

Antifeminism as a Human Right? On the Reinterpretation of Human Rights Discourse by Conservative and Far-Right Actors

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Abstract

This article examines the strategic appropriation and ideological reframing of human rights discourses by conservative and far-right actors, with a particular focus on Christian fundamentalist networks such as Agenda Europe. While human rights are commonly understood as a universal normative framework designed to promote equality and protect marginalised groups, recent developments suggest that actors opposed to feminist and LGBTIQ+ rights are increasingly mobilising the language and symbolism of human rights to legitimise exclusionary political agendas. The article is based on a close analysis of the policy document Restoring the Natural Order. Its two central aims are as follows. First, it argues that the reinterpretation and appropriation of rights discourses constitute key political strategies within these movements and therefore merit closer scholarly attention. Second, it shows how Christian fundamentalist actors articulate a notion of ‘true human rights’ that are supposedly derived from an immutable ‘natural law.’ Within this framework, rights that conflict with this order - such as access to abortion or the legal recognition of same-sex marriage, are systematically portrayed as illegitimate or ‘false’ rights. The analysis identifies three interrelated tactics used to reframe human rights in this context: delegitimization, reinterpretation and co-optation. These serve not only to undermine specific rights claims, but also to challenge the very foundations of the human rights project by redefining its normative scope along conservative, hierarchical and exclusionary lines. The paper concludes that this ideological reconfiguration poses a significant threat to the inclusive and democratic potential of human rights discourses, particularly feminist achievements.

Keywords: Antifeminism, Human Rights, Agenda Europe, Christian fundamentalism, far-right

Peer review: This article has been subject to a double blind peer review process



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Introduction

The human rights discourse is commonly understood as a universal normative foundation for ensuring equality, dignity, and protection from discrimination against diverse social groups. For decades, civil society actors, institutions of political education, and international organizations have invoked human rights to take a stand against inequality, racism, sexism, and other forms of group-based misanthropy. Feminist movements, too—despite their justified critiques of the Eurocentric and patriarchal tendencies within human rights frameworks—have engaged this discourse as a point of reference to articulate emancipatory demands.

Increasingly, however, this emancipatory human rights discourse is being reinterpreted and appropriated by conservative and far-right actors. These actors draw upon the language and symbolism of human rights to legitimize their own political agendas—for example, the restriction of sexual and reproductive rights, or the re-naturalization of binary gender relations. The central thesis of this paper is that conservative and far-right forces do not merely attack human rights, but deliberately inscribe themselves into their language and argumentative structures in order to roll back equality-oriented progress—particularly with regard to feminist achievements and the rights of LGBTIQ+ persons. This process involves not only a substantive attack on specific rights, but also an ideological shift in the very understanding of what human rights mean.

While far-right appropriations of human rights discourse have received at least some scholarly attention, Christian actors—who have likewise been developing strategies in recent years to co-opt human rights for their own political agendas—have so far been largely overlooked. This paper seeks to build upon and expand the currently sparse research on this topicⁱ by focusing on comparable strategies within the conservative and Christian fundamentalist spectrum and the relevance of gender and sexuality issues in this context. This analysis focuses specifically on that development. Taking as its starting point the strategy paper *Restoring the Natural Order* from the Agenda Europe network, it investigates how Christian fundamentalist actors, in particular, seek to strategically reinterpret human rights discourses. Building on analyses conducted with Stefanie Mayer of the strategy paper *Restoring the Natural Order* by the Christian fundamentalist network Agenda Europe (Mayer and Goetz, 2023), this study aims to demonstrate two key points. First, the reinterpretation and appropriation of discourses on rights are central strategies in this context and warrant particular attention. Second, it will

be shown that Christian fundamentalist actors advocate the view that ‘true human rights’ must be grounded in natural law and portray any rights that contradict this order—such as the right to abortion or same-sex marriage—as illegitimate or false rights.

To do so, the paper first outlines the multifaceted relationship between human rights and ideologies of inequality—ideologies that provide the basis for discrimination and exclusion—and identifies three levels of this relationship. It then introduces the Christian fundamentalist network Agenda Europe and explains the significance of the strategy paper. Based on a close analysis of the document, the main section of the paper identifies three distinct facets of reference to human rights and reveals the strategies of delegitimization, reinterpretation, and appropriation associated with them. The analysis shows that the strategy paper presents human rights, on the one hand, as malleable through political processes, and on the other, positions natural law’ as a timeless moral principle that alone can determine the legitimacy of rights. This contribution links theoretical reflections with an empirical analysis of the strategy paper and exposes how appeals to the ‘common good’ and ‘natural law’ are used to justify far-reaching exclusions. Particularly striking is the attempt by these actors to relativize human rights by invoking an allegedly superior and objective ‘natural law,’ in order to draw selective distinctions between ‘true’ and ‘false’ rights. Rights such as abortion or same-sex marriage are portrayed as ideological aberrations that contradict the ‘natural order’ and are therefore deemed illegitimate. In conclusion, the paper aims to demonstrate how this reinterpreted human rights discourse serves to delegitimize feminist achievements—and to highlight the dangers that emerge from this trend.

