

Human Rights in the 'Green New Deal' Narrative:
Grassroots Climate Activism and Constructions of Human Rights in 'Creative Social Praxis'

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ABSTRACT

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Since November 2018, when Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez joined youth activists on Capitol Hill in protest for a “Green New Deal” (GND), the idea of a GND has sustained surges of media and political attention, bringing the topic of climate justice into mainstream. The GND, an umbrella of investment policies comparable to the New Deal programs, aims to mitigate climate change while ensuring economic and social security to all Americans. But while many commentators have been quick to draw the link between climate and justice, public commentary has not yet made a basic connection between the justice-based principles of the GND and human rights. I write this paper with the intention of starting that conversation. In showing how grassroots organizations and progressive Democrat officials are shaping a GND “Narrative” through collaborative forms of activism, I show that the Narrative is operating in “creative praxis”^{*} to discretely spread ideas of human rights into the American public consciousness. In pursuing this argument, I also provide information that may be useful for human rights scholars interested in how social movements may navigate American Exceptionalism—discussing in depth the human rights themes, rights claims, and demands cohesively embedded into the patriotic Narrative.

^{*} I draw this term from Neil Stammers’ theoretical framework, which is utilized throughout this paper. Citation: Neil Stammers, *Social Movements and Human Rights*, (New York: Pluto Press, 2009): 38.

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“Image 5.1.” Credit of Sunrise Movement.

Chapter 1: Introduction

In November 2018, over a thousand young activists congregated inside the United States Capitol Hill building wearing shirts that read “we have a right to good jobs and a livable future.”¹ The activists, which belonged to the social movement organization Sunrise Movement, funneled their way into the offices of soon-to-be elected House Speaker, Congresswoman Nancy Pelosi, and other prominent political leaders. “BREAKING:” the Sunrise twitter account posted, “we’ve begun a sit in inside @NancyPelosi’s office because @HouseDemocrats have failed our generation time and time again. They offer us a death sentence. We demand a #GreenNewDeal.”² Since this day in November, and following the unveiling of a House and Senate resolution in February 2019, the idea of a Green New Deal (GND) has established a prominent enclave for discussions of climate change within mainstream news coverage and political dialogue. It is through these channels, moreover, that grassroots organizations and select elected officials have strategically framed climate policy into a social and economic justice narrative, and as I will argue, simultaneously constructed ideas of human rights into the American public consciousness.

In its policy framing, the GND is an umbrella of investment policies that mobilizes every facet of economy and society within 10 years to mitigate climate change while ensuring economic prosperity and security to all Americans through a federal jobs guarantee. The Deal posits that the only way to achieve these solutions in the scope and timeframe necessary is through wide-sweeping federal investments comparable to Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s New Deal era, hence the title, Green “New Deal.”³ Like the New Deal, the GND has multiple objectives—it aims to not only stop climate change and prevent its threatening effects on human livelihood, but also to stabilize domestic social and economic crises at

¹ Sunrise Movement, “1000+ youth sitin, 143 arrested demanding Dem leadership back Green New Deal,” Sunrise Movement (blog), Medium, December 10, 2018, <https://medium.com/sunrisemvmt/1000-youth-sit-in-143-arrested-demanding-dem-leadership-back-green-new-deal-b0095abe4804>

² Sunrise Movement, Twitter post, November 13, 2018, 7:26am, twitter.com/sunrisemvmt.

³ “The Green New Deal—in Summary,” Green New Deal, New Consensus, accessed March 8, 2019, <https://newconsensus.com/green-new-deal/>.

home, among those, wage stagnation, declining life expectancy, and access to adequate healthcare, housing, food, and higher education. With a strong focus on justice and equity, the Deal pays specific attention to investing in “frontline and vulnerable communities,” those of which have historically experienced the brunt of systemic “racial, regional, social, environmental, and economic injustices.”⁴ In this respect, a key point of the Deal is that the crises of climate change, income inequality, declining health, water and air quality, etc. can and should be addressed together through a social justice policy lens.

So far, the Deal has gained widespread attention by political leaders and the press. While many are quick to critique the Deal as “impractical” and “unrealistic,” there is not a doubt that the Deal has triggered exponentially more policy discourse on climate change than usual within the political and mainstream news sphere.⁵ In this respect, activists have demonstrated that campaigning behind the Deal, insomuch as it aims to lay a foundation for robust climate policy, is also laying roots for an entire social movement.⁶ Among the objectives: to shift societal conceptions of what is “politically possible,” the roles that everyday people can play in politics, the intersections between climate change and economic justice, the inherent “dignity” in all kinds of work, and the responsibility that the federal government has in protecting economic and social rights.⁷

In my preliminary research, I found that while the GND framework clearly draws inspiration from economic and social justice narratives in human rights, the public commentary on the Deal thus far has not yet made a basic connection between the guiding principles of the GND and human rights. Especially when accounting for the fraught place that human rights holds in the United States, the vast media and

⁴ U.S. Congress, House, *Recognizing the duty of the Federal Government to create a Green New Deal*, HR 109, 116th Cong., 1st sess., introduced in House February 7, 2019, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-resolution/109/text>.

⁵ Lisa Hymas, “The Green New Deal is pushing climate change into mainstream media,” *Grist*, April 3, 2019, <https://grist.org/article/the-green-new-deal-is-pushing-climate-change-into-the-mainstream-media/>.

