

## Kathryn Sikkink

Kathryn Sikkink (\*1955) is a political scientist who has contributed considerably to making human rights a field of research. Born into a liberal academic family, she started developing an interest in the world's Spanish speaking regions early on. Doing research in Latin America during the 1980s and 1990s, she gradually moved away from political economy and started questioning economic structures as driving forces. However, she became increasingly convinced that emphasis should be placed on ideas and beliefs. This led her to take a closer look at non-state actors and their efforts to shape international politics.

## Interview

The interview took place on June 26, 2019, while Prof. Kathryn Sikkink was in Nuremberg for an international conference. Dr. Daniel Stahl, coordinator of the Study Group Human Rights in the 20th Century, met Sikkink at a Hotel lobby and talked with her for about three hours.

### Stahl

Let's start with your childhood. You were born in 1955, right?

### Sikkink

Yes. I was born in Palo Alto, California. When I was one year old I moved to Brookings, South Dakota. And then when I was in third grade, we moved to a small town in Minnesota, St. Cloud, Minnesota.

### Stahl

Can you tell me something about your family?

### Sikkink

My father grew up on a farm in Southern Minnesota and after serving briefly in the U.S. Army at the very end of World War II, he got the GI Bill, which paid for education. He was able to get a university education and went on to get a PhD in speech and communication. It's a field in the United States. And after getting his PhD at the University of Minnesota, he was, I think, quite surprisingly offered a job at Stanford University, which is why I was born in Palo Alto. But he was very unhappy in that job because the students were very rich and the junior faculty were very poor. He had to do telephone sales in the summer I was born to supplement his professor's income.

Also, he was an only child – his parents were living on a farm in Minnesota. So when he had an opportunity to return to the Midwest, he did. And that's why I grew up in Brookings, South Dakota, which is the home of South Dakota State University. Eventually, he moved back to Minnesota to be even closer to his family as a professor and later administrator at St. Cloud State University, part of the state university system in Minnesota.

**Stahl**

And your mother?

**Sikkink**

My mother was a nurse and mainly did not work as a nurse when we were growing up, but continued to go back to work in the nursing field off and on, eventually got a master's in psychological nursing.

**Stahl**

Do you have siblings?

**Sikkink**

I have three siblings. I'm the second child, an older brother who's a physician, and I have two younger sisters. The next one down teaches – has a PhD in anthropology and teaches anthropology, and then my youngest sister's also a high school teacher.

**Stahl**

Did politics play a role at home?

**Sikkink**

Yes. My parents were liberal. My mother was already an incipient feminist. And my parents took a position against the Vietnam War. So I grew up in a house that was already opposed to U.S. policy in Vietnam. As an eighth grader already, I was given a note from my parents to bring to my high school principal that I was going to leave school that day to go to protests and teach-ins against the Vietnam War at the university.

**Stahl**

Did you understand the discussions?

**Sikkink**

Yes, I remember agreeing with them, but I wanted to go to the teach-in. I wanted to learn – that was the point. I wanted to learn more. My middle school principal told me that I should be aware that those were the communists that were organizing this teach-in. And I told them that I had my parents' permission. He couldn't talk me out of it, and I had every intention of going to this.

**Stahl**

And the other teachers and your classmates, how did they react?

**Sikkink**

I think I was part of a relatively small group of students in this very conservative town who were politically progressive, who were religiously agnostic. St. Cloud was a small German Catholic town settled by German Catholic immigrants. It was a very conservative town. So I rebelled from an early stage against that.

**Stahl**

And your parents supported you?

**Sikkink**

Oh, well they didn't like me wearing skirts that were too short. They supported my political rebellion, but not always my social rebellion.

**Stahl**

When did you start not only to participate, but also to get involved more and more and to take action on your own?

**Sikkink**

When I was 15, around 1970, my father had a sabbatical, and we went to live in Spain. It was still under Franco.<sup>1</sup> So that was a big eye-opener for me. We lived five months in Spain. I started to learn Spanish. And then we camped around Europe for the next six months. I think it was an eye-opener because it just opened the world to me – I was from this little conservative town, where I was mainly opposed to stifling cultural values. I just began to see the world as a bigger place with many more important debates. For a long time, I just kept trying to get far away from my hometown.

**Stahl**

Were there some special experiences you made in Franco's Spain?

**Sikkink**

This was very late in Franco's Spain, but you could still see the Guardia Civil on the streets. People didn't want to talk about politics. We were reading books on the Spanish Civil War in my home, but no one was talking about the Spanish Civil War. So it was mainly noticing all these silences.

**Stahl**

But you talked about Spanish history with your parents?

**Sikkink**

Oh, yes. We did talk about the Spanish Civil War, so I knew that Franco was an authoritarian. I knew something about the connection between Spain and the Nazis later. One of the books I read was *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*.<sup>2</sup> My father had it, I guess. But there were huge gaps between what I knew and didn't know. I can't remember when the pieces started coming together.

**Stahl**

But you were definitely interested in history, reading about the Spanish Civil War and the Third Reich? Was that something that came from your parents?

**Sikkink**

It was something that came from my parents. My father was very interested in history. And my mother was a nonconformist. She believed in questioning dogma.

**Stahl**

Did you get along well with her?

**Sikkink**

Yes. I didn't have such a huge need for rebellion because they were mainly encouraging us to be free thinkers.

**Stahl**

Did you learn Spanish during this time?

**Sikkink**

I started learning Spanish at this time.

**Stahl**

Would you say there were any teachers that had a major impact on you?

**Sikkink**

When I got back to St. Cloud, Minnesota, one of the teachers that had an impact was my Spanish teacher because now I was taking advanced Spanish. And I first learned about the Tlatelolco massacres in Mexico in my high school Spanish class. So that was the next episode of human rights violations I learned about, and she encouraged me. My brother and I both went and spent a summer in Mexico after I graduated from high school, still trying to improve our Spanish. So it was really not in Spain but in Guadalajara, Mexico that I started being more or less able to have a coherent conversation in Spanish.

**I felt that if we did not want to have the repetition of things like the Vietnam War, that we citizens of the United States needed to become more cosmopolitan.**

Many of my efforts of that early period were more cultural than political. I wanted to shed my skin as an ugly American. I thought I could shed my skin by learning the language well. I remember feeling that Spain was full of "ugly Americans." They were talking in loud voices in English and being obnoxious. So my effort was more to say, could I not be like that? Could I find some way to blend in more, and I think that's what I was mainly still doing in Mexico.

**Stahl**

Were there other political issues you became involved in after the Vietnam War?

**Sikkink**

In 1973, I went to the University of Minnesota. That was the year, of course, that the United States pulled out of Vietnam. So I arrived in college just as the Vietnam protests ended, because the protests were very connected to the draft. As the draft ended, the protests ended. So in some ways, I came to a University that had been very politically active at a moment where it was becoming less politically active. But for people who were interested in Latin America, that was, of course, the year of the coups in Chile<sup>3</sup> and in Uruguay.<sup>4</sup> I began taking courses in Latin American politics and some courses in International Relations. And so I got interested in Latin American politics.

At one point, for example, I became involved in trying to stop the University of Minnesota

from having an official exchange relationship with the National University in Chile, arguing that the university had been involved in the coup, that they had removed professors, that they had imprisoned professors and students, and that we should not have any official relationship with them because it would be legitimating these universities that had no independence anymore vis-à-vis their authoritarian government. So that was one kind of politics that was happening at the university.

Then my father went to teach in Denmark with the study abroad program, and I went to spend a semester in Denmark. Then I went to work as a *jeune fille au pair* in Paris, France, for another eight months. I spent a year in Europe in 1974/75. France was the epitome of cultural sophistication, right? And so I decided, having devoted all this time learning Spanish, I now would push that aside, and I would now try to learn French.

Oddly, I actually discovered the class system in France and not in the United States. When I came back from France, I had an opportunity to apply for a scholarship to go study in Uruguay. At a certain point, one of my advisers said, “Why won’t you just stay home and finish your degree?” It was almost an unseemly amount of trying to travel. To this day, I think I had this notion that the more I could travel, the more I could somehow shed this skin.

**Stahl**

Where do you think this feeling or this desire to shed your skin came from?

**Sikkink**

I don’t know. I said the ugly American, *The Ugly American*<sup>5</sup> was a book that my father had that we read. I really think it came from watching American tourists. I think it was connected to Vietnam. I think I felt that if we did not want to have the repetition of things like the Vietnam War, that we citizens of the United States needed to become more cosmopolitan. Our attitudes, not just our politics, but our attitudes had to be more cosmopolitan. Our practices had to be more cosmopolitan.

If I were to put some logic on it now, I would say it was a struggle for assuming some kind of cosmopolitan identity that I thought was connected to a cosmopolitan politics. But that would make it sound more rational than it was. I think I didn’t know for sure.

**Stahl**

Did racism in the United States have an impact on you?

**Sikkink**

Right. Minnesota, for example, the small towns in Minnesota in the 1960s and 1970s when I grew up were completely white. So I was not exposed directly to racism, as it wasn’t discussed. We later learned, as Minnesota became more diverse, that many people were very racist. But at the time, the prejudices I remember were between Protestants and Catholics still, if you can imagine. There was a small college named St. Olaf College, and I later had a student who went to work there. She joked that she was part of the diversity program because she was Catholic, and she was teaching at a Lutheran university.

My grandparents were Dutch. Sikkink is a Dutch name. They were Dutch farmers and religiously Dutch Reform, Calvinists. But my father questioned religion from an early age and left the church. My mother was agnostic. So the divisions of my childhood were divisions between really quite extreme forms of religious conservative belief and reason. They brought me up as a Unitarian, a very, very liberal approach to religion. I had a friend in third grade whom I had told I didn't believe in God, and she began to be concerned about my soul and started praying for me, to save my soul.

Of course, there were also divisions around discrimination that girls and women faced that I always fought against and I fought against with my mother. I say this in Evidence for Hope,<sup>6</sup> my mother wanted to get a profession. She was told she could be a nurse, a teacher, or a secretary. She liked science. So she was a nurse, right? But she brought up her daughters to believe we could do whatever we wanted. I think I just had a kind of a knee-jerk kind of feminism from day 1, and then I argued a lot about it. It was just at a moment where that was possible.

**Stahl**

Do you remember some moments, some incidents where you had to fight?

**Sikkink**

Well, it was more like being on this cusp of change where you don't have any models. At the University of Minnesota, I had one woman professor. And when I went to Columbia University to do my PhD, there were zero women in the Political Science Department. I had this notion that I wanted to become an academic, and I believed it was possible, but I had no models. I did have fights though. I had fights with my department at the University of Minnesota for years about changing the meeting time because the University of Minnesota Childcare Center was closed at 5:15, and they insisted on having meetings that went until 6:00. So those kind of things, but it was more this sense that we're starting to pioneer things. Possibilities were open to us, but there were no models. There was no roadmap. When I got pregnant and I was writing my dissertation, I realized I didn't know anybody who had a baby and wrote a dissertation at the same time.