On the Relationship Between Human Rights and Ideologies of Inequality

Human Rights Against Ideologies of Inequality

For decades, slogans such as ‘Human Rights Instead of Right-Wing Hate’ have accompanied political discourse and the efforts of diverse actors seeking to counter the spread of far-right ideologies. International human rights instruments, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), enshrine the dignity and equality of all people as universal values. These principles fundamentally conflict with far-right ideologies, which are rooted in the devaluation and exclusion of certain groups through ideologies of

inequality, including racism, antisemitism, sexism, and hostility toward LGBTIQ+ individuals.

Despite feminist critiques—such as those highlighting the Eurocentric and patriarchal nature of these instruments or their neglect of economic, social, and cultural rights (e.g., Bunch, 1993; Leicht et al., 2016; Tönnies, 2011)—human rights continue to serve as a universal framework for exposing far-right narratives of ethnic or male superiority as discriminatory and antidemocratic. In this vein, human rights-oriented political education seeks to instil democratic values such as equality, pluralism, and empathy while promoting the protection of marginalized groups and empowering individuals to advocate for these principles (e.g., Filzmaier and Ingruber, 2019; Fritzsche, 2005; Heldt, 2018; Thyroff et al., 2019; Große-Wächter and Röttger, 2021).

However, the relationship between right-wing and conservative ideologies and human rights is not limited to opposition. This dynamic can be examined on three levels. The first of these involves the aforementioned efforts by various political and civil society groups, organizations, and NGOs, as well as educational institutions, to position human rights as a normative foundation against ideologies of hatred and discrimination, such as far-right extremism.

Attacks on Human Rights, Treaties, and Institutions

Given the historical and political importance of human rights in combating right-wing extremism, it is perhaps not surprising that (2) human rights themselves have increasingly become the focus of right-wing and conservative attacks, challenges and delegitimization. Human rights have served not only as a legal framework - enshrined in international conventions such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the European Convention on Human Rights - but also as a political and moral language to challenge and expose the exclusionary and discriminatory ideologies of the far right. Through both legal protection and civil society discourse, human rights have provided tools to resist racist, sexist, anti-Semitic and anti-LGBTIQ+ positions and to assert the principles of equality, dignity and non-discrimination. It is precisely this normative and symbolic power that has made them a central target for those who wish to re-establish hierarchical social orders under the guise of 'tradition', 'nature' or 'national identity'. In Austria, for example, the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ)—a long-established party that has served as a model for many far-right movements across Europe—has repeatedly questioned the validity of human rights,

delegitimized human rights conventions, and attacked the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR).

In early 2019, then-Minister of the Interior and current FPÖ leader Herbert Kickl criticized the ECHR, arguing that it posed an obstacle to purportedly necessary measures (e.g., in asylum law). Kickl asserted that ‘the law must follow politics, not the other way around’ (DerStandard, 2019), thereby calling into question Austria’s adherence to international agreements and raising the possibility of amendments or withdrawal. While this statement directly contradicts the principle of legality enshrined in Austria’s constitution, it opened a discursive space that other far-right politicians continue to exploit.

Other FPÖ leaders joined this discourse: former FPÖ leader Norbert Hofer described the ECHR as ‘outdated’ (DerStandard, 2024), while Lower Austrian FPÖ leader Udo Landbauer characterized the concept of human rights as too ‘vague’ (DerStandard, 2023). Former FPÖ parliamentary group leader Johann Gudenus went even further, asserting that ‘the Human Rights Convention is not divinely ordained’ (DerStandard, 2019).

Although the Austrian People’s Party (ÖVP), at the time in coalition with the FPÖ, did not fundamentally question the ECHR, it lent support to this discourse. For instance, then-Secretary of State Karoline Edtstadler suggested that the ‘interpretation’ of the ECHR should be open to debate (DerStandard, 2022). In 2022, ÖVP parliamentary group leader August Wöginger went so far as to demand a revision of the convention, claiming that ‘the Human Rights Convention needs to be updated. We now face different circumstances than when these laws were written decades ago’ (Kurier, 2022).