⁶ Sam Adler-Bell, “The Story Behind the Green New Deal’s Meteoric Rise,” *New Republic*, February 6, 2019, <https://newrepublic.com/article/153037/story-behind-green-new-deals-meteoric-rise>

⁷ *Ibid.*

political attention the Deal has acquired, and the strong U.S. public opinion polling in support of the Deal⁸ and federal responsibility for human rights in general,⁹ there is a significant basis to inquire about how the GND may be currently shaping domestic conceptions of human rights. The purpose of this thesis is therefore to explore how actors promoting the GND— both from civil society and within elected positions of government— are enforcing and perhaps reconstructing a GND “Narrative” that establishes ideas of human rights into the American public consciousness. Alongside this analysis, which comprises the heart of my paper, I also speculate how the Narrative, by excluding references to “human rights,” may be adapting to American Exceptionalism.

The paper proceeds as follows. In Chapter 2, I breakdown my focus of analysis, what I call the GND ‘Narrative.’ I then lay out the theoretical and analytical frameworks in which I analyze the Narrative through. In Chapter 3, I provide a brief review of human rights in the United States and articulate their socio-political meaning in order to draw out the social environment in which the Narrative operates. In Chapter 4 and 5, I dive into my main findings, analyzing how the Narrative is projecting, constructing, and reconstructing conceptions of human rights through collaborative forms of activism.

⁸ Sean McElwee, “People Actually Like the Green New Deal,” *New York Times*, March 27, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/27/opinion/sunday/green-new-deal-mcconnell.html?pgtype=Article>.

⁹ Council on Foreign Relations, *Public Opinion on Global Issues*, page 127.

Chapter 2: Theoretical & Analytical Frameworks in the GND “Narrative”

2.1 *The Green New Deal ‘Narrative’*

The phrase “Green New Deal” holds dual dimensions. In its earliest iteration, the November Capitol Hill protests established the phrase as an activism rallying cry from the Sunrise Movement: “to stop climate change and create millions of good jobs in the process.”¹⁰ Behind this conceptualization was the interplay of other grassroots organizations, including the policy thinktank, New Consensus, and the political action committee, Justice Democrats.¹¹ However, the phrase soon after acquired an institutional dimension with the February 2019 release of a joint Congressional and Senate non-binding GND resolution. The resolution, unveiled by co-sponsors Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Senator Ed Markey, laid out a “scope of solutions” to address climate change, and established in official and more technical format the goals of the GND.¹² Along these lines, the resolution has reached 103 co-sponsors and become somewhat of a centerpiece “litmus test” for select politicians eager to demonstrate their commitment to progressive climate policy.¹³ These dimensions of the Deal have merged into a set of ideas that comprise the main focus of my analysis: what I call the GND “Narrative.”¹⁴ Here, I aim to briefly breakdown the actors in the Narrative for further reference throughout the paper. It is from these organizations and figures that I draw my evidence from in Chapters 4-5.

I make the distinction between civil society and government dimensions of the Narrative not to suggest that they are separable, but rather, to articulate how the Narrative comprises interconnecting

¹⁰ Sunrise Movement Mission, Sunrise Movement, accessed April 1, 2019, <https://www.sunrisemovement.org/>.

¹¹ Zoya Teirstein, “How Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez’s Green New Deal is being built,” *Grist*, March 12, 2019, <https://grist.org/article/how-alexandria-ocasio-cortezs-green-new-deal-is-being-built/>.

¹² Devan Cole and Sunlen Serfaty, “Ocasio-Cortez and Markey Unveil Green New Deal Resolution,” *CNN Politics*, February 08, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/02/07/politics/alexandria-ocasio-cortez-ed-markey-green-new-deal/index.html>.

¹³ Emily Witt, “The Optimistic Activists for a Green New Deal: Inside the Youth-Led Singing Sunrise Movement,” *The New Yorker*, December 23, 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/the-optimistic-activists-for-a-green-new-deal-inside-the-youth-led-singing-sunrise-movement>.

¹⁴ As many commentators have clarified, the concept of the Green New Deal first originated in 2006 with the formulation of the Global Greens ‘Green New Deal Task Force,’ and later became articulated in 2014 as a campaign policy platform of the U.S. Green Party. However, as the concept never gained widespread attention within this timeframe, I do not include this conceptualization of the Deal within the scope of my analysis.

grassroots efforts across civil society *and* the progressive faction of the Democratic Party. In this vein civil society and progressive Democrats are actively framing the GND in a collaborative form of activism. The flow of ideas can be seen as starting from the grassroots organizational level, and bridging into the government level.¹⁵ In between these domains are key progressive political messengers, like the resolution co-sponsors Alexandria Ocasio Cortez and Senator Markey.¹⁶