So I started asking all my friends. And finally, someone said, "There's this woman out in Colorado who got a PhD who had a baby while she was writing her dissertation." And so I'm calling up someone who doesn't know me who lives in Colorado pregnant to see if there's someone who says it's possible to write a dissertation and have a baby at the same time. I remember this vividly, I got the phone and I explained who I was and who'd given me her name, and could we talk. I said, "So can you have a baby and write a dissertation at the same time?" And she said, "Not only can you do it, but it was the best thing I ever did." I was at the point where I thought everyone had to choose. Either you could have a baby, or you could write a dissertation. I didn't want to have to choose. I wanted to have it all, I wanted a career, a full-time career, and I wanted to have a family. It was opening up to us, but there were no roadmaps.

**Stahl**

So when did you become interested in studying International Relations?

**Sikkink**

I started university as a journalism major. I wanted to be a journalist, an international journalist.

**Stahl**

Why?

**Sikkink**

Again, I think that was the cosmopolitan, sophisticated model I had in my mind, some radio announcer anchorwoman or something like that. They started teaching me immediately how to write a news article, the technique of writing a news article. And I said, well, I'm interested in international journalism, and I don't know enough about the world. So I'm going to have to learn about the world before you start teaching me how to write a lead paragraph for a news article. And so I switched my major to International Relations in order to learn about the world with the idea that I would go back later to journalism. And I just never went back.

**Stahl**

In which year was that?

**Sikkink**

Just before I went to France and Europe in 1974. And I just never went back to study journalism.

**Stahl**

What made International Relations so attractive?

**Sikkink**

My first impression was I liked it. I was interested in it. I was good at it – I was good enough. But I had no intention of doing it for a career. I was going to be an activist, or I was going to be a diplomat, or I was going to be something much more active and much more sophisticated than a professor. Our finances were constrained, so I needed to get a scholarship if I wanted to study abroad, and that's why I had to work in Europe as a jeune fille au pair. I couldn't just go and study. We didn't have enough money, my family.

**The Uruguay experience was a crucible for me.**

The only scholarship for study abroad at my University in a Spanish-speaking country was for Uruguay, and Uruguay was under the dictatorship. It was an exchange for student leaders. A group made up of faculty and students chose one person a year from the University of Minnesota and one from the University of the Republic in Uruguay to participate in the exchange. They explained to me that, contrary to what I had opposed in Chile, the Uruguay group had decided to work outside the university – they worked inside the University of Minnesota and outside the university in Uruguay in order to not grant any legitimacy to the intervened university there.

I was involved in something called the Minnesota International Student Association. I was doing things like organizing conferences on hunger. In fact, I met my husband<sup>7</sup> back in 1976 because I was organizing an event on campus for the International Student Association on hunger in the world. He was already working on development in hunger issues. We were inviting a well-known speaker and they needed a local discussant, and someone said, “You need to meet Doug Johnson.” And so I met Doug Johnson.

But then shortly after I met Doug, I went to Uruguay. The Uruguay experience was a crucible for me because I’d never lived for a year so vividly as a young adult. I turned 21 in Uruguay and had all these friends who were Uruguayan students and political activists, some of whom had been in prison. Some had been tortured.

All of a sudden, it was like a wakeup call for me and a whole education. I was doing a lot of reading, a lot of independent studies about why Uruguay fell into dictatorship. It was a very democratic country. How could the most democratic country in Latin America along with Chile, how could both of them suffer these terrible coups in 1973? I was very interested in the literature on economic causes of dictatorships.

**Stahl**

Do you remember some theories or explanations?

**Sikkink**

Of course, yes.

**Stahl**

Which arguments convinced you?

**Sikkink**

What was very much en vogue at the time were that there were economic causes to these dictatorships, right?

**Stahl**

Dependency theory.<sup>8</sup>

**Sikkink**

It was dependency – it was what I would later know as dependency theory, yes. But there were other studies that compared Uruguay and New Zealand and Argentina and Australia, saying these are similar countries, similar economies, but New Zealand and Australia had some land reform, and Uruguay and Argentina still had these large tracts of land and had resisted, of course, reform and rural landowners had supported the coups.

Then there was very heavy critique of U.S. policy in the region and U.S. imperialism. At that time, I read Philip Agee’s *Inside the Company*, which was an inside account of the CIA involvement throughout the region. Agee had been in Uruguay. He later denounced the CIA and wrote his tell-all book about the CIA in Latin America.

So that was the kind of stuff I was reading, but I was really deep into development theory. I



was interviewing people at the U.S. Embassy for a paper I was doing on U.S. foreign policy. I was interviewing people at some agricultural cooperatives about alternative development models. I was already very interested in ideas and in theory. I should've seen the writing on the wall. I was literally losing sleep over, why is it that Uruguay had a coup in 1973, and how could you possibly explain that?

**Stahl**

So you actually started not with the question you later dealt with – how to deal with atrocities – but you first started with the reasons for atrocities.

**Sikkink**

I was already interested in cause, yes. I'd made friends and was living with a group of people who were Uruguayans in Uruguay and then the Uruguayans back in Minnesota because of this exchange program. I was living with a group of politically active people. And I kept going out with Doug. Doug got started running the Nestlé boycott,<sup>9</sup> which was a critique, of course, of corporate marketing, of breast milk substitutes. It was one of the first big anti-corporate campaigns. It started in 1977, just when I returned from Uruguay, and it ended in 1981. Then I had the chance of spending the summer in Africa, I reasoned I was interested in the developing world, and I hadn't been to Africa. So I'll just go to Africa, at which point my adviser finally said to me, "Why don't you stay home and finish your degree?"

But I wrote my senior honors thesis on research in Tanzania. I spent a year learning some Swahili, which turns out to be a very, very hard language. I don't speak a word of it anymore, but it was quite an education. I spent a summer in Tanzania doing research on the whether the International Coffee Agreement actually contributed to the diversification out of coffee; I was exposed to all the debates about the problems with cash cropping, the connection that cash cropping has to a particular economic model. Are there alternative forms of agriculture that would be less vulnerable to the international economy than cash cropping?

**Stahl**

So you were very much interested in economic questions at this time in the 1970s.

**Sikkink**

I believed what people said at the time that, if you were interested in human rights, you had to study economics. The left was very influenced by Marxism and Marxist theory, and people believed that the economic substructure should be our focus.

**Stahl**

So from your perspective back then, all these issues you dealt with were human rights issues: Did you call them human rights issues?

**Sikkink**

Around that time, I was beginning to know about human rights law. I knew some about the Universal Declaration. I knew about the Covenants.<sup>10</sup> They had just come into force in 1976, the year I went to Uruguay. I was in Uruguay during Carter's election. I sort of thought

Jimmy Carter was a reformist. I wasn't that impressed. The Uruguayans were very interested in talking about Jimmy Carter. They were so amazed that a U.S. presidential candidate and eventually U.S. President was talking about human rights. It was forbidden to them to speak about what their own government was doing with regard to human rights. So talking about Jimmy Carter and how much they appreciated him was a way that they could talk about human rights without talking about their own government.

**Stahl**

But you were not impressed.

**Sikkink**

At the time, I wasn't impressed, but the more the Uruguayans tried to twist my arm about what a good guy Jimmy Carter was, the more impressed I got. And so when I was in Uruguay, I opened up a newspaper one day– they were all censored, completely censored newspapers. I opened up a newspaper, and I see a report on hearings in the U.S. House of Representatives led by my representative from Minnesota, a guy named Donald Fraser.<sup>11</sup> They were about Uruguay. Hearings about Uruguay word for word. And I'm thinking this newspaper decided to go out of business with a bang. So I bought the next newspaper, same thing. All three major newspapers had the same coverage of the hearings. So I thought, what is going on here? What was going on probably was that the Uruguayan dictatorship just misunderstood and thought it would be so off-putting to people that Uruguay was being discussed in the U.S. Congress that it would turn people against the U.S.

**Stahl**

As an act of imperialism.

**Sikkink**

As an act of imperialism that would turn people off. To the contrary, people were going, "Oh my goodness, we can't believe that they're talking about this." A leading opposition politician was giving testimony. His testimony said, "Just stop sending aid, military and economic aid to these dictatorships in the Southern Cone. Could you just help us out that way, please, by stop aiding?"

I was interested in U.S. policy, the beginnings of a U.S. human rights policy, which is what I was interviewing people in the U.S. Embassy about. What I discovered interviewing people in the U.S. Embassy in 1976 was– this was under Ford<sup>12</sup> and Kissinger,<sup>13</sup> of course – they were all apologists. They knew to get ahead in the Foreign Service was to tow the Kissinger line.<sup>14</sup>

**Stahl**

Well, but Kissinger also had had a hard time to get them in line.

**Sikkink**

Yes, but it was pretty clear that when some undergraduate student comes and interviews you, it's not the time to bare your soul. And so they just basically said, "Our ambassador assures us that this information about human rights violations is grossly exaggerated, and things are getting better."

This was 1976, a time when things were not getting better. And I knew they weren't getting better. And so I knew that the U.S. Embassy was lying to me. Either they were lying to themselves, or they were lying to me, or they were doing both. But there was only one person in the Embassy that even admitted to me that the human rights problem in Uruguay at the time was really serious.

**Stahl**

Did you meet anyone back then who was affected personally or their families?

**Sikkink**

I had a friend who'd been arrested and tortured, imprisoned and then released. My friends explained to me how they burned their books because they'd studied Marx in the university, of course. The first thing was get rid of all the Marxist books on your shelf. Then they brought you into the rooms, and they closed the windows, and they closed the shades. And then they put on their record of protest music that they had somehow kept, and they wanted you to hear it. But it was so scary for them to even play a bit of protest music to you in the dark of the room.

So you understood repression in that way, not just someone telling you they'd been tortured, just realizing, what's it like that the family I lived with, who were the parents of a Uruguayan friend of mine, actually had to ask me to leave because I was dating someone who was from a leftist theater group. They were so afraid of losing their jobs. They worked in the secondary school system, the national administration of secondary schools.

The Uruguayan control over its citizens was so great that if they had a person in their house who was dating a leftist theater member, they could lose their jobs. So my understanding came that way, through the granular day-to-day stuff of how frightened people were of – they were just terrified basically.

**Stahl**

Did you get involved in activism?

**Sikkink**

No, you couldn't. There was no activism in Uruguay in 1976, zero activism, as opposed to Argentina, where there were human rights organizations. Not until 1980 was there a single human rights organization in Uruguay that could operate. And the labor unions were trying to do just a little bit, but mainly, they were just trying to protect their members who were being disappeared and imprisoned.

**Stahl**

So then you came back to the United States?

**Sikkink**

After I got my undergraduate degree from the University of Minnesota I applied for a Ford Foundation paid human rights internship. In 1979, I was awarded the internship and placed with a human rights organization working on Latin America in Washington D.C., called the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA).

**When was space open for civil society?****Stahl**

What kind of organization was that?

**Sikkink**

It was a church-based organization mainly. It was started by a Methodist minister who had been in Chile and had to leave Chile in 1973 after the coup. The people on the Board of Directors were from the National Catholic Bishops' Conference, from the World Council of Churches, but there were some secular people, too. It started out as being church-based. We were a very small organization. And we were basically lobbying Congress around human rights issues and receiving human rights activists from Latin America. And we were kind of a service provider. I was assigned to work on Argentina and Uruguay, so very early on, the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo<sup>15</sup> came, the Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo.<sup>16</sup> My job was to set appointments for them, accompany them to their appointments, do their translation.

**Stahl**

What kind of appointments, mainly with senators?