The FPÖ is far from unique in this regard. Across Europe, far-right parties and movements pursue similar agendas. In Hungary, Viktor Orbán sought in 2018 to drastically curtail the freedoms of human rights organizations, thereby weakening civil society (Tagesschau, 2018). Similarly, UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak declared that ‘border security is more important than membership in international courts,’ referring to the ECHR (TRT Global, 2024).

Far-right ‘criticism’ often focuses on delegitimizing human rights as an ideology that allegedly undermines the West by subordinating so-called autochthonous, national, or European interests to the rights and needs of refugees.

Reinterpretations and Appropriations of Human Rights

In recent years, an additional layer has emerged: (3) right-wing and conservative actors are increasingly attempting to reinterpret the discourse on human rights and appropriate it as a political strategy to advance their ideology and objectives. Among the limited number of publications addressing this development is Andrea Schneider's paper, *The New Defenders of Human Rights? How Radical Right-Wing TNGOs are Using the Human Rights Discourse to Promote their Ideas* (Schneider, 2018). As early as 2018, Schneider highlighted that transnational far-right groups such as *Generation Identity* (GI) were employing the discourse on human rights to legitimize their own positions. GI deliberately replicates elements of transnational NGOs (TNGOs)—such as professional public relations, fundraising campaigns, and networking activities—to establish legitimacy. Additionally, they appropriate the language and symbols of established human rights organizations, such as Amnesty International, to present themselves as ostensibly legitimate civil society actors, while simultaneously promoting a selective understanding of human rights.

Similarly, Kaius Tuori and Iida Karjalainen (2024), in their paper *The European Far Right and Human Rights Language* (Tuori and Karjalainen, 2024), explore the increasing use of human rights language by the European far right in recent years. This shift is particularly noteworthy given that resistance to international influences has long been a defining characteristic of these movements. Based on an analysis of 'European parties, organizations, and activists in the far-right movement mainly in France, Germany, and Finland' (Tuori and Karjalainen, 2024, p.1), the authors demonstrate how these actors exploit human rights discourses. They observe that European far-right groups employ human rights as a 'rhetorical tool' (Tuori and Karjalainen, 2024, p.4) to frame racist ideologies as legitimate demands for rights. For instance, they reinterpret human rights to promote white supremacy, portraying Western human rights as unique to Western, white cultures.

What our investigations have found is that the use of human rights language is mainly instrumental: the criticism of Western bias in human rights is turned into an argument for white supremacy, the language of minority protections is repurposed as a way to argue for the protection of the white majority and against the rights of minorities. In a similar way, the criticism of the ideological foundations of human rights is instrumentalized as a tool to attack perceived liberal elites for

their insufficient concern for the health of the nation-state.
(2024, p.14)

Central to far-right arguments is, on the one hand, a rejection of universal human rights, suggesting that such rights should apply only to specific groups of people, and on the other hand, the theory of ‘relative natural law.’ This perspective asserts that the rights of migrants and minorities threaten the rights of the white majority population. Such arguments are often deployed in racist rhetoric to defend ‘Western’ values against the alleged threat posed by other cultures or religions, particularly Islam. The theory of ‘relative natural law’ also claims that human rights, which may appear universal, are in reality valid only for specific cultures or societies. This view is intertwined with racist and nationalist rhetoric, challenging the applicability of human rights to other cultures and ethnicities. As Tuori and Karjalainen (2024, p.7) note:

The notion that human rights or natural law would be restricted to a single area or group is not new; there is a long-standing discussion regarding what was known as relative natural law theory. [...] Natural law is founded not on legislation, but on things such as humanity, reason, or other virtues.

These appropriations, however, extend beyond human rights to include progressive discourses more broadly, which are rhetorically employed to legitimize their own goals. In modernized far-right ideologies, selective references to progressive values, such as equality, women’s rights, and LGBTIQ+ rights, are instrumentalized by right-wing actors to depict ‘Western’ values as superior and to oppose the perceived threats posed by migration, particularly from Muslim-majority countries (e.g., AK Fe.In, 2019; Dietze, 2016, 2019; Drüeke and Klaus, 2019; Duina and Carson, 2020; Jäger et al., 2019; Mense and Goetz, 2024; Wielowiejski, 2018).

Agenda Europe and the Strategy Paper *Restoring the Natural Order*

Agenda Europe is a network established in 2013 that unites some of the most influential European actors involved in recent ‘anti-gender’ mobilizations (Datta, 2018, 2019, 2021).