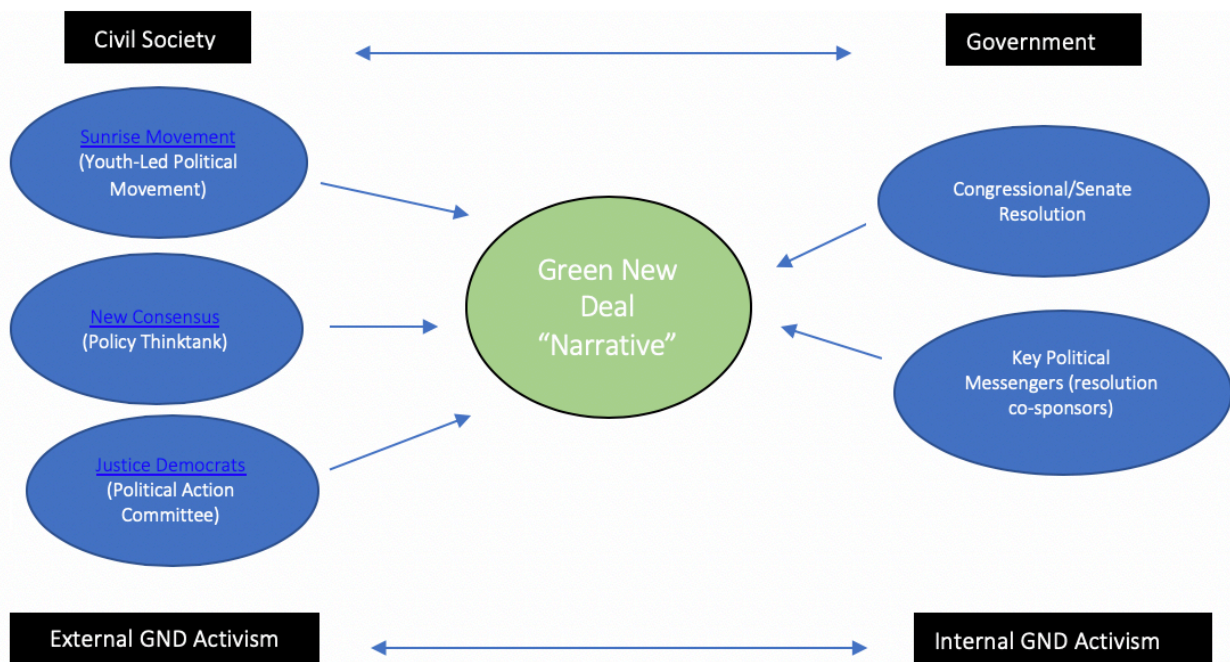


Table 2.1: "Green New Deal Narrative"

The interconnected flow from civil society to government activism becomes clear in a few examples. Behind the scenes, before Sunrise protests in November began, the political action committee Justice Democrats helped elect Ocasio-Cortez and a slew of other freshman congressmembers, all of who endorse the GND by virtue of belonging to the committee.¹⁷ Once the protests began, Ocasio-Cortez

¹⁵ Teirstein, "How Green New Deal."

¹⁶ Adler-Bell, "GND's Meteoric Rise"

¹⁷ Ibid.

joined the Sunrise Movement activists in the sit-in at Nancy Pelosi’s office.¹⁸ In this picture, a Representative-elect (who had not yet taken oath to office) actively engaged in an open form of protest against the established leader of her party. And throughout the resolution drafting, there is ample evidence that New Consensus played a large consulting role to politicians.¹⁹

This is all to say that the civil society and government actors involved in framing the Narrative — from outside and within the government—are performing activism for the GND in a coordinated and interconnected format. Moreover, because the civil society organizations identify as “grassroots” groups pursuing bottom-up strategic efforts, the co-sponsor politicians of the GND, as a commentator has pointed out, are promoting legislation from an “outside-in strategy relying on organization and people power.”²⁰ Along these lines, my analysis understands the Narrative as the newest, most visible branch of grassroots climate *movement activism* in the United States—activism operating both outside and inside the halls of government.

2.2 Theoretical Framework: Sociology of Human Rights

I analyze the Narrative through a sociology of human rights, an emerging area of scholarship that employs sociology to understand how social movement activism articulates, informs, and spreads human rights practices and norms.^{21 22 23 24 25} The premise for this new scholarship acknowledges that the field of human rights is dominated by legal and political science studies, academic angles well-fit to explore

¹⁸ Ryan Grim and Briahna Gray, “Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez Joins Environmental Activists in Protest at Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi’s Office,” *The Intercept*, November 13, 2018, <https://theintercept.com/2018/11/13/alexandria-ocasio-cortez-sunrise-activists-nancy-pelosi/>.

¹⁹ David Roberts, “Sen. Ed Markey: ‘We are now in the era of the Green New Deal,’” *Vox*, April 16, 2019, <https://www.vox.com/energy-and-environment/2019/4/16/18306596/green-new-deal-climate-change-ed-markey>.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Neil Stammers, *Social Movements and Human Rights*, (New York: Pluto Press, 2009).

²² Gideon Sjöberg, Elizabeth A. Gill, and Norma Williams, “A Sociology of Human Rights,” *Social Problems* 48, no. 1 (February 2001): 11-47, <https://doi.org/10.1525/sp.2001.48.1.11>

²³ Dominique Clément, “A Sociology of Human Rights: Rights through a Social Movement Lens,” *Canadian Review of Sociology* 48, no. 2 (May 2011): 121-135, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1755-618X.2011.01258>.

²⁴ William T. Armaline, Davita Silfen Glasberg, Bandana Purkayastha, *The Human Rights Enterprise*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015).

²⁵ Judith Blau, “Human Rights: What the United States Might Learn from the Rest of the World, and, Yes, from American Sociology,” *Sociological Forum* 31, no. 4 (December 2016): 1126-1139, <https://doi.org/10.1111/socf.12299>.

human rights as they exist institutionally and *de jure* (in theory). Nevertheless, reality shows that the connection between human rights *de jure* and human rights *de facto* (in practice) does not follow a clear or linear route. In fact, while legal human rights instruments assign member states the responsibility to respect, protect, and promote the human rights of domestic populations, it is often the member states themselves that withhold and/or violate those human rights. Historical perspectives instead reveal that “human rights are often developed and forced into practice through the struggles of grassroots organizations and non-elites from below.”²⁶ In this respect, the scholars suggest that to better understand how human rights successfully come into practice and produce lasting social change, human rights scholarship must pay equal attention to the pre-institutional dimension of human rights, in other words, the social dimension of how human rights acquire meaning and become integrated into the social context.