**Sikkink**

Mainly congressional staff people. If you could get to a senator, it was huge. It was mainly congressional staff people, media people who were interested, sometimes people in the State Department, desk officers and lower level State Department people who worked on Latin America. You did what you could.

**Stahl**

What was your task?

**Sikkink**

People said what they wanted, and you tried to arrange appointments for them where they could have an impact. They were working on behalf of imprisoned family members or disappeared children. But also, they were trying to say, "Stop military aid or stop economic aid."

**Stahl**

How did you perceive the Washington atmosphere during this year?

**Sikkink**

Oh, it was a super exciting place to be. But of course, that was still during Carter, the last year of Carter, and it was during the Iran hostage crisis.<sup>17</sup> But all the air was being sucked out of politics by the Iran hostage crisis. And then I was there for the election of Ronald Reagan<sup>18</sup> and for the first year of the Reagan Administration.

**Stahl**

Did you notice some shift within the State Department's behavior?

**Sikkink**

Completely, yes. Carter's Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights had been a woman named Patricia Derian,<sup>19</sup> who you've heard about, who was a noted advocate of human rights, an outspoken person. When she met with Admiral Massera<sup>20</sup> in Argentina, Pat Derian said, "I've seen maps of secret clandestine prisons in Argentina, and I understand that beneath our feet, there's a clandestine prison where people are being held and tortured." That's what Pat Derian said to Massera – the Argentine military never forgave her, and she was 100 percent right. She was in the Escuela de Mecánica de la Armada, and that was one of the main secret detention centers.

Then Reagan nominated someone as Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights who wanted to do away with the office – Ernest Lefever.<sup>21</sup> That nomination was defeated in the U.S. Senate, and it was defeated in part because Timmerman<sup>22</sup> came and spoke at the Congress. I was present in the room when Timmerman spoke, he got a standing ovation. And so what did I learn? One thing I learned is when people today want to talk about the good old human rights days when everything was easy and everyone believed in human rights, and now we have contestation – this is what's happening in our conference here in Nuremberg now. I wanted to say, "I'm sorry, but there was no such thing as the 1970s as the good old days of the Human Rights Movement. The governments were trying to kill human rights activists. The U.S. government under Reagan was trying to completely reverse U.S. policy and was trying to embrace every possible dictator, including Ríos Montt,<sup>23</sup> who was committing genocide at the time. And people felt beleaguered. It was not a dominant discourse."

So I'm very skeptical. And this you see in Evidence for Hope in part, I'm very skeptical of this notion that we're having contestation now and we didn't have it before because my feeling is there's been contestation all along. So I lived through the Reagan Administration. And then of course, we lived through the administration of George W. Bush,<sup>24</sup> what with the U.S. torture policy and invasion of Iraq.

What Trump says is the most shocking and disturbing, but what he's done politically is not nearly as bad as what happened under the George W. Bush Administration – not just advocating, but systematic use of torture, not to mention the invasion of Iraq and everything that implied.

So what does experience tell me? People talk about this closing space for civil society today, that's another kind of trope tonight, closing space for civil society. When was space open for civil society? Do you think that when the Madres de Plaza de Mayo were marching and being disappeared by the Argentine government that there was open space, when the Uruguayans couldn't even set up a human rights organization because they were too afraid, when the Guatemalan human rights activists were being massacred, that this was open space?

So again, I'm quite skeptical that civil society space is closed more today. What I think is these new authoritarians are extremely clever about having new ways to harass civil society through tax laws and through making them register as foreign agents. There are new and clever ways to delegitimize and undermine. But I do not believe necessarily that

there's less space today than there was before.

**Stahl**

We didn't talk about your studies at the university. So with which theories did you have to deal there? And how did you relate these theories, political science, International Relations to what you were doing and hearing?

**Sikkink**

At the University of Minnesota, I did this interdisciplinary degree in International Relations, which included taking economics courses and intercultural communication courses. I had some very, very brilliant professors of International Relations and I was put through an extremely rigorous course in International Relations theory by Raymond [Bud] Duval, a scholar who was sympathetic to dependency theory and taught dependency theory. He'd been a professor at Yale and part of a research team that tried to quantify dependency theory. I just had to learn it all, realism, game theory. He was not one of these professors who says, "I'm a dependency theorist. I'm only going to teach you that." It's like, "No, let's just teach you an immensely complex field in its entirety." But I wasn't taught human rights. Human rights was not being taught by anybody in the political science department. So international human rights I learned more on my own. I didn't learn it in classes really. We had a wonderful law professor at the University of Minnesota who was a pioneer in teaching human rights law and work. He wrote one of the best textbooks – it still is used to this day – on human rights law.

**Stahl**

Who was he?

**Sikkink**

His name is David Weissbrodt<sup>25</sup> at the University of Minnesota. But undergraduates couldn't take law classes. So I was mainly self-taught on human rights and so going to work in Washington was a baptism of fire because I had to come up to speed while working, it was nothing that was taught to me. When I went back to do my PhD at Columbia University, I started realizing that the life I had lived as a human rights activist in Washington was still nowhere reflected in the curriculum that I was studying at Columbia University.

**Stahl**

And why? Can you explain that?

**Sikkink**

I think it's because human rights still was not considered a suitable topic for political science. It was still being done in law. It was considered really very normative, kind of wishful thinking. So it was still the heyday of more rationalist approaches to IR. Realism, neoliberal institutionalism, and Marxism, and some critical theory. But there wasn't anything yet that we would call constructivism today. And certainly, human rights was not a subfield of political science.

**Stahl**

So how did you deal with that situation? Did you just say, "Okay. What I have experienced

in Washington doesn't relate to what I'm doing," or did you already try to adapt your discipline to your experiences during your PhD work?

**Sikkink**

John Ruggie<sup>26</sup> was my dissertation adviser. He was one of the voices of what became constructivism and IR. He was teaching us a graduate course on international regimes. I said, "The problem with this is everyone assumes that states are the only regime makers – but what about NGOs? Sometimes they help make international regimes," international regimes being principles, norms, rules, and procedures governing a particular issue area, right?

I wrote a course paper for Ruggie's course on the Nestlé boycott, which was what Doug was doing and I was involved in. I argued that "The Nestlé boycott is a good example of the impact of NGO activism. These activists are getting the World Health Organization and UNICEF to draft a code of conduct for companies. It wouldn't have happened without activists in the boycott."

Ruggie said "This is a really good paper, and you should try to publish it." I was too busy. And then a couple of years later, the social movement secured an agreement with Nestlé and settled the Nestlé boycott. They got four out of their five demands from the boycott. At that point, I said I'm probably going to have to turn this paper into an article.

During graduate school, I had spent a summer and some of my extra time working at the United Nations in the Center on Transnational Corporations as a research assistant. When you're a graduate at Columbia, you can get jobs downtown at the UN, research assistant jobs at the UN. I'd been working on transnational pharmaceutical corporations, so in the article, I did a comparison between the boycott issue and why we can't get a code of conduct for transnational pharmaceutical corporations. John Ruggie helped me submit that article, to the journal *International Organization*, which is a top journal in my field. And in 1986, I had my first publication.<sup>27</sup> It was about the role of nongovernmental organizations in creating new norms and rules in world politics. It focused on this boycott issue, and it was the first and only time in my life I ever got an article published without a revise and resubmit.

**Stahl**

Would you say that was one of the first articles to deal with NGOs as actors on the international level?

**Sikkink**

It was a very early article to deal with that. But it was so specific. I wasn't trying to make a general theoretical argument. I was trying to explain why this campaign succeeded and why similar efforts to get a code of conduct for the pharmaceutical industry didn't succeed. So I was looking at characteristics of what it was that allowed success in one area and not another. I wasn't trying to make a major theoretical innovation; I was trying to tell a quite detailed empirical story with some theoretical implications.

**Stahl**

But did you realize that this could become an important field of research?

**Sikkink**

No, not then. I went on to write my dissertation about something entirely different.

**I was still convinced that, if you're interested in human rights, you need political economy.**

**Stahl**

What was it about?

**Sikkink**

It was about the impact of the Economic Commission for Latin America, ECLA<sup>28</sup> on economic policymaking in Brazil and Argentina in the 1950s and 1960s. So I went back to political economy. I was still convinced that, if you're interested in human rights, you need political economy. I'd trained now in political economy. I was going to do a political economy dissertation, but I was also very interested in the origins of ideas, where new ideas come from.

What later was called dependency theory was first articulated by Latin American economists at ECLA. Raúl Prebisch,<sup>29</sup> who was the head of ECLA, wrote one of the first articles criticizing declining terms of trade between the periphery and the center. So I was interested in studying what difference ECLA and its approach to development policy made for economic policymaking in Latin America in the early period of the 1950s and 1960s. I spent a year in Argentina and eight months in Brazil doing very deep historical primary research on the topic.

**Stahl**

And that was in the 1980s?

**Sikkink**

I started my PhD in 1981.

**Stahl**

That was at a time when the discussions about the New International Economic Order (NIEO)<sup>30</sup> stalled.

**Sikkink**

Right, and so Prebisch then later left ECLA and went to UNCTAD, headed UNCTAD.<sup>31</sup> That was around NIEO, exactly, the new international economic order. It was a very hot topic at the time, but I took a particularly historical approach to it. After completing my dissertation and publishing it as a book, I decided that I was still interested in working on the role of ideas in politics. I was going to have to get out of political economy to do it because the economists would never give you the time of day. If you weren't an economist, you really were not being given space to talk about political economy.



In the end, I decided to say, if you were interested in human rights, you should just study human rights, that the links between the economy and human rights were nowhere near as direct, as my mainly lefty Marxist colleagues had wanted to suggest. And I began to question that the economic structure was really driving things. Instead I began to place much more importance on people's attitudes, people's beliefs about the world.

**Stahl**

When was that?

**Sikkink**

This came in the process of this research. You had, of course, sociologists like Cardoso<sup>32</sup> and Faletto,<sup>33</sup> but then you had comparativists like Guillermo O'Donnell,<sup>34</sup> who was a political scientist who wrote that dictatorship is determined by a particular stage of industrialization, the need to deepen a particular mode of capitalism. Industrial capitalism in the periphery led to authoritarian regimes, so this notion that the economic imperatives determine the political system.

But then of course, I was doing research as democratization is happening all over the region. So I'm in Argentina doing my political economy research while the Juicios of the Juntas are taking place. I'm in Argentina for a year, 1985, in the year that all these trials are going on. And I thought, "Oh, God, I'm buried in the 1950s and 1960s, and all this cool stuff is happening now." I also realized the economic mode of production has not changed. And yet we have these vibrant new democracies.

So while people said that it was the economic mode of production that led to dictatorship and therefore we have to change the mode of production in order for democracy to develop, I was surrounded by evidence that that couldn't be true. And so I really started to question that.

In that questioning, I was very influenced by the ideas of Albert Hirschman,<sup>35</sup> who was a mentor of mine and became an influence in *Evidence for Hope* as well because Hirschman writes a great critique about the economic determinants of democracy. I began to really separate from something that had been driving me for quite a long time. And that is that I thought if I wanted to study human rights, I had to do political economy. Now I began to say, "No, let's just study human rights."

