
- Bourdieu P (1990) *The Logic of Practice*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Bourdieu P (1993) *Sociology in Question*. London: Sage.
- Bourne J (2004) Anti-semitism or anti-criticism. *Race and Class* 46(1): 126–140.
- Brown W (2004) 'The most we can hope for...': Human rights and the politics of fatalism. *South Atlantic Quarterly* 103(2–3): 451–463.
- Challand B (2009) *Palestinian Civil Society: Foreign Donors and the Power to Promote and Exclude*. London: Routledge.
- Chandler D (2006) *From Kosovo to Kabul and Beyond: Human Rights and International Intervention*. London: Pluto.
- Douzinis C (2000) *The End of Human Rights: Critical Legal Thought at the Turn of the Century*. Oxford: Hart.
- Douzinis C (2007) *Human Rights and Empire: The Political Philosophy of Cosmopolitanism*. London: Routledge-Cavendish.
- Dworkin R (1977) *Taking Rights Seriously*. London: Duckworth.
- Estévez A (2008) A Latin American sociopolitical conceptualization of human rights. *Journal of Human Rights* 7(3): 245–261.

- Estévez A (2011) Human rights in contemporary political sociology: The primacy of social subjects. *Human Rights Quarterly* 33(4): 1142–1162.
- Feldman I (2009) Gaza's humanitarianism problem. *Journal of Palestine Studies* 38(1): 22–37.
- Finkelkraut A (2000) *In the Name of Humanity: Reflections on the Twentieth Century*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Futrell R (2003) Framing processes, cognitive liberation, and NIMBY protest in the U.S. chemical-weapons disposal conflict. *Sociological Inquiry* 73(3): 359–386.
- Gamson W (1992) *Talking Politics*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Goldberg DJ (2006) *The Divided Self: Israel and the Jewish Psyche Today*. London: IB Tauris.
- Goodwin J, Jasper JM and Polletta F (2001) *Passionate Politics: Emotions and Social Movements*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.
- Hanafi S and Tabar L (2005) *The Emergence of a Palestinian Globalised Elite: Donors, International Organisations and Local NGOs*. Washington, DC and Ramallah: Institute of Palestine Studies, Muwatin.
- Hunt S and Benford R (2004) Collective identity, solidarity, and commitment. In: Snow D, Soule S and Kriesi H (eds) *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Jad I (2007) NGOs: Between buzzwords and social movements. *Development in Practice* 17(4/5): 622–629.
- Karpf A (2007) Children of the Holocaust. *The Guardian*, 7 February.
- Karpf A, Klug B, Rose J, et al. (eds) (2008) *A Time to Speak Out: Independent Jewish Voices on Israel, Zionism and Jewish Identity*. London: Verso.
- Landy D (2008) Authenticity and political agency on study trips to Palestine. In: Lentin R (ed.) *Thinking Palestine*. London: Zed.
- Landy D (2011) *Jewish Identity and Palestinian Rights: Diaspora Jewish Opposition to Israel*. London: Zed.
- Lentin R (2008) *Thinking Palestine*. London: Zed.
- Lerman A (2008) Touching a raw nerve. In: Karpf A, Klug B, Rose J and et al. (eds) *A Time to Speak Out: Independent Jewish Voices on Israel, Zionism and Jewish Identity*. London: Verso.
- Lovell T (2000). Thinking feminism with and against Bourdieu. In: Fowler B (ed.) *Reading Bourdieu on Society and Culture*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- McAdam D (1988) *Freedom Summer*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Makdisi S (2008) *Palestine Inside Out: An Everyday Occupation*. New York: WW Norton.
- Marquese M (2008) *If I Am Not For Myself: Journey of an Anti-Zionist Jew*. London: Verso.
- Merz S (2012) 'Missionaries of the new era': Neoliberalism and NGOs in Palestine. *Race and Class* 54(1): 50–66.
- Pappe I (2006) *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*. Oxford: Oneworld Publications.
- Pollis A and Schwab P (1980) Human rights: A western construct with limited applicability. In: Pollis A and Schwab P (eds) *Human Rights: Cultural and Ideological Perspectives*. New York: Praeger.
- Polner M and Merken S (2007) *Peace, Justice, and Jews: Reclaiming Our Tradition*. New York: Bunim and Bannigan.
- Rancière J (2004) Who is the subject of human rights. *South Atlantic Quarterly* 103(2/3): 297–310.
- Rosenfeld A (2006) Progressive Jewish thought and the new anti-Semitism. Available at: www.ajc.org/atf/cf/%7B42D75369-D582-4380-8395-D25925B85EAF%7D/PROGRESSIVE_JEWISH_THOUGHT.PDF.
- Rothman F and Oliver P (1999) From local to global: The anti-dam movement in Southern Brazil, 1979–1992. *Mobilization* 4(1): 41–57.