Far from being the only ultra-conservative network, Agenda Europe is especially important because it brings together influential anti-

feminist and anti-queer actors, including among others elected parliamentary representatives, former politicians and high-ranking civil servants from the European Commission, who work with campaigners in order to develop political lobbying strategies and professionalise campaigns (Mayer and Goetz, 2023, p.96).

The actors seek to shape public discourse and political developments on a transnational level through a coordinated strategy, thereby exerting influence on political decision-making processes. While their agenda primarily targets feminist movements and LGBTIQ rights, their actions ultimately undermine the inclusive and democratic foundations of human rights as a whole, and with them, the democratic fabric of society itself.

In summer 2021, leaked documents suggested that the paper had already been discussed at an Agenda Europe summit in 2014. This information is confirmed by the authors in the 2024 republished version, now translated into eleven languages, but they refer to it as a ‘handout for a private circle of friends’ (RTNO, 2024, p.3). The manifesto comprises six chapters over 180 pages, analyzing legal and political issues from an ultra-conservative Christian perspective, such as sexuality, reproduction, medical questions (beginning and end of life), equality, and (anti-) discrimination.

Notably, the paper does not argue from a religious perspective, as might be expected, but primarily from a legal one, referencing court cases and international legal documents. In doing so, it shifts the discourse on divine order to one on rights, claims, and human dignity (see Mayer and Goetz, 2023, pp.99ff.). A particularly significant aspect is its reliance on the so-called ‘natural law,’ which, it is argued, applies universally and ‘which human reason can discern and understand, but which human will cannot alter’ (RTNO, 2024, p.11).

In the context of a frame analysis conducted with Stefanie Mayer (Mayer and Goetz, 2023), we found that the authors of the RTNO document claim exclusive truth by asserting:

Genuine moral precepts are not based on subjective ‘values’ but on objective truth, and this is why it is not only legitimate, but also necessary, to impose them on those who do not accept them: for a society to live in peace and justice, it is necessary that its legal order comply with Natural Law (RTNO, 2024, p.7).

This objective truth is equated with ‘natural law,’ presented as the timeless and immutable foundation of moral and legal legitimacy. The authors define ‘nature’ narrowly: something is considered ‘natural’—and

therefore ‘normal’ and morally correct—only if it serves a specifically predetermined function. For example, homosexuality is rejected as ‘not normal’ on the grounds that it allegedly does not fulfil the ‘purpose of sexuality,’ namely reproduction (RTNO, 2024, p.48). Instead, ‘nature’ is embedded in a teleological framework, serving a higher purpose. This linkage creates bridges to established fields such as law and science, which hold strong legitimacy in modern societies.

Another finding from our previous research, also relevant to this contribution, concerns the importance attributed by the authors to the ‘cultural revolution’ triggered by the 1968 movements, which they claim destroyed the West. Since this was primarily a sexual revolution that separated sexuality from its original purpose, reproduction, and thereby undermined the fundamental basis of human dignity, it is identified as the greatest threat to humanity and natural law (Mayer and Goetz, 2023, pp.104f.). This, the authors argue, has caused irreparable damage, leaving only a ‘narrow time window of ten to twenty years left.’ If this window is not utilized to reverse these developments, Western civilization will ‘simply not continue at all’ (RTNO, 2024, p.9).

Given that the paper attributes a central role to certain interpretations of human rights—particularly regarding the rights of LGBTIQ+ individuals or abortion—in the imagined process of humanity’s deformation, it is worthwhile to examine its strategies for reinterpretation.

Human Rights in the Strategy Paper *Restoring the Natural Order*

A closer analysis of the paper reveals three levels of references to human rights: (1) the relationship between human rights and natural law, (2) the delegitimization of modern human rights and accusations of their manipulation by international organizations, and (3) their own conceptions and interpretations of human rights.

Human Rights or Natural Law?

In the section ‘Human Rights or Natural Law?’ (RTNO, 2024, pp. 12-15), the differences between human rights and natural law are summarized as follows: human rights are codified, positive law developed through political processes (e.g., in the UN or the Council of Europe), while natural law is viewed as a universal, uncodifiable order that exists independently of human will or politics. Human rights consist of isolated rights often presented as absolute principles, which can potentially conflict with each

other, whereas natural law offers flexible solutions based on overarching harmony. Natural law is independent of human will or political processes and forms the foundation of a just legal system. In short, human rights are man-made and changeable, while natural law is portrayed as immutable and pre-political (RTNO, 2024, pp.12f.).