So after I published my first book. I got a call out of the blue from a colleague, Robert Putnam,<sup>36</sup> who was writing a book about double-edged diplomacy, and he asked me to write a chapter on U.S. human rights policy. I said, "You don't know this, but I actually know a lot about this topic." And I did my first coauthored article about U.S. human rights policy towards Argentina.<sup>37</sup> I just said, this is what I want to be doing. I want to be working directly on the mechanisms of human rights change, not indirectly back here looking at economic policymaking in the 1950s. Basically, I've been doing that kind of direct human rights research ever since.

**Stahl**

Would you agree with the observation that there was a movement away from economics,

from leftist theories towards human rights and that, often, the same people who had done this leftist critique of capitalism earlier now became more and more involved in human rights issues?

### **Sikkink**

It's funny because my last piece about the Economic Commission of Latin America, was based on the puzzling that ECLA economists were doing, not in the 1950s, but in the 1980s. I was very influenced by the people at ECLA's grappling with their own history. My chapter<sup>38</sup> discussed an article by an ECLA economist called "The Empty Box,"<sup>39</sup> and by the empty box they meant a case in Latin America that had achieved both growth and equity. ECLA economists were saying, "What we wanted was growth with equity." Everything that ECLA did was aimed at getting growth with equity.

So they did a self-critique. That is, in the early 1990s, after 30 years of import substituting industrialization, there was not a single Latin American country that had achieved both growth and equity. So some ECLA economists admitted that they had put excessive emphasis on import-substituting industrialization and protectionism. At the same time, many people were grappling with the contrast between what was going on in Asia and what was going on in Latin America. You had these Latin American countries that were for the most part at that time wealthier than what later became the Asian Tigers, Taiwan, South Korea, etc. And the Asian countries overtake them.

Yes, there's scholarly debate. Not just about what the Asians are doing. What the Asians were doing was initial import substitution, but then export promotion together with a lot of emphasis on land reform and education. So people tell different stories, but the most persuasive version of what these Asian Tigers were doing is something like that. It's definitely not neoliberalism. People who tell you it's neoliberalism haven't looked carefully at what the South Koreans and the Taiwanese and others were doing at that time. But they did export promotion. And they did know how to let go early of import substitution.

While Latin Americans were hanging onto import substitution and creating this rent-seeking behavior on the part of Latin American businessmen and leaders, and it did not lead to growth with equity; at the same time the Asian Tigers were doing much better on growth and much better on equity.

### **Stahl**

One could also say that the Latin American countries failed in the 1980s because of this huge debt crisis all over the world, but especially strong in the Latin American countries in the 1980s. So when you were writing your dissertation, one could also come to the conclusion that it was not because of these countries' own bad decisions, but because of the world economic structure – like the dependistas.

### **Sikkink**

Let me begin by clarifying that one result of my historical research in Latin America over time was that I came to understand that Latin American leaders and activists have much more nuanced forms of political agency than some scholars give them credit for. This began with my first article on Latin America, on Raul Prebisch, in the Latin America Research

Review,<sup>40</sup> and has continued through my most recent work on Latin America protagonism for modern human rights law.<sup>41</sup> You might say the thread running through much of my work is to try to simultaneously take both international structures and domestic politics into account, without erasing the agency of domestic political actors, whether economists or social movements.

With regard to the debt crisis, I don't deny that the international structure at the time was critical. You look at the conditions of these loans – without set interest rates, with variable interest rates, for example. All of a sudden, countries signed those loans, and they just went to unimaginable levels of interest rates that created a crushing debt burden, no doubt. Even so, I really came to believe that these explanations that put all the emphasis on the international system and paint the Latin American actors as if they were innocent victims were also missing the point about the influence in Latin America of powerful ideas about import substitution on policy.

And there were explanations for dictatorships that were that same way, as if choices were not being made in Latin America. They were simply victimized by circumstances. And of course, in some cases, the United States were supporting these dictatorships. In 1954, we're overthrowing coups in Guatemala. We're overthrowing Chileans in 1973. But the closer you look, the more you realize that this was a partnership of Latin American elites and militaries who were perfectly capable of carrying out coups by themselves, and in the Argentine and the Uruguayan case there was relatively little support from the United States. There was green light that Kissinger gave to the Argentine military, but the coup was mainly carried out by the Argentines. The same for the Uruguayans, they didn't get as much support from the US as in Chile or Brazil.

You had to look at it country by country. In Chile, the United States committed the coup. Elsewhere, they didn't. And so I began to really oppose these notions that Latin American elites had no responsibility or had not been involved in creating dictatorships in society and knowing how to torture and abuse rights and creating economic systems that benefited the wealthy and privileged among them. To this day, I believe that the core international factors matter, but the issue is how international factors interact with these domestic factors.

### **Stahl**

Were there a lot of academic debates at your university about these issues?

### **Sikkink**

There were definitely interesting debates about what was going on in Asia. I was very influenced by some authors, like Stephen Haggard<sup>42</sup> and Bob Kaufman,<sup>43</sup> very gifted scholars, who wrote this important study comparing Latin America and Asia,<sup>44</sup> who called our attention to things that happened in parts of Asia, like lots of emphasis on education as well as some emphasis on land reform, so stressing reforms that had not happened in Latin America, and huge segments of society there were left out of education. And land reform was mainly not happening in most of Latin America at the time, as you know.

### **Stahl**

Did you have a lot of contact with your Latin American colleagues at this time, or was it more a U.S.-American debate?

**Sikkink**

I would go to Argentina every year. I lived in Argentina in 1985– the whole year. But then we started going back for a month almost every year to try to keep up to date and be in contact with people, with my colleagues there. Meanwhile, you have these plans in Latin America such as the Austral plan<sup>45</sup> in Argentina in 1985, where I lived with hyperinflation. I understand why Argentines are terrified of hyperinflation because I've been in a supermarket where the person stamping the prices is just a few feet ahead of you as you're pulling groceries off the shelves. I've seen people get their paychecks and go to the supermarket quickly before their earnings are erased.

And then we went to live in Brazil. And the same thing happened, we saw the failure of the Plano Real.<sup>46</sup> I always believed in heterodox economic approaches. I was friends with heterodox economists. Those were some of the people writing some of these plans. But they couldn't figure out how to get a grip on the hyperinflation that was killing them. A lot of things happening in Argentina up to today have to do with fear of hyperinflation.

**Stahl**

And your husband stayed with you in Argentina?

**Sikkink**

Yes, Doug went with me. Doug finished his work on the Nestlé boycott. He went to the Yale School of Management, where he did a degree in management, and then he came back and was running the Center for Treatment of Torture Victims in Minnesota, the largest treatment center for torture victims in the United States. He was the Executive Director. It was based in Minneapolis. Minnesota actually has a lot of refugees and had the highest percentage of refugees as percentage of the population of any state at that time of any state in the United States. And then a small number of people came from elsewhere to be treated as well. At the time, there were a lot of Central Americans, at the very beginning. Quite soon, the bulk of the clients were African, mainly from African civil wars and authoritarian regimes. But there was a smattering of Latin Americans at the beginning, especially Central Americans.

**I decided I would be happier in graduate school than I would be staying in activism.**

**Stahl**

Did your husband's work have an effect on you?

**Sikkink**

The work of my husband has always had an effect on me. I watched the Nestlé boycott in my living room. When I met Doug the year the Nestlé boycott started, I was a member of the activist group that launched the Nestlé boycott. I was just one of the minions that was making the posters for the demonstration. But I watched. When I went back to graduate school and I wasn't an activist anymore, I watched activism closely through him. So the

boycott was important for me, and then looking at what's happening with the torture movement, that was important. It was a much more professionalized group. These were health professionals mainly who were treating torture victims.

When I started at the University of Minnesota, I started getting into fights with people, with pro-Cuban colleagues. I said let's talk about torture victims in Cuba because we've got a bunch of them here in the Center for Victims of Torture. And I did find that this was not always a very popular point of view. There were still many in the human rights community who wanted to talk about human rights violations of governments of the right, but not of governments of the left. And the torture issue really forces you to come face to face with that and say, no, I can't just praise Cuba and not mention torture victims.

I also remember speaking about Puerto Rico, for example. There was an event about Puerto Rico and Cuba on campus, about political prisoners in Puerto Rico. I said, yes, we definitely have to worry about political prisoners in Puerto Rico, the U.S. is holding political prisoners in Puerto Rico. And we're going to talk about political prisoners in Cuba at the same time. It can't be that the left is going to talk about political prisoners in Puerto Rico and not mention them in Cuba, and the right's going to talk about political prisoners in Cuba and not mention them in Puerto Rico. I really started to feel that we've got to try to have some kind of objectivity.

#### **Stahl**

But talking about objectivity, were you and your colleagues never concerned that when you wrote about topics like the Nestlé boycott, topics you and your husband were involved in, that this would be blending scholarship with activism and that it was going too far?

#### **Sikkink**

As you know, the Nestlé boycott was my first article ever. My professor, who knew about Doug's involvement, encouraged me to submit it for publication, and I did. But when I wrote my book *Activists Beyond Borders*, I explicitly left out the Nestlé case, which I could've included as a chapter, as an example, because I felt I was too close to it. So no, I wasn't prepared to turn down my first chance of a publication when my professor, who knew about my connection to it, nevertheless encouraged me to submit. But I did think about that, and I decided I didn't want it to be part of *Activists Beyond Borders* because people would say that.

#### **Stahl**

But did you leave out the boycott only because you didn't want to offend people or was it your own conviction that perhaps your results would be biased if you included your husband's campaign?

#### **Sikkink**

I think it was a combination of what people would say, but also that I wouldn't have a good answer if they said it. So I think it was my own sense that in general, that's too close. That puts me too much in a conflict of interest. But that's different from having this experience in Latin America or experience working at the Washington Office for Latin America. In fact, I left activism because I discovered I wasn't cut out for activism because I didn't like

lobbying and because I wanted to do more research. I kept saying, “Don’t you think we should do a little more research about that?” We’re lobbying to cut off military aid. Do we know if military aid really leads to improvements in human rights? And there just wasn’t time for that in the activist work. I believed in the issues. I admired what they were doing, and I did not like the day-to-day work because it was too much like marketing, and I didn’t like marketing.

**Stahl**

So you took a deliberate decision not to continue with activism.

**Sikkink**

Right, I had a one-year internship. They asked me to stay on as a regular staff person. I was working as a regular staff person for about eight months. And at that point, I had a scholarship that I could use for graduate school, and I had to either take it or leave it. I decided I would be happier in graduate school than I would be staying in activism. Doug was happy in activism, and I wasn’t. So I can tell the difference. It’s a matter of temperament. I don’t judge what I did as the better thing to do. It just is what fits my temperament. And Doug’s temperament at the time fit better with continuing his activism.

**Stahl**

You told me that you lived in Argentina in 1985. Around that time the *Nunca Más* report<sup>47</sup> was published and some trials against militaries who had been involved in the repressive policies of the government were happening.

**Sikkink**

My later research on transitional justice was very much influenced by spending years watching Argentina – and especially living in Buenos Aires during the trial of the juntas. Later I would follow the ups and downs of the search for accountability for mass atrocity in Argentina and in the rest of Latin America.

**Stahl**

Were you involved with some people who worked on these trials?