- Rucht D (2000) Distant issue movements in Germany: Empirical description and theoretical reflections. In: Guidry J, Kennedy M and Zald M (eds) *Globalizations and Social Movements*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Sjoberg G, Gill EA and Williams N (2001) A sociology of human rights. *Social Problems* 48(1): 11–47.
- Stammers N (1999) Social movements and the social construction of human rights. *Human Rights Quarterly* 21(4): 980–1008.
- Stammers N (2009) *Human Rights and Social Movements*. London: Pluto.
- Steinberg M (1999) The talk and back talk of collective action: A dialogic analysis of repertoires of discourse among nineteenth-century English cotton spinners. *The American Journal of Sociology* 105(3): 736–780.
- Turner B (1993) Outline of a theory of human rights. *Sociology* 27(3): 489–512.
- Yiftachel O (2006) *Ethnocracy: Land and Identity Politics in Israel/Palestine*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Yiftachel O (2009) Critical theory and ‘gray space’: Mobilization of the colonized. *City* 13(2–3): 246–263.
- Zizek S (2005) The obscenity of human rights: Violence as symptom. Available at: www.lacan.com/zizviol.htm#7x.
- Zreik R (2004) Palestine, apartheid, and the rights discourse. *Journal of Palestine Studies* 34(1): 68–80.

Author biography

David Landy is Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology, Trinity College Dublin. His main research interests are in transnational social movements. He is the author of *Jewish Identity and Palestinian Rights: Diaspora Jewish Opposition to Israel* (2011).

Résumé

Le discours sur les droits de l’homme se trouve au cœur du travail des mouvements sociaux internationaux. Considérant les droits de l’homme comme un discours qui varie en fonction du contexte et qui est déterminé socialement, l’article analyse la manière dont il est utilisé par un mouvement social en particulier – celui des activistes juifs de la diaspora qui sont critiques à l’égard d’Israël – et montre qu’il peut en même temps contester et reproduire les pratiques existantes de domination. L’article applique les critiques du discours sur les droits de l’homme au cas de la Palestine, où ce discours a d’une certaine façon été utilisé pour saper la subjectivité politique et la lutte collective des Palestiniens et légitimer une intervention extérieure. Néanmoins, des groupes transnationaux critiques à l’égard d’Israël, en particulier des organisations juives de la diaspora, se situent dans le cadre des droits de l’homme. Il y a plusieurs raisons à cela : cela permet aux activistes de parvenir à la « libération cognitive », de parler du problème, et de cadrer leurs activités afin d’attirer de nouvelles recrues. L’article étudie ce rôle paradoxal des droits de l’homme, et recommande de le considérer comme un langage qui à la fois entrave et permet la pratique de la solidarité transnationale.

Mots-clés

constructivisme social, droits de l’homme, Israël/Palestine, Juifs de la diaspora, mouvements sociaux, transnationalisme

Resumen

El discurso de los derechos humanos es central para el trabajo de los movimientos sociales internacionales. Partiendo de una concepción de los derechos humanos como un discurso que

depende del contexto y es construido socialmente, este artículo investiga cómo es usado ese discurso por un movimiento social específico – de activistas judíos de la diáspora que son críticos con Israel – y argumenta que el discurso puede, al mismo tiempo, desafiar y reproducir las prácticas de dominación existentes. El artículo aplica las críticas contemporáneas sobre los derechos humanos al caso de Palestina, donde este discurso ha sido usado de alguna forma para minar la subjetividad política y la lucha colectiva de los palestinos y para justificar la intervención exterior. No obstante, los grupos transnacionales críticos con Israel, particularmente las organizaciones de la diáspora judía, se basan en el marco de los derechos humanos. Hay varias razones para esto: ofrece a los activistas un medio para conseguir la “liberación cognitiva” para hablar sobre la cuestión y para encuadrar sus actividades y atraer reclutamientos. El artículo investiga este rol paradójico de los derechos humanos, y recomienda entender los derechos humanos como un lenguaje que constriñe y facilita, al mismo tiempo, la práctica de la solidaridad transnacional.

Palabras clave

Constructivismo social, derechos humanos, diáspora judía, Israel/Palestina, movimientos sociales, transnacionalismo