From the fact that contemporary interpretations of human rights are man-made and changeable, the authors of the paper also derive what they see as their inherent danger: 'Given the high importance that is nowadays attached to international human rights treaties, it is no wonder that those treaties have become a primary target for politically motivated manipulation and distortion' (RTNO, 2024, p.13). The authors of the document also express concerns about the institutions responsible for faithfully interpreting human rights instruments. They warn that these institutions have been infiltrated by individuals willing to deliberately manipulate and distort human rights:

The post-WWII system of human rights is in a deep crisis today, and to resolve this crisis it is necessary to understand that human rights documents are no absolute truths, but the outcome of a political process, and that their interpretation can be the result of gross and deliberate manipulation (RTNO, 2024, p.15).

Under the subheading 'Political Ideologies Undermining Natural Law' (RTNO, 2024, p.15), the document analyzes how various political ideologies allegedly undermine natural law and influence the interpretation of human rights. Marxism, Darwinism, feminism, homosexualism, gender theory, relativism, and anti-discrimination ideology are identified as central currents. These ideologies are depicted as tools of manipulation aimed at destabilizing traditional moral values and the 'natural order.'

The paper also offers purported solutions to these identified problems, addressing the question 'Which Solutions Must We Seek?' with a clear answer: 'A Legal Order in Conformity with Natural Law' (RTNO, 2024, p.23):

In the first place, there can be no doubt that our aim, and indeed the aim of every decent man, must be to establish a legal order that fully corresponds to Natural Law, which by necessity implies that actions that stand in contradiction to Natural Law must be duly prohibited and, where necessary and appropriate, placed under dissuasive sanctions. This precisely is the purpose of positive legislation: it should implement and enforce Natural Law. It is thus,

for example, perfectly legitimate to strive for legislation that criminalizes abortion, euthanasia, or sodomy, or that rules out the legal recognition of same-sex marriages’, even if there be some citizens who believe abortion, euthanasia, or sodomy to be morally acceptable. In the ideal situation, Natural Law and positive legislation converge (RTNO, 2024, p.23).

The authors make it abundantly clear that human rights must be derived from ‘natural law.’ In his study on the RTNO Paper, Neil Datta refers to a definition of natural law from the Encyclopædia Britannica, which describes natural law as ‘a system of law or justice common to all men and derived from nature rather than from the rules of society or positive law. Agenda Europe members posit that conservative Christian religious positions on sexuality, reproduction and morality are drawn from Natural Law’ (Datta, 2018, p.10). Thus, the authors of RTNO define natural law as a universal, objective legal order that exists independently of human will and is closely linked to religious principles, particularly Christian teachings. They assert an absolute claim to this position, arguing that any deviation from the principles of natural law constitutes a threat to the integrity and stability of the entire legal system. All laws, they contend, must strictly adhere to an immutable and universal understanding of natural law in order to safeguard the legal order as a whole: *‘Once we have decided that positive laws must comply with Natural Law, we must follow that approach consistently. [...] accepting one single law that disrespects Natural Law means accepting a principle that will ultimately undermine the entire legal order.’* (RTNO, 2024, p.26)

Modern interpretations of human rights, such as the right to abortion or same-sex marriage, are consequently labelled as contradictions to natural law and therefore deemed illegitimate. These ‘false rights’ are also accused of distorting the true meaning of human rights.

Delegitimization of Modern Human Rights and Allegations of Manipulation

As previously mentioned, the authors of the RTNO document attempt to delegitimize modern human rights—such as the right to abortion or same-sex marriage—by asserting that they contradict natural law and are therefore invalid. Additionally, they portray modern human rights as the product of the purportedly destructive ‘Cultural Revolution,’ which they claim has eroded society’s moral compass:

While the ‘achievements’ of the Cultural Revolution (such as ‘legal’ abortion, ‘legal’ euthanasia, or the recognition of same-sex ‘marriages’) will ultimately defeat themselves, there is reason to fear that before this happens they will inflict irreparable damage on society. If, for example, an entire generation of young people is, due to a false understanding of sexual mores, educated in a way that makes them unable to become good spouses and parents, this will cut off the chain of tradition of the moral values that have built Western civilization. (RTNO, 2024, p.9)

The right to abortion is not interpreted as an expression of freedom but rather as an attack on the unborn's right to life. Similarly, the legal recognition of same-sex partnerships is criticized as an undermining of traditional marriage concepts. In line with these views, the paper calls for banning abortion, homosexuality, contraceptives, divorce, or extramarital sex due to their purportedly harmful consequences for society as a whole.