**Sikkink**

By the time I started writing this first piece on human rights, I started going back to Argentina to do human rights research, which I hadn’t done. At that time, some of my close friends at a place where I’d worked in Buenos Aires called CEDES,<sup>48</sup> a place I’d been as a graduate student, some of my close friends at CEDES were doing major research on the Trials of the Juntas. They were four academic colleagues of mine, people I knew from other issues, who were now working on this human rights issue. So as I turned to human rights, international human rights, they turned to work on human rights in Argentina. And so I watched that project and learned from it. Luis Moreno Ocampo, who’d been the assistant prosecutor of the Juntas, joined that research project as well as a kind of collaborator from the world of practice. That’s when I met Ocampo, Luis Moreno Ocampo.<sup>49</sup>

And I continued to interview people I knew in the Human Rights Movement, people I met when I was at WOLA,<sup>50</sup> but now I started interviewing them for my academic research,

including, for example, people at CELS,<sup>51</sup> which is a major human rights organization. I knew the leadership there from when I'd been at WOLA. And now I went back to them and said, "Now I want to interview you about U.S. foreign policy and what you think the impact of U.S. foreign policy is."

**Stahl**

So what was your project about? Can you specify it a little bit more?

**Sikkink**

I wrote two chapters for two edited volumes on human rights issues. The first chapter I wrote was one about diplomacy. It was called "Double-Edges Diplomacy." The idea was that the impact of U.S. policy is partly the result of the political game going on internationally, but it's also part of the political game going on domestically. And how does this domestic political interaction with this international one lead to outcomes?

This was about the end of disappearances in Argentina and about the invitation to the American Commission for Human Rights. So the United States threatens to withhold turbines for export-import bank loans to Argentina. And the Argentines negotiate in return that they will invite the American Commission for Human Rights, but they do that because there's divisions within the Argentine military government. Some are looking for a way out, and some are digging in deeper. You've got Carter in the U.S. You've got the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights, which is starting to come into its own. You've got divisions within the Argentine military. What you get is the American Commission going to Argentina and writing this incredibly important report that becomes the turning point where the Argentine state gives up the practice of disappearances before the transition to democracy.

I tried to figure that all out. At that time I was able to do interviews I can't do anymore, people in the military, with the Ministry of Economics, the Deputy Minister of Economics, the advisers to the military, Walter Mondale, who actually negotiated the deal with Videla.<sup>52</sup> I was able to actually really pick apart that moment and figure out what happened. That was one thing I did.

**Stahl**

Do you still have the transcripts of these interviews?

**Sikkink**

I have transcripts from those interviews, yes. I interviewed people in the Human Rights Movement, too, about what they perceived had been going on at the time. Then I did a comparison with U.S. human rights policy and European human rights policies. I was very interested in the Dutch in particular, who were the earliest in 1976 with their white paper on human rights.

So I started saying, this is the Dutch approach. It's very different than the U.S. approach. And I learned about the role of the European Court of Human Rights, for example, and I wrote a piece for the volume *Ideas and Foreign Policy*,<sup>53</sup> where I first contrasted the European human rights system and the European human rights policies and U.S. human

rights policies, how different they were from one another.

**It was just kind of a bubbling innovation, the Argentine Human Rights Movement.**

**Stahl**

You mentioned that you learned a lot from these people. Can you specify that a little bit?

**Sikkink**

I probably have an interview in my files of every President of CELS. Mainly, it's like this: you leave Argentina, you're not there for a year. And then you come back, and you're way behind. So the first thing people are doing is just bringing me up to date before they are telling me about new things. So there was the Truth Commission, and there were the trials. Then there were all these truth trials,<sup>54</sup> which was an innovation, the Argentine Human Rights Movement, to propose these truth trials. It was Emilio Mignone<sup>55</sup> who wrote the first legal brief that proposed there should be truth trials.

Then you have the forensic anthropology group who are figuring out how to use forensic anthropology for human rights, it had never been used before for human rights. So they invite Clyde Snow.<sup>56</sup> They work with the American Association for the Advancement of Science. The grandmothers are trying to do this grand paternity blood testing.

So the Argentine Human Rights Movement was always steps ahead of me. And I'd have to go back and say, "You've done what? What is grand paternity blood testing?" So that was what I was learning. Then that eventually led to a piece I wrote called "Argentina as a Protagonist," how it had gone from a pariah state to a protagonist in human rights.<sup>57</sup>

It was just kind of a bubbling innovation, the Argentine Human Rights Movement at the time, that accompanied a lot of conflict. It wasn't happy go lucky, everyone in one big family. The Madres Línea Fundadora were already refusing to cooperate with the other part of the Madres, not to mention everyone else in the Human Rights Movement. So there were lots of fights and this incredible innovation and intransigence.

**Stahl**

Do you also think that human rights scholarship was much more innovative compared with what was going on in the U.S.?

**Sikkink**

I think the Latin American Human Rights Movement at that time was very innovative in its activism. At WOLA, in my time there, we were more of a service organization. And these groups were calling the shots. In terms of scholarship, there has been excellent human rights scholarship in the U.S. as well as in Latin America and Europe.

**Stahl**

Were there many other scholars working on human rights policies in the United States?



**Sikkink**

There were. There weren't very many at that time, but little by little, there started to be more human rights research.

**Stahl**

And where in the field were they located?

**Sikkink**

Take Alison Brysk,<sup>58</sup> for example, her first book was about the Argentine Human Rights Movement.<sup>59</sup> It's a really important book. There were a few people senior to me who did human rights research. There was David Forsythe.<sup>60</sup> He was at the University of Nebraska. And there was Jack Donnelly,<sup>61</sup> who was at Colorado. I would say they really were at the forefront. And they were both IR people.

Forsythe was really an international organizations and law person. He worked on the Red Cross, but he also did a lot of human rights research and publishing. And Donnelly wrote the premier textbook that I used in my human rights classes. So there were people who were doing that work already. And they were IR people. And Donnelly was a political theorist, too, who did not necessarily have links to groups in the Global South.

I think because of all this innovation going on in Latin America, a lot of people working on Latin America started doing human rights research because these human rights organizations were very dynamic. This trial of the Juntas in Argentina was a first; never before in the history of Latin America had anyone ever put their own former officials on trial. And all of a sudden, we've got all nine of the Juntas sitting up there on the banco de los acusados.<sup>62</sup> It was just incredible. And I wasn't the only one who was impressed – they're just all over. At a certain point, this is a decade later, I wanted to say, "Stop going to Argentina." People have interviewed these Argentine human actors so many times. Can we just please go someplace else? We don't need another book about human rights activists in Argentina. I'm talking by the year 2000. There's almost too much research on Argentina and nothing on Uruguay, nothing on Bolivia. So there are these other interesting human rights stories that aren't being told because the Argentine scene was so fascinating.

**Stahl**

Did this sudden interest in human rights change International Relations in terms of how they worked, the theories they worked with? Do you see an impact on the field of International Relations?

**Sikkink**

My book that had the most impact was *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics*,<sup>63</sup> which I wrote with Margaret Keck.<sup>64</sup> Virtually all the examples came from Latin America, but it was explicitly aimed at being a general IR comparative, not a Latin Americanist audience.

And there, we stepped up. We made big theoretical claims about the fact that the field was missing these nontraditional actors. And by missing the role of these actors in world politics was misunderstanding something about the nature of global politics. In *Activists Beyond*

Borders, we make a big claim that you have to take these networks, these nontraditional actors seriously in order to understand something about modern International Relations. And that book got a lot of attention because it hit at exactly the right moment, where people were seeing some of this and didn't have a framework to organize it.

It was one of those almost lucky things academically, where you write a book and it happens to hit the market at just the moment where people are prepared to be receptive to it. And we weren't the first book on the role of NGOs. Peter Willits had previously edited a book about this topic.<sup>65</sup> But we were an early and strong statement in 1988. And we got attention.

In 1999, I coedited with Thomas Risse<sup>66</sup> and Steve Ropp<sup>67</sup> *The Power of Human Rights*,<sup>68</sup> because Thomas had seen me present on the *Activists Beyond Borders*, and read some of that in draft and realized we were working on similar issues and so he integrated me into his edited book project." So those two things, the coauthored book *Activists Beyond Borders* and the coedited book with Thomas Risse were really things that I think made more of an impact in IR.

#### **Stahl**

How were the reactions in the U.S.?

#### **Sikkink**

*Activists Beyond Borders* won the Grawemeyer Prize for Work for Improving World Order, which is the only major prize in political science, International Relations, that carries a major monetary prize. It's my most cited book to date, still in print after all these years.

Around 1998, I wrote an article about norm dynamics with Martha Finnemore<sup>69</sup> – and that's really translating into constructivism.<sup>70</sup> So *Activists Beyond Borders* had constructivist insights, but it isn't put out there as a constructivist book, whereas this article "Norm Dynamics" is saying, "Let's make arguments about how norms are important in world politics and therefore how we need constructivism, which is a theory that looks at the role of human consciousness in international life."

**We just felt like our subfields, comparative politics, International Relations were not providing us with the insights we needed.**

#### **Stahl**

Constructivism was just becoming a major theory at this time.

#### **Sikkink**

Exactly. John Ruggie had innovated in important ways, as did Friedrich Kratochwil<sup>71</sup> a German IR scholar. Both were my professors at Columbia University, and I was clearly influenced by them. And Alexander Wendt<sup>72</sup> is recognized as the leading scholar of constructivism. So yes, constructivism was coming together. But much of it was very top-down structural constructivism. And what Martha Finnemore and I were doing was saying, "Let's tell you about a more agentic piece of this. Where do those ideas come from? They

don't just come out of the air. They're created by advocates and agents."

**Stahl**

When did you first feel that the conventional theories and explanations of IR didn't work for you?

**Sikkink**

Margaret Keck and I decided to write the book because she was working on environmental networks and I was working on human rights networks. We just felt like our subfields, comparative politics, International Relations were not providing us with the insights we needed to describe and explain the world as we saw it in our research.

So we wrote the book by way of critique of what was not available to us in our disciplines. I had lived it in Washington. I came to graduate school, and I had just lived this life, and it was not reflected in my curriculum at all in graduate school. But it took me six more years to finish my dissertation, publish my dissertation, get tenure, and get going on this new project.

**Stahl**

Did you also meet criticism from neorealists or some other groups?

**Sikkink**

Oh, lots of criticism all the time.

**Stahl**

Was there some criticism that you would consider worth mentioning?

**Sikkink**

When I was working on *Activists Beyond Borders*, people started saying, "Well, these things aren't so new. These networks aren't so new. What about the antislavery movement?" And so I said, "Okay. We'll do a historical chapter. That's good." And we did a historical chapter on the antislavery movement, the women's suffrage international movement, anti-footbinding in China, and a failed campaign around female circumcision in Kenya during the colonial period – I learned so much from that.

Political science has a strong dose of rationalism, and the belief that everything can be explained by interests, especially economic interests. I remember one of my rationalist colleagues saying, "Well, slavery was ended because it was no longer profitable." So I dug deeply into the slavery research. And there's this incredible slavery research, people who look at calorie intake of slaves, it's crazy how detailed it is. But the leading historian of slavery said, "Slavery was abolished at the height of its profitability by men and women ablaze with moral fervor." But the political scientist somehow had this notion that slavery was abolished because it wasn't profitable. The knee-jerk reaction of most political scientists is, "Let's look first for the interest explanation. There's always got to be an interest explanation."