Stammers, the scholar that I drive my analytical framework from, conceives of this dimension of human rights as the “creative social praxis” role of social movements— a praxis which “enables us to re-examine the nature of the social and the possibilities for change and transformation.”²⁷ Essentially, social movements serve as vehicles for human rights practice to the extent that they act as creative laboratories for imagining transformative evolutions of social change. It is in these spaces that social movement actors and organizations “construct human rights”²⁸ through experimenting with rights discourse to not only make economic, social, and political demands, but probe shifts in public understandings of societal norms and values as they buttress foundations for social acceptance of human rights. As Stammers notes, “to say that human rights are socially constructed is to say that ideas and practices in respect of human rights are created, re-created, and instantiated by human actors in particular socio-historical settings and

²⁶ Armaline et al., *Human Rights Enterprise*, 26.

²⁷ Stammers, *Social Movements*, 38.

²⁸ Neil Stammers, “Social Movements and the Social Construction of Human Rights,” *Human Rights Quarterly* 21, no.4 (November 1999): 980-1008, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/762754>.

conditions.”²⁹ It is through this framework that I see the development of the GND Narrative as embodying this critical point of “creative praxis.”

Moreover, since sociologists understand human rights practice as “power struggles” between social movement actors and the state, it is critical, in using sociology of human rights as a theoretical framework, to always contemplate how the use of rights discourse also serves to challenge different systems, institutions, sites, and social manifestations of power. Developing his framework from Foucault, Stammers says that “we need to see power as being held, developed and exercised consciously by individual or collective social actors, but also recognize that it manifests itself structurally through the patterning of social systems regardless of consciousness and intent,”³⁰ and that, in effect, “construction and use of human rights discourses by social movements can play an important and positive role in challenging relations and structures of power, both as concentrated sites of power and the way in which that power is embedded in everyday social relations.”³¹ In this sense, the social construction of human rights acquires additional meaning in its potentiality to serve as a critical framework of oppressive, powerful systems— we see this in Sjoberg’s bold characterization of human rights as “one of the few counter-systems available for critically evaluating, for example, the neoliberal political and economic model, which has attained almost total global dominance.”³² It is from this sociological angle of human rights that I feel compelled to write this paper—with the understanding that social movements have historically experimented with and constructed human rights ideas and demands in their early stages, and with the understanding that the GND Narrative has continued to reach greater masses of Americans since November 2018.

2.3 Analytical Framework: Expressive & Instrumental Activism

²⁹ Stammers, “Social Construction,” 981.

³⁰ Ibid, 983.

³¹ Ibid, 987.

³² Sjoberg, Gill, and Norma, “Sociology of Human Rights,” 41-42.

In conducting my findings, I use Stammer's analytical framework of movement activism and human rights. His framework breaks down social movement activism into two confluent dimensions: expressive activism and instrumental activism. Both of these dimensions help us understand the creative praxis of social movements as they relate to articulating, informing, and spreading human rights as well as challenging hegemonic power structures.

As outlined in Table 2.3, the distinction between the two relates to the scope of their objectives. Stammers says that instrumental activism uses rights discourse to advocate for *specific* economic, social, political demands and directly confronts "existing agents, sites, and structures of power."³³ Here, instrumental activism is directed towards institutional structures, and makes demands within this institutional sphere. In the case of the Narrative, actors engage in instrumental activism by making formal demands to government leadership and also challenging the power of the Democratic Party.



Table 2.3. Retrieved from Stammers' "Social Movements and Social Construction of Human Rights" on page 987.

By contrast, expressive activism targets changes in society at large. It is "oriented towards the construction, reconstruction and/or transformation of norms, values, identities and ways of living and being" and towards challenging "socio-cultural manifestations of power relations in everyday life. Stammers says that traditionally, academic writing has looked towards the intersection between

³³ Stammers, "Social Construction," 987.

instrumental activism and institutional structures, without looking at how expressive dimensions aims to shape more fluid structures of society and culture, like norms and values.

Stammers adds that expressive and instrumental activism are always connected. He says that “while a useful analytical distinction, the instrumental and expressive dimensions of activism are rarely separable and should certainly never be set up as a binary polarity.”³⁴ In further articulating expressive activism, he also adds that “my usage of the term ‘expressive’ is intended to designate the affective and normative dimensions of social movement activism. This activism is foundational for what social movements are and what they try to do. Indeed, the instrumental dimensions of movement activism are usually derived from this foundation.”³⁵ Thus, we can see expressive activism as the broader framework for the social change that the movement aims to achieve, while viewing instrumental activism as directed, specific goals that engages with institutional structures to assert this framework for social change. In this vein, the expressive dimension might be thought to be tightly packaged into the instrumental dimension. It is through this analytical framework that I lay out my analysis of the Narrative. In Chapter 4, I lay out how the expressive dimension of the Narrative is constructing human rights, and in the following Chapter 5, I conduct the same analysis for the instrumental dimension.

Before I dive into this analysis, however, I hold that in light of the sociology of human rights, it is critical to understand the socio-political meanings of human rights as they exist in the United States today, as well as how the fraught relationship between the United States and the human rights institutional regime has staged the formation of these meanings. Through drawing out this information, I am better able to articulate throughout Chapters 4 and 5 the social and political gravity—and at times novelty— of the human rights claims and ideas embedded in the Narrative.

³⁴ Stammers, *Social Movements*, 166

³⁵ *Ibid*, 164.