Another key aspect involves the authors' allegations that international organizations manipulate human rights to serve their own agendas. They claim that, after failing to explicitly incorporate references to a “*right to abortion,*” “*a right to euthanasia,*” a “*right to same-sex marriage,*” or *similar desiderata*’ (RTNO, 2024, p.13) into relevant documents, advocates shifted their strategy to focus on *‘reinterpretation of existing documents, be it through academic writing or through the activities of treaty monitoring bodies (such as the different UN Committees or the European Court of Human Rights).’* (RTNO, 2024, p.13).

The authors further argue that, in recent years, key positions within the EU, the European Court of Human Rights, the EU Fundamental Rights Agency, and academia have been filled by individuals pursuing a *‘consistent agenda of judicial activism,’* who “*discover*” *new abortion and LGBT rights in internationally agreed texts that, such as the CEDAW or the European Human Rights Convention, in fact do not contain them.’* (RTNO, 2024, p.13).

To substantiate their claims, the authors cite several examples of alleged misinterpretations of human rights treaties by UN treaty-monitoring bodies, including efforts to legalize abortion. They assert that during UN conferences on population and women, attempts were made to introduce a ‘right to abortion’ surreptitiously:

‘The strategy was to submit to those conferences texts that contained a multiplicity of vague references to ‘sexual and

reproductive health and rights,' with the intention to reveal only after the adoption of those texts that those references were going to be interpreted as containing a right to abortion.' (RTNO, 2024, p.13)

The paper also highlights strategic agenda-setting meetings (e.g., between the EU and lobby groups) (RTNO, 2024, pp.20ff.), institutional control, and ideological influence by individuals allegedly pursuing a specific agenda. These individuals, according to the authors, have *'slowly but systematically infiltrated the judicial systems since the 1960s and are now, in many countries, well placed to exert influence on the recruitment of new judges and "academic experts"'* (RTNO, 2024, p.131). Many members of such organizations, they argue, are therefore not qualified to hold their positions, and their political successes are *'not the success of their arguments, but of their cadre policies.'* (RTNO, 2024, p.131).

In summary, the authors accuse international organizations of reinterpreting human rights for political purposes, exercising political control, and engaging in manipulation that undermines the 'true' meaning of human rights. Strategically, their primary goal seems to be to discredit organizations like the UN, the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR), or NGOs, and to call their credibility into question. Ironically, the strategies they criticize are the very ones they themselves employ—namely, reinterpreting human rights through the lens of natural law, staffing institutions with like-minded individuals, and embedding their ultraconservative values into laws and institutions.

The RTNO's concepts and interpretations of human rights

In the RTNO paper, a highly restricted, conservative concept of human rights is formulated, one that emphasizes traditional moral and societal values. While human rights are acknowledged, they are recognized only insofar as they align with natural law. The authors make it clear that human rights, as they are formulated in international treaties, represent positive laws and cannot be equated with natural law. They argue, as mentioned earlier, that 'true' human rights must be derived from natural law, which is portrayed as an objective, immutable order. (RTNO, 2024, pp.9, 22, 36) Rights that would contradict natural law, such as abortion or rights for LGBTIQ+ individuals, are consequently labelled as illegitimate. (RTNO, 2024, pp.43, 69) Therefore, the authors criticize current, modern conceptions of human rights, such as sexual and reproductive rights and gender issues, as part of a threatening 'Cultural Revolution' that

undermines traditional values and is also politically motivated and harmful to society. (RTNO, 2024, pp.7ff., 36, 101) One example of such arguments can be seen in the section that addresses the question *'Is divorce a human right?'* The authors claim that there is no international jurisprudence suggesting that international human rights obligate states to allow divorce. Regulation of divorce, they argue, falls under national legislative authority, with a crucial limit: divorce laws must not render marriage a 'hollow shell.' A law that fully prohibits divorce, they assert, could be consistent with international human rights, while overly lenient divorce laws might violate the right to marriage: *'Arguably, therefore, a marriage law that does not allow for divorce would be in line with international human rights standards, whereas legislation allowing a person to obtain a divorce too easily could be seen as violating the right to marriage.'* (RTNO, 2024, p.40) Similar arguments are found concerning same-sex marriage, abortion, and other reproductive rights.