So they were extremely skeptical when I was saying that many of these human rights

activists are brought to it because they are ablaze with moral fervor. Certainly people had interests. But families had interests in having their children released from prison or their husbands or their wives released from prison. But to chalk the Human Rights Movement up to interests just misses most of what's important about it.

We said these advocacy networks were principled. The first article I wrote on the topic was for International Organization in 1993, referred to "Principle Issue Networks" and then eventually became "Transnational Advocacy Networks."<sup>73</sup> And that really enraged some people because many scholars have spent lots of time trying to prove that human rights activists aren't really principled. At one point, we say that advocacy activists are strategic and principled, meaning they're driven by their principles, ideas about right and wrong, but they're strategic. They want to win, right? I cannot tell you how many times I've been told: "Look, they raise money. They spend all their time raising money." So I had to say to people, "I said these activists were principled. I didn't say they were stupid."

So there's an immense literature against Activists Beyond Borders that just wants to take on and on again that we say that they're motivated by principles and no amount of trying to explain that, just because you're principled doesn't mean you're stupid or doesn't mean you're not strategic, that people want to win, and they do make choices. I don't think it's unprincipled to work on human rights in China and the United States, even though the situation in the DRC is worse. I think there are very good both principled and strategic reasons to do that.

I'm not sure if we could've expressed it in a different way, there's literally a sentence that I wish I could change where it says they're motivated by principle and not by interest. If I could just take that sentence out and repeat the sentence that comes a couple of pages later, "These are simultaneously principled and strategic actors," then that might've not have fed this growth industry of proving that activists aren't principled. I think there's a lot of good work to be done, but I'm not sure that any more ink should be wasted on that issue.

**Stahl**

When Thomas Risse contacted you and you started working on this spiral model, did he already have this spiral model, or was that something you developed in conversation?

**Sikkink**

The boomerang model already existed, and the spiral model was an adaptation and an extension of the boomerang model. And that's what we say in *The Power of Human Rights*. The spiral model is about seeing patterns. So when Thomas heard me present about the boomerang model, he understood that it matched things that they were seeing in their research. He had a whole team of PhD students who were working with him. So then the team worked together to try to develop this more intricate notion of change over time. That's the spiral model.

**Stahl**

And did you consider it helpful for your research?

**Sikkink**

I really enjoyed working with that group. I enjoyed learning about what scholars in Germany were doing. Up until then, I had not had contact with scholars in Germany. And I became very impressed with the level of sophistication that German scholars were using in their approach to IR. Later, I sat on the board of the Peace Research Institute in Frankfurt with Harald Müller.<sup>74</sup> And so I got to see that operation, which is another very impressive operation and impressive theoretically. I really liked the way that German scholars were apparently avoiding some of the big struggles we were having in the United States. The paradigm debates seemed to be not as intense here.

In the United States, we were having a lot of debates around method. If you were a constructivist and you believed in ideas, then you couldn't use quantitative methods as if they were mutually exclusive. I felt that method was becoming an identity for many U.S. scholars. People appear to say "I'm someone who does qualitative research, and that's my identity. And my identity is threatened by people who do quantitative research." In the German context, people were committed to testing hypotheses and using systematic research. They seemed to be fighting less about method at the time.

### **Stahl**

You said that one of your intentions was also to create theories, to create knowledge that could help human rights activists. So where do you see the impact of your research of these early years? We are still talking about the end of the 1980s, the 1990s.

### **Sikkink**

Number one, I've never done what's called participant action research. It's called PAR, which would require the researcher to sit down and design the research project with communities or with activists. I have not done that. I'm not a consultant for the Human Rights Movement. But I always had my finger on the pulse of people in the human rights community. And very often, I am interested in the questions that they are interested in.

So I was saying, "We asked for cutting off economic aid, but do we know if it really works?" I always had the causal question that was behind the activist strategy. And that became particularly clear around two books, *The Justice Cascade*<sup>75</sup> and now *Evidence for Hope*. In *The Justice Cascade*, I was listening to these debates among activists and in policy circles.

There was just an immense critique of human rights prosecutions almost from day one as soon as the Argentines started prosecuting. There were people who said this was dangerous for democracy. So when there was the coup attempt against Alfonsín,<sup>76</sup> they said, "See, we told you, of course, that Alfonsín shouldn't have done the trials." But of course, there were coup attempts in Chile, too, and no one was trying to prosecute there at the time. There was a notion that you can have truth or justice, but you can't have both truth and justice. There was the notion that justice exacerbates conflict, and since conflicts cause more human rights violations, that's a problem. I just had a real gut-level sense that these were misdirected critiques. I wanted to conduct systematic research. And that's when I began my first big quantitative study, which I'd never done before. I was saying, "There are amazing things happening in Latin America around the rise of accountability." And people were going, "Poof, maybe in Argentina, no place else."

I'm thinking it was around 2005 or so that I started to build the database which finally led to The Justice Cascade. At first it was just a really rough database trying to show something's happening. Eventually, we got better data and more data. We really were able to answer questions that were extremely important to people working on prosecutions and that is, does it work? Is it associated with undermining democracy? At a minimum, we were trying to see if there's evidence for these hypotheses that prosecutions undermine democracy, that prosecutions lead to more conflict, that you can have truth or justice, but not both. Once we started to get good enough data we could start asking and answering these questions. And that was important. It was interesting to me, but I could also see it was of great interest to people who were engaged in this kind of work as well.

So that was one example. And then Evidence for Hope is another example. It's really a book that I tried to write for people in the Human Rights Movement. At the beginning of the book, I mention talking to activists from Mexico and activists from Egypt and people who tell me they've lost hope. I don't tell them, "Oh, you should be hopeful because things are good in Mexico or Egypt." They're not good. Instead I said, "There's a long history of human rights here that I've lived and that I've conducted a lot of research about. And I think that it's a long history of victory and failure, of ups and downs, of Carter and then Reagan, but that the overall trend has been of seeing changes that we never anticipated back in 1980 when I started working at the Washington Office on Latin America." People have written me right out of the blue. People I don't know write me and say, "It was really helpful for me to read this book."

Sometimes, I ask questions that are parallel to questions of interest to the Human Rights Movement. Sometimes I write, in this case, directly for people in the movement. I always try to write in a language that is accessible. So I try to avoid jargon when I can because I want to be read by people in the movement.

But then sometimes, like with Evidence for Hope, people want me to keep going on and on and on about the same thing. And I just say, "Been there. Done that. I'm onto something else." It's like people want me to keep writing Activists Beyond Borders, versions of it over and over again. They want me to write the handbook chapter on recent developments in transnational advocacy networks. And that's not what I'm doing research on right now. I'm not really interested in writing that. There's a lot of good people out there who can write that who are doing that research. And so I like to move on to something different. My new book is about responsibilities, human rights and responsibilities, for example, which is a completely new topic.

**To see the Soviet Union disintegrate almost from within, with scholars of the region not having anticipated it at all did undermine some confidence in the models we had.**

**Stahl**

You were saying that this book you wrote with Keck came at the right moment. Could you describe a little bit more why you think it was the right moment?

**Sikkink**

It was 1998. 1998 is the year that Pinochet was arrested in London. It's the year the Rome Statute is passed. You know how many years it takes to write a book. So we've been working for six years on this book. And it just so happens to be published in 1998 when these things happen. "What? General Pinochet's arrested in London?" If someone had asked me one month before Pinochet was arrested in London, "Is it going to happen?" I would have said, "No. It's legally possible for it to happen. Politically, it's not going to happen." No one expected to have an International Criminal Court. It seemed impossible. And so unexpected things happened. And people were asking, "What's going on?" So it was useful to have our book come out in that context.

**Stahl**

And would you also say that the field of International Relations had changed completely during the previous years so that it was receptive to your arguments?

**Sikkink**

It didn't change completely, but it certainly changed to be receptive.

**Stahl**

Can you describe some of the changes IR underwent in the 1990s?

**Sikkink**

Some of these changes connect to politics. For example, Peter Katzenstein edited a very important book on constructivism and security issues called *Culture of National Security*.<sup>77</sup> In his introduction, Katzenstein wrote that the end of the Cold War and the fall of the Berlin Wall was to International Relations what the sinking of the Titanic was to naval engineering: something that reveals the fundamental flaw in the whole approach.

I'm not sure if that's true, but what is true is that no one predicted the end of the Cold War. So we have all this International Relations theory and everyone busily commenting and following the world. And almost no one had a clue that there might be this dramatic change in the varying structure and nature of the system.

Katzenstein captured that in the way most of the rest of us didn't, that there was this interaction between changes in the world and theorizing about the world. For realists, the Cold War was the structured international system, a bipolar system that was driven by interests and was unlikely to change unless one superpower conquered the other superpower.

To see the Soviet Union disintegrate almost from within, with scholars of the region not having anticipated it at all did undermine some confidence in the models we had. And so people were interested in alternative approaches. But I also think that there were approaches happening in the social sciences more generally. The linguistic turn occurred first in other fields. Constructivism is partly about a linguistic turn, in the sense of increased attention to the norms, ideas, language, and culture.

So the field has changed, not because realism has gone away. Realism's alive and well. But constructivism is now one of the most important approaches to International Relations.

Many people in political science and international relations in the U.S., Canada, and Europe do identify as constructivists, according to surveys of the field.

**Stahl**

Apart from the end of the Cold War, were there other developments going on in the world that were important in this context?

**Sikkink**

The third wave of democracy would be another one. I lived that. I started at Columbia University in 1981. I was a student of IR, but also a Latin Americanist. The entire region was under authoritarian regimes, except Costa Rica, and Venezuela – ironically there was democracy there at the time – and Colombia, but of course, Colombia had this big civil war. So there were three democracies, and one was Colombia with a huge civil war. The entire rest of the region was under some kind of authoritarian regime.

I remember vividly that there was a graduate seminar on political parties. And I said, “I work on Latin America. I don’t need to know about political parties.” I assumed that this authoritarian nature of the region would continue. I also didn’t learn quantitative skills because I said that we know, garbage in, garbage out. The data being produced by these authoritarian regimes is garbage. So to get quantitative methods would let me use garbage produced by these authoritarian regimes as if it were reliable data.

So I made two bad choices at graduate school, based on the assuming that the region I studied would continue to be authoritarian. And then we had this transition in the region. We know there are deeply repressive regimes still, Venezuela foremost among them. That’s another thing I have really argued with the left about, including the human rights left in Latin America, how long it took them to begin to talk about human rights violations in Venezuela. Unacceptably long.

So after the third wave of democracy: all of a sudden, there is a dramatic increase in the number of democracies in the world. I’m following all the democracy indices very carefully. Despite our great alarm about democracy today, we’re still very close to an all-time high number of democracies in the world. And that’s not counting these electoral authoritarians. No one’s counting Venezuela, Turkey, or Hungary as democracies. Not counting those, we still are at almost an all-time high for democracy. So that’s a huge world change that means we need to change the way we think about politics.

**Stahl**

Did you perceive a shift within the field of International Relations at some point after the 1990s, or would you say, looking at International Relations, there’s not so much that has changed since the late 1980s?

**Sikkink**

I’ve already mentioned the rise of constructivism. But then there’s also the rise of critical theory.

**Stahl**



But the rise of constructivism, began in the 1980s.