Chapter 3: Human Rights in the United States

3.1 *The Present State of Human Rights in the United States*

How does the most powerful, rich, and technologically innovative country in the world have 40 million people living in poverty? How is it that Americans suffer from the highest rates of infant mortality and income inequality in the developed world; and the highest rates of obesity and incarceration in the entire global community? How is it expected that Americans will live much shorter and sicker lives compared to people living in developed, democratic countries?³⁶ In 2017, the UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights went across the country to investigate. They found that the “United States [government] is alone among developed countries in insisting that while human rights are of fundamental importance, they do not include rights that guard against dying of hunger, dying from a lack of access to affordable healthcare, or growing up in a context of total deprivation.”³⁷ The report went on to conclude that “at the end of the day, particularly in a rich country like the USA, the persistence of extreme poverty is a political choice made by those in power. With political will, it could readily be eliminated.”

When contemplating implementation of the GND—which aims to address many issues of social instability, poverty, and environmental damage— we should thus be interested in why political will for human rights is so hard to come by. In turn, my analysis follows the reasoning of sociology of human rights: that the U.S. political economy, as it exists today, is not *structurally designed* to serve the rights of people, but rather, to promote the accumulation and concentration of capital. The reality today is that far too often, the two come into conflict.

³⁶ Philip Alston, *Statement on Visit to the USA, by Professor Philip Alston, United Nations Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights* (Washington, DC: United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 2017). <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=22533&LangID=E>

³⁷ Ibid

Armaline et al., Sjoberg, and Stammers attribute this phenomenon to the current era of global economic restructuring (GER.) GER, which explains the transformation of the economy since the 1970s, draws correlative links between industrialization, the rise of transnational corporate and multinational organizational power and hegemony, and the decline of state sovereignty. Effectively, these processes, which have established modern capitalism as the “dominant economic system,”³⁸ have induced the erosion of labor power and unprecedented scales of both global and domestic economic inequalities as well as racial and ethnic divisions.

GER has actively impeded the realization of economic and social human rights in particular.

Armaline draws out a helpful anecdote of how corporate interest and public interest come into conflict:

“human rights instruments assign states the responsibility of insuring and protecting rights yet corporations are often bound by law (the state) to protect the rights of share holders even when in violation of human rights and/or ecological standards (rights of *stake* holders). States are then expected to sanction some of the most powerful collective actors in the modern world for practices directed by those very states and their most powerful members (significant *share* holders.)³⁹

In this respect, states, conflicted by interests, are held to an impossible standard of human rights, especially in times of scarcity and crisis. For example, in reference to the global recession and the U.S. government’s handling of the 2008 financial crisis, we see a clear example of how “private industry was able to transcend individual states’ ability to ensure the rights of citizens to food, clothes, and shelter – let alone a living wage or health care to their populations.”⁴⁰

The premise follows that today, strong political will is necessary to counteract human rights violations on American soil, but that it is hard to come by because of the hegemony of neoliberal political and economic structures of the state. As sociology of human rights follows, the struggles for human rights practices will then come from grassroots movement below, not above. Though this is a global critique of GER and human rights that can apply to many states, the question of political will and human rights holds

³⁸ Sjoberg, Gill, and Norma, “Sociology of Human Rights,” 22.

³⁹ Armaline, Glasberg, and Purkayastha, *Human Rights Enterprise*, 23.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 437.

an entirely additional layer of nuance when contextualized within the United States—a state that holds a particularly hostility to human rights as alluded to by the Special Rapporteur. The next section therefore points to how the United States history with human rights has set the stage for their failure to fulfill the social and economic rights obligations today that the GND Narrative is advocating for.

3.2 A Fraught History: Human Rights vs. the United States

As human rights scholarship notes, it is curious that the nation that played such an instrumental role in forming the ideals of human rights has strayed so far from their ideological origins. A review of the history of human rights in the United States is thus in order. As Blau recalls, “The term human rights was only coined in 1948 with the adoption of the UDHR [Universal Declaration of Human Rights], although earlier, in 1944, Franklin Delano Roosevelt anticipated the principle” in a document which he termed the “Second Bill of Rights.”⁴¹ The Second Bill of Rights included social and economic rights like the right to health, education, a job, and a decent standard of living; they were meant to complement the civil and political rights enumerated in the original Bill of Rights and codified into the U.S. Constitution, like the right to equal treatment under the law and the right to free speech, religion, and voting representation.⁴²

FDR died before he could introduce the Second Bill of Rights into the legislative body, and his intention to implement social and economic rights into the framework of U.S. society and legal system was ultimately abandoned. But his wife, Eleanor Roosevelt, advocated for the Second Bill of Rights principles as chair of the Committee on Human Rights.⁴³ Under her leadership, the integration of civil and political rights with social and economic rights would become the ideological basis for the non-binding UDHR, the most important normative framework and moral force for human rights that enumerated the inherent rights, dignity and value of all human beings.⁴⁴ The document established the main principles of

⁴¹ Blau, “Human Rights,” 1127.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 1128.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

human rights—describing all human rights as universal and inalienable; interdependent and indivisible; and equal and non-discriminatory.⁴⁵ At this time, the United States demonstrate support of this “holistic approach to human rights” that integrated both civil/political and economic/social rights.⁴⁶

Following the death of FDR and into the 1960s, the U.S. government’s positive attitude towards human rights had gone off course. When the principles of the UDHR were drafted into the two most foundational human rights treaties—the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) (encompassing “negative” rights that the government had to provide immediately and could not inflict on) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), (encompassing “positive” rights that the government would be held responsible for providing over progressively over time with respect to the state’s available resources)— the U.S. stalled over twenty years before ratifying the ICCPR, and never seriously considered ratifying the ICESCR.⁴⁷ Today, within the larger human rights regime, the U.S. has only signed a small portion of human rights treaties compared to the vast majority of nations, and ratified even fewer.⁴⁸

As political sociology presumes, we cannot look at this history of human rights in the United States in a vacuum—indeed, every decision that the United States has made in establishing levels of commitment to human rights in the early development of the regime up until now must be understood as *politically calculated* decisions. In particular, the U.S. held two political positions in calculating their commitment to the ICCPR and the ICESCR: “the ICESCR was considered ‘socialist’ and the ICCPR was though to undercut American sovereignty because the U.S. Bill of Rights already included civil and

⁴⁵ “What are human rights?” Issues, United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, accessed April 1, 2019, <https://ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Pages/WhatareHumanRights.aspx>.