In this framework, the 'common good' takes precedence over individual rights and freedoms, which are only considered legitimate when they align with the 'natural order.' In the strategy paper, the concept of the common good is not understood in a communitarian sense—as grounded in shared values and mutual social responsibility—but is framed in a conservative and exclusionary manner. The authors claim that only heterosexual, married couples with children contribute meaningfully to the common good, as they 'not only provide social security for both partners on the basis of a binding commitment, but they also rear the children that will work to sustain the currently active generation when it reaches retirement age' (p. 45). Homosexual couples, by contrast,

typically do not make such a contribution, given that by nature they do not have children. They neither bear the expenses nor the loss of income possibilities that is normally associated with rearing children; instead, they normally have two salaries and less expenses. Their pensions are paid by the work of children other persons have raised (p.53).

This line of reasoning reduces the common good to biological reproduction and economic utility, thereby contradicting key communitarian principles of solidarity and pluralism. Rather than invoking the common good to foster inclusion and shared responsibility, the argument here instrumentalises it to legitimise traditional gender and family norms.

Thus, natural law serves not primarily to protect individual rights, as modern concepts of rational natural law would suggest, but rather to legitimize the existing social order as an expression of divine will. This perspective serves to limit and constrain rights such as those for LGBTIQ+ individuals or reproductive freedoms. Human rights are consequently not understood as dynamic, adaptable principles but as fixed, divinely or naturally grounded orders that should transcend democratic processes. This concept stands in opposition to modern views of human rights, which are aimed at pluralism, equality, and individual self-determination.

Delegitimization of Feminist Achievements in the Reinterpreted Human Rights Discourse

In the context of the reinterpretation of the human rights discourse within the RTNO paper, feminist achievements play a central role insofar as the reinterpreted human rights discourse is used to delegitimize feminist progress, such as reproductive rights and gender equality. In this context, for example, abortion rights and other reproductive rights are presented as ‘false human rights,’ and the right to abortion is framed as a severe violation of the ‘right to life,’ positioned in stark contrast to natural law, which would protect the life of the unborn child.

The authors of the paper also use the reinterpreted human rights discourse to reinforce traditional gender roles and depict the demand for gender equality as a ‘Cultural Revolution’ driven by ideological forces, one that would disturb the natural order. This, they claim, represents an attempt to undermine natural law, which dictates a ‘proper’ division of roles between men and women.

The modern human rights discourse, based on individual freedom and equality, is also portrayed as subjective and manipulable. The authors argue that feminist advances, such as abortion rights and LGBTIQ+ rights, are artificial and harmful, as they are based on a supposedly ‘false’ interpretation of human rights. Abortion and other feminist rights, such as the recognition of LGBTIQ+ marriages, are described as unjust and destructive to society. The inverted human rights discourse attempts to present these achievements as violations of universal, ‘natural’ principles.

Thus, the reinterpreted human rights discourse serves to delegitimize feminist struggles for self-determination and equality by portraying them as ‘unnatural’ and in conflict with a traditional, natural law-based order.

Conclusion

To summarise, the strategy paper *Restoring the Natural Order* undertakes an ideological reconfiguration of human rights discourse that not only delegitimises specific rights—such as sexual and reproductive freedom or gender equality—but also challenges the democratic and inclusive foundations of the human rights framework as a whole. One of the most important strategies employed by the authors of the RTNO document to reinterpret and co-opt the discourse surrounding human rights is the use of secularized language, the adaptation of specific terminology, and a legal rhetoric. In essence, this is not a new endeavor, as Christian actors have been attempting for some time to frame their objectives within a secularized language (Datta, 2018; Goetz and Mayer, 2023; Hennig and Weiberg-Salzmann, 2021; Kuhar, 2017; Kuru, 2009; Paternotte, 2015; Stambolis-Ruhstorfer and Tricou, 2017; Strube et al., 2021). The authors themselves make no secret of this, as they explicitly call in their paper for the active adoption of certain terms— even if they were coined by their opponents— but with a conservative meaning attached. Through consistent use, these terms could be ‘corrected’ so that opponents would no longer be able to employ them effectively:

It therefore seems to be a much better strategy to use all those words, including neologisms such as ‘reproductive rights’, but at the same time making clear what meaning those words have for us. If that is done consistently, we might even succeed in ‘contaminating’ (or in fact, rectifying) the vocabulary that our opponents have crafted, so that they cannot use them anymore. (RTNO, 2024, p.139)