### **Sikkink**

Well, put it this way. The first article that we can call constructivist, although they didn't use that term, was a Kratochwil and Ruggie article in 1986. But then it's really Alex Wendt's pieces where he starts using that term in the early 1990s that are more important for the recognition of constructivism as an alternative approach to the field, parallel to realism and liberalism. Critical theory plays a very important role in IR. Two kinds of critical theory, both kind of Habermasian critical theory, which is something that Thomas Risse and others have written about, but much more deeply, it's been marked by Foucaultian critical theory and Derrida and others, French theorists. IR in some Universities in the the United States and in Britain has been very marked by a turn to kind of a Foucault and Derrida approach to critical theory.

I think it partly corresponded to the decline of influence of Marxist theory, which probably connects to the end of the Cold War, but as I said, there was also the linguistic turn in comparative literature. It comes out of the humanities into social sciences, but I also think it comes from a disillusionment with the alternative utopia. Here, Samuel Moyn<sup>78</sup> is right that there were alternative utopias. Marxism was one of the main ones. As the alternative utopia, Marxism becomes less influential. People seek other critical stances. And a Foucault or a Derrida approach to critical theory is one that's very important in some sectors. It was very strong in the University of Minnesota, that's why I'm very aware of it. I think in British universities, it's even stronger. The SOAS, for example, is a place that's had quite an influence.

### **Stahl**

On human rights also?

### **Sikkink**

Critical scholars turned their attention, very correctly in my mind, to an increased concern with inequality and a very legitimate critique of hyperglobalization.

Where I disagree is the idea the Samuel Moyn and others have made that human rights are in some way "complicit" with hyperglobalization and neoliberalism. This was based on two main arguments. One is the notion that when human rights activism increased dramatically in the 1970s it was the same time that neoliberalism takes off.

I talk about this in Evidence for Hope. Only if you believe Sam Moyn's chronology that human rights really begins in the 1970s do you see any correlation in the timing with neoliberalism. But if, as most scholars recognize, human rights begins, of course, in the 1940s and continues in the 1950s and the 1960s, you see it is very much part of postwar political and economic order, including what John Ruggie has called embedded liberalism, the postwar agreement that one would have more or less free markets, but also have protective social policies.

Those of us who worked in Latin America know that these Latin American human rights groups were fighting against neoliberal governments. So the Argentines and the Chilean

human rights organizations were fighting against governments that were neoliberal governments that were disappearing activists and labor leaders and others. So the notion that human rights is complicit with neoliberalism is just confounding for me and others who've worked on Latin America.

Then there is the notion that human rights and neo-liberalism are similar because both focus on the individual, as if the care that human rights places on the individual, as an individual at the center of concern, the individual as the object of attention, and the creation of all sorts of protections to protect the wellbeing of the individual is in any way similar to a neoliberal economic approach that uses the individual at the center of the functioning of the model, but never the object of concern. So there are these incredible missteps, deep conceptual either confusion or disingenuousness, people who know it's confusing but like to be confusing.

**Stahl**

You mentioned Samuel Moyn. He's a historian. But you said this was also an argument that became very important in the field of International Relations.

**Sikkink**

Yes.

**Stahl**

How do you explain this sudden interest or openness to this argument?

**Sikkink**

One reason is that all of our fields love counterintuitive, provocative arguments. Moyn is extremely good at making counterintuitive, provocative arguments. They capture attention. Two, some of us may have done a disservice by being so troubled by the quality of the research in the book that we went out of our way to call more attention to it than it deserved.

**Stahl**

I wonder why generally in the field of International Relations this connection between neoliberalism and human rights coming from critical theory became so convincing.

**Sikkink**

I don't know, maybe there are various things. All of us rebel against our elders. In my day, we rebelled by doing dependency theory. Nowadays, when your professors are constructivists, you can rebel by being a critical theorist. There may be some affinity even with nihilism. It's a position that lets you critique, but you only have to critique. You don't have to do anything else. I think there's lots to critique in the world. I've had colleagues quote to me, "Derrida says deconstruction is justice." It's powerful, and it's so comfortable and easy to be right there at the nihilist critical edge and never ever have to do anything but take apart things other people do. You don't have to build anything.

**Stahl**

But wouldn't you say that there were also some developments and events taking place on

the global level that contributed to pushing the argument?

**Sikkink**

What, for example?

**Stahl**

Perhaps the economic crisis.

**Sikkink**

People think the world is worse off than it's ever been before. And that could contribute to a critical approach. I've argued, objectively, we do not have good evidence for that. So my question is, why do people think the world is worse off than ever before in the absence of evidence, in the absence of strong evidence? In *Evidence for Hope*, I gathered all the information I could gather on as many measures that exist for human rights. And there are indeed a handful of things, like refugee flows, that are worse today than before.<sup>79</sup>

But in virtually every other area, life expectancy, infant mortality, child mortality, education for women, the number of countries using the death penalty, Human Development Index, literacy in the world, you name a measure and to the degree that I've consulted it, I can tell you that the world is better than it was.

There's a survey – I cite it in the book – In 2015, 18,000 people in 17 countries were asked in whether the world is better than before, worse than before, or more or less the same. In Germany, 4 percent of Germans thought the world in 2015 was better than before. In the United States, 6 percent of people thought the world was better.

Only in two countries in the world in 2015 did a majority of people think the world is better or staying the same, China and Indonesia. Every other country in the world, including all the vastly developed countries of the world thought the world was getting worse and I would argue without good objective evidence of that.

Now it could be that the quality in relations has broken down, that people are more isolated, that they're lonelier. We don't have measures for that. So it could be that people are more isolated and lonely and that makes them believe that the world is worse off.

But if you really ask most of the people, "Okay. Fine. Just tell me, when do you want to return to? Where's the golden age you want to return to?" Because as a woman, living in my country, I would not want to be born in a time earlier than the time I was born, so what's going on? There's deep pessimism in the world. I agree. There are a handful of things like the rise of refugees and increases in domestic inequality in some countries, but even if you want to talk inequality – I've even delved deeply into the inequality literature because, remember, I worked on ECLA. I worked on NIEO. What did ECLA and NIEO want? They wanted a decrease in inequality between and among countries. So what has happened in the world today? There has been a decrease in inequality between and among countries, namely because China and India and countries in Asia, as they become wealthier, they've reduced inequality between countries.

In other words, Raúl Prebisch's dream and the NIEO dream of a reduction in inequality between countries has occurred. And that actually means that the average individual in the world in relation to other individuals in the world, the average inequality of individuals in the world has decreased.

But inequality within countries – some countries, not all – inequality within countries has increased. And people feel that very, very deeply. They feel that because inequality has increased within countries that all inequality everywhere in the world has increased and gotten worse. And so what was so important to Prebisch and NIEO and what has improved is completely ignored. What is also very important is that we have to be able to do more about inequality within countries, it has drawn a lot of attention and made people think that everything's worse.

In *Evidence for Hope*, I use some psychological theory to understand this pessimism. We know humans have negativity bias. We know that we have availability heuristics – negative information is much more available to us than it was before. The news bias towards negative information is very high. That's extremely true in social media as well as in the regular media.

I look around and here, I'm in Germany. It's the most incredibly well-regulated society. And in Germany, only 4 percent of people thought in 2015 that the world was getting better? You just have to go to the museum. Go to the museum and look at postwar Germany and see how far Germany's come. I'm puzzled by it.

We have tax data back to a century in these countries we don't have in other places. But we have information that basically shows the Europeans and the Japanese have found it's possible to use social policy to limit inequality. And the English-speaking world has turned its back on the very kinds of social policy needed to address these forms of inequality.

So it's not like we don't know anything about what causes inequality. We do know it, and it's not capitalism per se, which a lot of people want to choose, but it has to do with the so-called varieties of capitalism and particular models of capitalism. Europeans mainly know how to have a variety of capitalism that includes high levels of social protection that has diminished inequality. Human rights have been part and parcel of that, not complicit with inequality or neoliberalism, but human rights have been part of movements that have led for calls for all sorts of social policies that will help diminish inequality. Human rights have been really good on status inequality. We know that economic inequality is related to status inequality. Blacks in the United States are poor partly – not just – because they face discrimination. So the degree to which you can bring down discrimination against racial minorities, against women, against LGBT communities, against ethnic and religious minorities, that will also contribute to improving their economic equality.

Human rights have been a leading force in contributing to the decline in status inequality in the world. We have movements in Latin America that have been very powerful to try to use human rights as a way of dealing with economic, social, and cultural rights. There've been movements and court cases in Brazil and Colombia and South Africa and Argentina, in India, on the right to food, the right to health, the right to water.

And those have been promising lines to pursue. They're not perfect. There are questions whether litigating to get a particular medicine is really a good way to improve access to health to everybody, but they've certainly been tools towards economic human rights.

So what is it that makes people think that human rights are complicit? Where is the evidence? That's what I say. I would like to see not a conceptual piece, of which there are many, but one good article with empirical evidence that human rights are complicit. Complicit is a causal word, it suggests heighten. Human rights heighten. Human rights exacerbate, lead to. So I would just like to see one piece of evidence that human rights are complicit with neoliberalism or that human rights exacerbate inequality. And I have never seen it.

**Stahl**

Is it possible that the human rights discourse of the 1990s focused too little on inequality and too much on the transition to democracy and political rights instead of inequality?

**Sikkink**

In the 1970 and 1980s, Latin Americans focused on political and civil rights because people were being massively imprisoned and tortured and disappeared. It was the most immediate problem they faced. It was not because of neoliberalism. They were fighting neoliberal governments. And they believed that they needed to protect the activists. They needed to change their governments in order to bring about change. I don't believe that this constitutes excessive attention to political and civil rights that somehow is to blame for inequality. I would like to see a little bit of evidence to that effect from people who are making that argument.

If you look at the Human Rights Movements in Latin America today, you see that groups are paying serious attention also to economic, social, and cultural rights. They were suing about pollution of rivers, for example. They were working on labor rights, right to health, and inequality. Human rights organizations in Latin America were not ignoring these issues.

**Stahl**

Where do you think human rights is now as a topic? Which place do you think it will have in International Relations in the next years?

**Sikkink**

Human rights is not going to go away as a topic. It will be subject to more quantitative studies. Some of those will be excellent, like Beth Simmons's book *Mobilizing for Human Rights*. And some of those quantitative studies will continue to be superficial and deeply flawed because some quantitative people don't want to have to do any field research. They don't even want to build their own data. They want to use canned data and fancy methods without having to go places and know things about the rest of the world. There are excellent people doing quantitative research, like I say. And I follow those studies, and I find some of them very interesting. I take them seriously. But there are also people who think that you can study International Relations without ever leaving New York City or Boston.

I really regret the decline of the norm that people who study IR or comparative politics should go and spend extended quantities of time elsewhere in the world, spend time really learning from your colleagues abroad, having lived experience of international politics from a different point of view. I think there's too much a tendency for people to see international politics sitting in Washington, DC or in Boston or maybe Berlin, being too close to power. But it's easy sometimes to be too close to power and not be able to get far enough away from power and close enough to the less powerful to be able to see your own government from a different perspective. What my experience in Latin America with my Latin American colleagues, and both activists and scholars, has done for me over the years is that it has really continually obliged me to see U.S. power from a different angle. And I'm afraid that we're losing that in IR. I'm not worried about losing human rights, human rights as a topic of study.