⁴⁶ Gillian MacNaughton and Mariah McGill, “Economic and Social Rights in the United States: implementation Without Ratification,” *Northeastern University Law Journal* 4, no. 2 (Spring 2012): 365, <http://ssrn.com/abstract=2054736>.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 367-8.

⁴⁸ Furthermore, even when the United States does ratify human rights treaties, the ratifications have attached provisions called “reservations, understandings and declarations,” which essentially makes these treaties legally void. The result is that the ratification of the treaty merely serves to symbolize that the U.S. recognizes the legitimacy of the treaty.

political rights.”⁴⁹ With these perspectives of human rights, the U.S. government has pursued a selective interpretation of human rights—holding the Bill of Rights and U.S. laws over the ICCPR, and outright rejecting the legal validity of economic and social rights. This position is contradicting when considering that the UDHR understands civil and political rights as interdependent with social and economic rights, *and* the fact that the majority of the U.S. public does in fact recognize social and economic rights as federal responsibilities.⁵⁰

Human rights advocates have chastised the United States for their apparent “American Exceptionalism” stance on human rights.⁵¹ For example, the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights held that the U.S.’s denial of economic and social rights, in particular, “does not eliminate responsibility, nor does it negate obligations” from their commitment to economic and social rights within the UDHR and human rights regime in general.⁵² According to our theoretical framework, it is therefore the role of social movement activism to hold the U.S. government accountable for human rights. However, within the context of American exceptionalism, it seems that any social movement on American soil that aims to embed ideals of economic and social rights will need to tackle this challenge in a more discrete language that does not pose direct threat to American Exceptionalism but rather accentuates it.⁵³ This is a central challenge of social movements, and I believe, one that the GND has already tackled within their expressive dimension of activism.

⁴⁹ Blau, 1128.

⁵⁰ Council on Foreign Relations, *Public Opinion on Global Issues: A Web-based Digest of Polling from Around the World*, New York: CFR, 2009, page 156.

⁵¹ Armaline, Glasberg, and Purkayastha, *Human Rights Enterprise*, 149.

⁵² Alston, *Statement on Visit to the USA*.

⁵³ As Carol Anderson points out in *Eyes Off the Prize*, the Civil Rights Movement tried to hold the United States accountable for human rights on the UN stage, but failed. This anecdote shows how efforts to explicitly call out the U.S. on human rights have been thwarted by U.S. political leadership.

Chapter 4: Expressive Dimension of Human Rights in Narrative

Chapter 4 analyzes the expressive dimension of the GND Narrative. In Stammer's social movement theory, the expressive dimension of movement activism constructs ideas of human rights by foregrounding rights discourse in (1) "legitimizing *alternative* values/norms" and (2) "morally validating self/group identities."⁵⁴ The former process forms the movement's "*outward attempt*" to "transform public culture," while the latter process forms the "*inward attempt*" to "legitimate the position, values, and identities of the movement actors."⁵⁵ These praxes challenge "socio-cultural manifestations of power relations in everyday life."⁵⁶ The overall idea here is that human rights *de facto* necessitate the dissolution of arbitrary power relations—and that the expressive dimension of movement activism aims to achieve this shift through pinpointing the flaws of the current system, sketching out alternative value systems that support rights-based societies, and elevating a higher public consciousness of specific rights in the construction of new norms and values.

As follows, this Chapter begins with a central foundation of the Narrative: the diagnosis of the current system (Section 4.1), followed by the outward and inward attempts of expressive activism (Section 4.2-4.3). In my analysis, I ultimately find that the movement's outward attempt to transform public culture invokes FDR's Second Bill of Rights to advocate for an alternative rights-based society that values human security, equality, and dignity, and shift manifestations of socio-economic power relations, the movement's inward attempt to legitimate the identities of the movement actors invokes intergenerational justice to prioritize the rights of young people, instilling a sense of moral authority in them, and challenging power relations between young people and adult decision-makers.

4.1 Diagnosis of Crises in Narrative

⁵⁴ See Table 2.3.

⁵⁵ Neil Stammers, "Human Rights and Social Movements: Theoretical Perspectives," *CAIRN* 75, no. 2 (2015): 76-77. <https://www.cairn.info/revue-interdisciplinaire-d-etudes-juridiques-2015-2-page-67.htm>

⁵⁶ See Table 2.3.

In diagnosing the current political and economic system, the Narrative describes a structurally exclusive and unequal society that, under the direction of the federal government, invests public funds into the private sector while excluding the vast majority of Americans from wealth generation and prosperity.⁵⁷ We see this theme articulated in the informational document produced by the New Consensus—also referred to by Sunrise as the resolution’s “FAQ”:

For the past four to five decades, America’s political and business leaders have failed to invest in or even look toward our future, content instead to entrust these responsibilities to the “private sector.” This has meant that many of our resources and much of our creative and energetic population have been used solely to generate revenue for a comparative few, leaving most other Americans either chronically underemployed or employed in activities that exacerbate the worst aspects of our current economy.^{58 59}

As the document goes on to explain, these poor investments undermined socio-economic mobility, and exacerbated class and ethnic divisions, shaping a “fractured America.”⁶⁰ Under this story, the Narrative establishes a society that is structurally broken—an ineffective government lacking “forward-looking leadership,” that opts to direct America’s great resource potential towards private gain and away from public good.⁶¹ In essence, the Narrative implies that these structures are cemented through an imbalance of economic and political power relations.