The selective re-interpretation of existing concepts bears striking parallels to the accusations made against their opponents. The authors accuse international organizations of reinterpreting human rights terms to legitimize rights such as abortion or same-sex marriage. At the same time, they themselves utilize a narrow definition of ‘natural law’ to present it as the universal foundation for all positive laws. They conceptualize natural law teleologically (i.e., goal-oriented) and religiously, dismissing alternative interpretations as illegitimate. However, their definition of natural law is not a neutral framework but is closely tied to medieval Christian principles. In doing so, they ultimately engage in the very practice they accuse their opponents of: the selective use of legal concepts to promote a specific political agenda. Neil Datta describes

this strategy as *'what the progressive community has labelled the 'colonization of human rights' — namely, the contortion of religiously-inspired positions on sexuality and reproduction to artificially resemble classical human rights language.'* (Datta, 2018, p.16)

Through the juxtaposition of 'true' and 'false' rights, as well as the dichotomy between 'objective truth' and 'subjective value,' the authors employ another strategy to create a moral superiority of their own position. They accuse their opponents of subjectivism and political manipulation, yet themselves use moralizing rhetoric to bolster their stance. Their strategies also include the discrediting of human rights activists and institutions, as they accuse organizations such as the UN, the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR), and NGOs of being controlled by ideologically motivated individuals. At the same time, they articulate explicit political demands and strategies aimed at reforming or dismantling institutions to impose their own agenda. While denouncing the alleged ideological influence within human rights organizations, they promote their own political agenda, grounded in the enforcement of religious values.

Furthermore, the authors criticize the manipulative use of language, yet they themselves employ moralizing terms such as 'culture of death' or 'false rights' to delegitimize their opponents and present their own perspective as universally valid. They also accuse their opponents of using human rights to pursue economic or ideological interests (e.g., the 'abortion industry'). In contrast, the authors pursue a political strategy aimed at integrating their ultraconservative values into laws and institutions.

Ultimately, the *Restoring the Natural Order* (RTNO) document employs the reinterpretation of human rights discourse as a strategic tool to legitimise a totalitarian political order. This order is grounded in an understanding of natural law as an ahistorical and immutable principle that stands above democratic processes. In doing so, it undermines the core human rights commitments to universality, equality, and protection from discrimination.

The notion that 'true' human rights must be exclusively derived from an allegedly objective natural law systematically excludes all those whose lived realities do not conform to this conservative ideal. This development poses a significant threat, particularly to feminist and LGBTIQ+ movements. As recent political regressions in countries such as Poland, Hungary, and Italy demonstrate, it is above all the achievements

in the realm of reproductive rights, gender equality policies, and gender-sensitive education that are being strategically dismantled. Moreover, the dismantling of feminist infrastructures—through the closure of counselling centres, the withdrawal of public funding, or the delegitimisation of gender studies—is no longer a theoretical risk but an unfolding reality in many places.

The reframing of human rights through the lens of conservative natural law thus threatens not only individual rights but the pluralistic and democratic fabric of society as a whole. By replacing democratic and rational processes with appeals to divine truth and universal moral principles, this ideological shift risks not only reversing decades of social progress regarding sexual and reproductive rights but also undermining the very foundations of democratic governance itself. All the more urgent, then, is the need to critically analyse and expose the strategies and political agendas of right-wing and conservative actors—to decipher their language, reveal the undemocratic logic underpinning their claims, and develop effective counter-strategies in response.

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To cite this article:

Götz, J. (2025). Antifeminism as a Human Right? On the Reinterpretation of Human Rights Discourse by Conservative and Far-Right Actors. *Feminist Dissent*, No.8, pp. 72-63 Retrieved from:
<https://doi.org/10.31273/fd.n8.2025.1982>

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- ⁱ The limited number of studies addressing this phenomenon of reinterpretations and appropriations of Human Rights primarily focus on far-right groups and parties, as well as the instrumentalization of human rights in racist discourses. One of the few works examining similar strategies within the Christian fundamentalist spectrum is Neil Datta's analysis, *Restoring the Natural Order: The Religious Extremists' Vision to Mobilize European Societies Against Human Rights on Sexuality and Reproduction* (Datta, 2018), published by the *European Parliamentary Forum on Population and Development*. While Datta's analysis addresses the appropriation of the human rights discourse, this is not its central focus. Rather, the study emphasizes the ideological construction and enforcement of a conservative, natural law-based worldview, which seeks to restructure societal norms regarding gender, sexuality, and family. In this context, human rights are understood as a strategic instrument to present conservative values within a universal, legally and morally legitimized framework. The analysis is less concerned with a comprehensive engagement with the human rights discourse itself and more with how this discourse is embedded within conservative narratives to advance political and social objectives.