## Fußnoten

1. Francisco Franco (1892-1975) led a coup d'état in 1936 against Spain's republican government. During the following civil war his troops killed thousands of adversaries. Franco stayed in power until his death in 1975.
2. William L. Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich. A History of Nazi Germany* (London, 1960).
3. In 1973, the Chilean military under General Augusto Pinochet (1915-2006) overthrew the democratic government of Salvador Allende (1908-1973) and established a dictatorship that lasted until 1989.
4. In 1973, the Uruguayan military took power after a coup and established the so-called Civic military dictatorship that lasted until 1985.
5. Eugene Burdick, William Lederer, *The Ugly American* (New York, 1958). The novel depicts the failures of the U.S. diplomatic corps in Southeast Asia.
6. Kathryn Sikkink, *Evidence for Hope. Making Human Rights Work in the 21st Century* (Princeton, 2018).
7. Douglas A. Johnson (born in 1949) chaired the Infant Formula Action Coalition (INFACT) and founded the International Nestle Boycott Committee.
8. The dependency theory originated in Latin America during the 1960s. It tries to explain the reasons for underdevelopment in certain regions by focusing on inequalities between "center" and "peripheries" in the economic world system. The hierarchical subordination of peripheral underdeveloped countries serves the economy of industrialized countries and perpetuates global inequalities.
9. The Nestlé boycott was launched in the U.S. in 1977 and criticized the concern for its aggressive marketing of breast milk substitutes.
10. The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights were adopted by the UN in 1966.
11. Congressman Donald M. Fraser (b. 1924), a Democrat of Minnesota, chaired the Subcommittee on International Organizations and Movements in the early 1970s. Starting in 1973, Fraser held several hearings with which he attempted to make human rights into a major issue of United States foreign policy for the first time.
12. Gerald Ford (1913-2006) was president of the United States from 1974 to 1977.
13. Henry Kissinger (\*1923), 1969-1977 United States Secretary of State.
14. Since the early 1970s, first the Nixon and afterwards the Ford administration became heavily criticized for their policies towards regimes, violating human rights norms.
15. The Madres de la Plaza de Mayo is an Argentinian human rights organization founded in 1977 during the military dictatorship to pressure the government to release information about disappeared people.

16. The Abuelas de la Plaza de Mayo is an Argentinian human rights organization founded in 1977 during the military dictatorship with the goal to detect the victims of forced adoptions and to reunite them with their families.
17. In the course of the Iranian Revolution, 52 American diplomats and citizens were held hostage from 1979 to 1981.
18. Ronald Reagan (1911-2004) was president of the United States from 1981 to 1989.
19. Patricia Derian (born in 1929) 1977-1981 Assistant Secretary of State for human rights and humanitarian interventions.
20. Emilio Massera (1925-2010), was one of the leading figures of the Argentinian military junta between 1976 and 1978. He was one of those mainly responsible for repressive policies.
21. Ernest Lefever (1919-2009) was the president of the Ethics and Public Policy Center, a conservative think tank, from 1976 to 1989.
22. Jacobo Timerman (1923-1999) was among the critics of the junta following the military putsch of 1976. He was arrested in 1977, released after international protests, and went into Israeli exile in 1979.
23. José Efraín Ríos Montt (1926-2018) was president of Guatemala from 1982 to 1983.
24. George W. Bush (born in 1946), 2001-2009 President of the USA.
25. David Weissbrodt joined the University of Minnesota Law School faculty in 1975.
26. John Gerard Ruggie (born in 1944), was teaching political science at the Columbia University, the University of California in San Diego and the Harvard University. He also held several posts at the UN.
27. Kathryn Sikkink, "International Codes of Conduct for Transnational Corporations: The Case of the WHO/UNICEF Code," *International Organization* 40:4 (1986), pp. 815-840.
28. The Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, known as ECLAC, is a United Nations regional commission to encourage economic cooperation among its 46 member states.
29. Raúl Prebisch (1901-1986), Argentinian economist, who was one of the main proponents of structuralist economics. In 1950 he became director of the ECLA.
30. The New International Economic Order was a plan to reform international economic relations, which was mainly developed by developing countries.
31. The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development was established in 1964 as part of the UN Secretariat in order to promote trade between developing and developed countries.
32. Fernando Cardoso (born in 1931), Brazilian sociologist, who worked on development issues and contributed significantly to dependency theory. Later, he became Brazilian President (1995-2002).
33. Enzo Faletto (1935-2003), Chilean sociologist, who worked on development issues.



34. Guillermo O'Donnell (1936-2011), Argentine political scientist who theorized on authoritarianism and democratization.
35. Albert Hirschman (1915-2012), U.S.-American economist writing on political economy and political ideology.
36. Robert Putnam (born in 1941), U.S.-American political scientist, who developed the two-level game theory that assumes international agreements will only be successfully brokered if they also result in domestic benefits.
37. Kathryn Sikkink, Lisa Martin, "U.S. Policy and Human Rights in Argentina and Guatemala, 1973-1980," in Peter Evans, Harold Jacobson, and Robert Putnam (eds.), *Double-Edged Diplomacy: International Bargaining and Domestic Politics* (Berkeley, 1993), 330-362.
38. Kathryn Sikkink, "Development Ideas in Latin America: Paradigm Shift and the Economic Commission for Latin America," in Frederick Cooper, Randall Packard (eds.), *International Development and the Social Sciences: Essays in the History and Politics of Knowledge* (Berkeley, 1997), 228-256.
39. Fernando Fajnzylber, "Industrialización en América Latina: de la caja negra al 'casillero vacío,'" *Cuadernos Americanos*, 1991-11-01, Vol. 5 (30). For a discussion in English, see, Osvaldo Kacef, José Louis Machinea, "Growth and Equity: in Search of the Empty Box," in CEPAL, *Economic Growth with Equity. Challenges for Latin America* (Houndmills, 2007), 1-23.
40. Kathryn Sikkink, "The Influence of Raúl Prebisch on Economic Policy Making in Argentina 1955-1962," and "Response," *Latin American Research Review* XXIII/2 (1988), 91-114, and 128-131.
41. Kathryn Sikkink, "Latin American Countries as Norm Protagonists of the Idea of International Human Rights," *Global Governance* 20/3 (July-September 2014), 389-404.
42. Stephen Haggard has published on political economy of growth and transitions to and from democratic rule.
43. Bob Kaufmann wrote about the political economy of democratic transitions.
44. Stephen Haggard, Bob Kaufmann, *Pathways from the Periphery: The Politics of Growth in the Newly Industrializing Countries* (Ithaca 1990).
45. The Plan Austral was a program of the Argentine government of Raúl Alfonsín implemented 1985 to stabilize the country's currency.
46. The Plano Real was a program implemented by the Brazilian government of Itamar Franco, developed by the Financial Minister Fernando Cardoso, to stabilize Brazilian economy.
47. Nunca Más was the name of the report published by the Argentine National Commission on Disappeared Persons in 1984 about people who had been disappeared under military rule between 1976 and 1983.
48. Centro de Estudios del Estado y Sociedad (Center for the Study of State and Society) is an independent Argentine organization conducting social research.
49. Luis Moreno Ocampo (\*1952) is an Argentine lawyer who served as the first Chief Prosecutor of

the International Criminal Court at The Hague from 2003 until 2012.

50. The Washington Office on Latin America is a NGO that was founded in 1974 in reaction to the Chilean coup d'état.
51. Centro de Estudios Legales y Sociales (Center for Legal and Social Studies), was founded during the dictatorship in 1979 and is a NGO promoting human rights and democracy.
52. Jorge Rafael Videla (1925-2013), was the leader of the Argentinian military junta and president of Argentina from 1976 to 1981. He was first convicted in 1985, pardoned in 1990, and finally convicted to life imprisonment following 2010 und 2012 trials for kidnapping, murder, torture, and child stealing.
53. Kathryn Sikkink, "The Origins and Continuity of Human Rights Policies in the United States and Western Europe," in Judith Goldstein and Robert Keohane (eds.), *Ideas and Foreign Policy* (Ithaca, 1993), 139-170.
54. The so-called truth trials took place at the end of the 1990s, when most of the crimes committed by the junta couldn't be prosecuted due to the amnesty laws of the 1980s. Against this background some judges enacted trials together with human rights organizations, which did not lead to indictments, but contributed to uncover crimes.
55. Emilio Mignone (1922-1998) in 1979 founded the Centro de Estudios Legales y Sociales (CELS), which supported families in the search for disappeared relatives. He was arrested in 1981 and released after international protests.
56. Clyde Snow (1928-2014) was a well-known U.S.-American forensic anthropologist.
57. Kathryn Sikkink, "From Pariah State to Global Human Rights Protagonist: Argentina and the Struggle for International Human Rights," *Latin American Politics and Society* 50:1 (2008), 1-29.
58. Alison Brysk (1960), is an U.S.-American political scientist whose emphasis has been on international human rights.
59. Alison Brysk, *The Politics of Human Rights in Argentina* (Stanford, CA, 1994).
60. David Forsythe, U.S.-American political scientist working on international human rights, international law, IR, American Foreign Policy. He published in 1988 his book about Human Rights and U.S. Foreign Policy.
61. Jack Donnelly is an U.S.-American political scientist, who published in 1989 the book *Universal Human Rights in Theory and Practice*.
62. dock
63. Margaret Keck, Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists beyond Borders. Advocacy Networks in International Politics* (Ithaca, 1998).
64. Margaret Keck (born in 1949), U.S.-American political scientist, who works on environmental politics and international activist movements.
65. Peter Willetts, *Pressure Groups in the Global System: The Transnational Relations of Issue-Oriented Non-Governmental Organizations* (London, 1982).

66. Thomas Risse (born in 1955), German political scientist who is working on international relations.
67. Steve Ropp is an U.S.-American political scientist.
68. Thomas Risse, Steve Ropp, Kathryn Sikkink (eds.), *The Power of Human Rights: International Norms and Domestic Change* (Cambridge 1999).
69. Martha Finnemore (born in 1959), is an U.S.-American political scientist and considered a pioneer of of constructivism.
70. Martha Finnemore, Kathryn Sikkink, "International Norm Dynamics and Political Change," in the Special Issue 'International Organization at Fifty: Exploration and Contestation in the Study of World Politics,' *International Organization* 52:4 (1998), 887-917.
71. Frederick Kratochwil (born in 1944), German-American political scientist, specialized in IR, considered as one of the pioneers of constructivism.
72. Alexander Wendt (born in 1958), German-American political scientist, he is considered as being one of the pioneers of constructivism.
73. Kathryn Sikkink, "Human Rights, Principled Issue Networks, and Sovereignty in Latin America," *International Organization* 47:3 (1993), 411-441.
74. Harald Müller (born in 1949), German political scientist, specialized in IR, whose focus has been on arms control.
75. Kathryn Sikkink, *The Justice Cascade. How Human Rights Prosecutions are Changing World Politics* (New York, 2011).
76. Raúl Alfonsín (1927-2009) was president of Argentina from 1983 to 1989.
77. Peter Katzenstein, *The Culture of National Security. Norms and Identity in World Politics* (New York, 1996).
78. Samuel Moyn (born in 1972), U.S.-American historian, who has described human rights as the "last utopia."
79. Note that this interview was recorded in June 2019, well before the major economic crisis provoked by the Coronavirus pandemic. In 2020, when this article is published, the world is in the worst health crisis since 1918 in addition to a huge economic crisis.

## Zitation

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