In the broken society, two exceptional crises have manifested that require urgent action—these are the “twin crises” of climate change and economic inequality. The Narrative insists that these crises threaten the cohesion and stability of American civilization, and of the global community, to destructive ends. Regarding the crisis of climate change, New Consensus relates:

“the planet is burning, threatening all of humanity and most forms of life with certain extinction. Destructive droughts, collapsing ecosystems, superstorms, floods, sea level rises, and wave after

⁵⁷ While I recognize that the phrases “America” and “American” are U.S. centric, I use the term for the purpose of demonstrating the sentiments of patriotism in the Green New Deal.

⁵⁸ Rhiana Gunn-Wright and Robert Hockett, *The Green New Deal*, (New Consensus, January 2019), page 4, https://s3.us-east-2.amazonaws.com/ncsite/new_conesnsus_gnd_14_pager.pdf.

⁵⁹ The first person “our” connotes the collective United States populous.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 2.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, 3.

wave of wildfires: the “war crimes” committed by climate change affect us all, even if some of us have yet to feel them directly. Our problems, in other words, are *national* problems, collective problems.”⁶²

Here, the Narrative constructs climate change as destructive to ecological stability, and from this flows the threat to human security and human civilization. This understanding of the climate change crisis aims to unite Americans under one central problem that will eventually affect everyone, and posits that transformative climate action is necessary within a 12-year timeframe.⁶³ Though there is an implicit appreciation that climate change threatens the global populous, the Narrative maintains a strong focus on American national solidarity.

It is important to also note, however, that the resolution does establish how climate change disproportionately affects specific populations in the present day, and that many of the effects of climate change are already being felt by marginalized communities:

“climate change, pollution, and environmental destruction have exacerbated systemic racial, regional, social, environmental, and economic injustices (referred to in this preamble as systemic injustices) by disproportionately affecting indigenous peoples, communities of color, migrant communities, deindustrialized communities, depopulated rural communities, the poor, low income workers, women, the elderly, the unhoused, people with disabilities and youth (referred to in this preamble as “frontline and vulnerable communities.”⁶⁴

In this respect, the Narrative aims to strike a balance between the disadvantaged circumstances of frontline and vulnerable communities (FVC) to systemic injustices exacerbated from climate change, while also establishing a national stake in the crisis of climate change “war crimes,”⁶⁵ a non-discriminating meteorological agent.

⁶² Ibid, 13.

⁶³ The timeframe is drawn from the report released by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change in October 2018, which predicts that nations have twelve years to remake the world’s energy infrastructure and transition to carbon negative outputs in order to avoid the most devastating impacts of climate change, including hundreds of millions of lives lost and exponential human exposure to wildfires, heatwaves, droughts, and flooding, which would also put dramatic pressure on the world’s food and water supply.

⁶⁴ U.S. Congress, *Green New Deal*, HR 109, pages 3-4.

⁶⁵ Gunn-Wright and Hockett, *Green New Deal*, 2.

In the Narrative, the second twin crisis is income inequality. As opposed to a natural resource crisis, income inequality describes a material resource crisis, namely poverty, whereby the lack of access to “good jobs” threatens economic and social security. At its core, the crisis of income inequality describes “wealth concentrating up at the top,” with “poverty overwhelming the bottom,” confluent with stagnated wages and worsening socio-economic mobility, and the “racial wealth divide” and “gender earnings gap.”⁶⁶ Though income inequality threatens all non-wealthy families and their access to an adequate standard of living, it also places emphasis on the racial lines of economic injustice. Sunrise co-founder Evan Weber stresses this point:

“The youth black unemployment rate in this country looks very, very different than the unemployment rate overall, particularly amongst young black men. Also, although we may have a smoothed out unemployment rate across the country, sometimes poverty and unemployment can be hyper-localized within communities.”⁶⁷

Similar to the crisis of climate change, the Narrative describes the overarching national problem as affecting the entire American populous, while then recognizing that some communities face the brunt of the risks that come along with the crisis. The Narrative thus aligns income inequality and racial injustice as parallel issues: as the New Consensus document states, “a society whose members are excluded by the privileged and powerful and whose cohesion is weakened by class and ethnic divisions is a society at serious risk.”⁶⁸ In this regard, the Narrative aims to depict the twin crises as worsening, causing dangerous fissures in society, and serving as a progressive threat to the interests of the collective society.

The twin crises are also exacerbated by the presence of “several related crises”⁶⁹ which I will call the “layered crises.” The resolution outlines the layered crises as “life expectancy declining while basic needs, such as clean air, clean water, healthy food, and adequate health care, housing, transportation,

⁶⁶ Ibid, 13.

⁶⁷ Johanna Bozuwa, Adam Simpson, Anthony Torres, and Evan Weber, “The Green New Deal and the Shift to a New Economy,” *Popular Resistance*, January 29, 2019, <https://popularresistance.org/the-green-new-deal-and-the-shift-to-a-new-economy/>.

⁶⁸ Gunn-Wright and Hockett, *Green New Deal*, 2.

