

Sociology of Knowledge Meets Human Rights

Conference of the Research Committee Sociology of Knowledge in the German Sociological Association

November 20-21, 2025, Université du Luxembourg

Organization: Angelika Poferl & Boris Traue

A sociology of knowledge relating to human rights begins with the social construction of the human being as a subject of human rights. It thus pursues a different approach than justifications based on natural and rational philosophical principles. Nor is it concerned with normatively presupposing 'human beings' as endowed with human rights and human dignity. From a sociology of knowledge perspective, the endowment of human beings with human rights itself becomes a topic and an object of study, whose historical and social conditions of validity, manifestations, and consequences must be explored. This includes the imperative to protect human dignity, which is inherent in human rights and yet simultaneously contested. The focus will be on forms of knowledge and processes of institutionalization of the human being defined by human rights in their legal, political, social, and cultural dimensions, as well as the structurally inherent individualization of legal subjectivity, which has far-reaching transformative potential; the interrelationship between generalization and specification, e.g., due to different human needs and requirements; the dynamics of universalization and particularization, which emerges primarily in controversies and conflicts – e.g., around an 'old' and 'new', currently resurgent cultural relativism; the question of the relevance of the attribution of human rights and human dignity to life and everyday life; and, last but not least, the actual subjective meaning that is meaningfully connected to the guaranteed 'possession' of human rights and human dignity, or the 'claiming' of human rights and human dignity born out of deprivation. The assumption of irrelevance to life and everyday life, a subjective insignificance, or an absolute negation must not be excluded here either.

The history and present of human rights and the struggle for human dignity are bound up with ruptures, contradictions, caesuras, and asymmetries. The experiences of the Holocaust, eugenics, colonialism, gender inequality, and other forms of socially, culturally, politically, and legally relevant exclusion (e.g., of the poor, same-sex lovers, and political dissidents) testify to the instability and fragility of a "we" defined by human rights. Human rights-based modernity claims to form a maximally broad horizon of inclusion that refers to "human beings" themselves. At the same time, it is thwarted by exclusions, the problematization of which can, in turn, invoke human rights and their universalist claim to validity. From sociological

and social theoretical, empirical, and methodological perspectives, a range of questions and problems need to be examined from the sociology of knowledge at the macro- and meso-levels of social developments and institutions, as well as in microsocial contexts of action and experience.

The following thematic complexes will be addressed and discussed at the conference:

I The Form of Human Rights Knowledge

What social developments give rise to human rights? How do they establish themselves as a form of knowledge? Who are their supporting groups? How are they integrated into different contexts? What is their relationship to national fundamental, civil, and social rights? What role do human rights-related discourses, interpretive struggles, and engagement play?

II Human Rights in Everyday Life

How are human rights (made) relevant in everyday life? How does awareness of human rights arise, individually and collectively? What manifestations does this awareness take, for example, as the (non-)exertion of one's own rights, or as the recognition or denial of the rights of others? What processes of community building or conflict, social inequalities, or cultural distinctions are emerging?

III The Subject of Human Rights

Are human rights abstract norms, are they reflected in experience, or are they grounded in it? What significance do, for example, dignity, pride, suffering, curiosity, empathy, and solidarity acquire here? While human rights norms are universal and planetary in nature, are they plural, particular, and distinct in experience? Can differences and similarities be identified beyond common social and cultural categories?

The conference will take place on November 20-21, 2025, at the Université du Luxembourg. The conference languages are German or English.

Please send proposals for contributions of no more than 500 words (PDF document) to Angelika Poferrl (angelika.poferrl@tu-dortmund.de) and Boris Traue (boris.traue@uni.lu) by May 10th.