⁶⁹ U.S. Congress, *Green New Deal*, HR 109, page 3.

and education, are inaccessible to a significant portion of the United States.”⁷⁰ To the extent that wage stagnation leaves a large portion of Americans without disposable income; spending on basic needs eclipses the household budget of low and middle-income families; and natural resource exploitation degrades access to clean water, air, and community health, the twin crises and the layered crises embody the interconnected *brokenness* of the political economy structure. As Congresswoman Ocasio-Cortez has said “these are not different problems, they are part of the same problems,” attesting that “a lot of what the Green New Deal is doing is shifting our political, economic and social paradigms on every issue.”⁷¹

In this sense, the Narrative makes clear how the outlined crises are *structurally* created and sustained—and, because they have been built—can also be reconfigured. As the Co-Founder and Executive Director of New Consensus, Demond Drummer, stated, “a fossil fuel economy that is designed to exploit and extract requires disposable people and places. What we’re saying is no more disposable people and no more disposable places.”⁷² The Narrative thus aims to legitimate the truth that the richest country in the world *does* have the resource capacity to change the structure of how the economy works, to invest in high-wage jobs and make basic needs accessible to the national populous, ultimately replacing the exploitative system with a nourishing one.

Beyond the systemic nature of these crises, the barriers to transformational change, according to Sunrise, involve the “deep lack of moral clarity and courage from our Democratic leadership.”⁷³ In this respect, the Narrative elucidates that America— after forty to fifty years of inattention to the public good, flawed political leadership, and growing threats of climate change and income inequality— has reached “the moral equivalent of war.”⁷⁴ Ultimately, this diagnosis sets up the Narrative to enumerate the morally

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ MSNBC, “The Green New Deal with Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez | All In | MSNBC,” YouTube video, 47:09, April 1, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yoFaQ9foV8I>.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Sunrise Movement, Twitter post, December 20, 2018, 6:50pm, twitter.com/sunrisemvmt.

⁷⁴ Gunn-Wright and Hockett, *Green New Deal*, 2.

correct directive: to embark on the transition from the *unsustainable* society in need of structural and moral renovation, towards a new political mission that will remedy the crises, redirecting public investment into the people as opposed to private companies. This mission is the Green New Deal.

4.2 Legitimizing Alternative Values and Norms in the Narrative

The Narrative’s “outward attempt” to transform public culture evokes rights language from the FDR New Deal era to establish a normative consensus about the responsibility of the federal government in securing access to good jobs, a stable climate, and basic human needs. As resolved by Stammers theoretical framework, the idea here is that as rights relate to shifting norms and values, that the “understandings of rights... [will] shape the identities, value systems and moral orientations” of people, and vice versa.⁷⁵ Thus, this section attempts to detail the areas of the Narrative that relate rights discourse to value systems and moral orientations, with the following section relating to identities (Section 4.3)

In summary, the Narrative tells the story of a nation at a moral crossroads, out of sync with its core values. These values—security, prosperity, dignity, and equality—were planted by FDR during the New Deal, when he implemented social security and welfare programs, and later on in his presidency, when he unsuccessfully attempted to establish federal responsibility for the welfare of American people by proposing a Second Bill of Rights (SBR).⁷⁶ The premise follows that Americans inherently possess economic and social rights as enshrined in the SBR, but that these rights have not been realized yet. The goal of the GND is to therefore mobilize the political will and moral clarity to redeem these rights. The arc of this storyline can be broken down as follows.

⁷⁵ Stammers, *Social Movements*, 82.

⁷⁶ As reviewed in “Human Rights,” the SBR formed the basis for what would become economic and social human rights, which are rights that entitle people to the necessary living conditions to meet base levels of economic and social security. The SBR specifically included: “the right to a useful and remunerative job; the right to adequate food, clothing, and recreation; the right to a decent home; the right to adequate medical care; the right to protect from insecurity that can accompany old age, disability or unemployment; and the right to a good education.”

The Narrative has strong ideological origins in the Second Bill of Rights. We see evidence of this connection in an interview with Senator Markey, co-sponsor of the resolution:

“When we were drafting the resolution, we looked to Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s 1944 State of the Union address, which he delivered in the form of one of his fireside chats. He laid out his plan to guarantee the third unalienable right: the pursuit of happiness. He said that true individual freedom cannot exist without economic security. So, because of the millions of veterans who were going to be returning after we finished winning World War II, he proposed the Second Bill of Rights, under which a new basis for *security* and *prosperity* can be established for all, regardless of station, race, or creed. And he went through [the rights]. If they sound familiar, it’s because they’re in the Green New Deal: the *right* to work in a job that pays enough to support a family, the *right* to earn enough to provide food and clothing and recreation, the *right* to a decent home, the *right* to medical care, the *right* to a good education, the *right* to do business in an atmosphere of freedom from unfair competition. He concluded by saying that all these rights spell *security*. So that’s what we did [in the Green New Deal] — without saying Medicare-for-all, because that’s not in there; without saying free college for everyone, because that’s not in there.”⁷⁷

Here Markey enshrines values like economic security and prosperity for all while introducing FDR’s early concepts of economic and social rights. Though the resolution doesn’t explicitly invoke these rights (as will be reviewed in Chapter 5), it is clear that the drafters of the resolution integrated the principles of the SBR into the provisions of the GND. Referencing FDR, the New Deal, and SBR, the premise of the Narrative follows that the government alone holds the power and responsibility to mobilize resources within the scope and scale necessary to address the crisis, and most importantly that this mobilization is legitimate because it is nationally *precedented*. When Ocasio-Cortez calls on the Democratic Party to “return to our FDR roots as a party,”⁷⁸ she and Markey alike tap into a historical memory, alluding to a previous era of economic crisis, whereby Democratic political leadership took the initiative to implement wide-sweeping reforms that restored struggling Americans with prosperity, economic security, and human dignity.

We can see further instances of how the Narrative equates economic and social rights with American values in an interview with Sunrise co-founder Evan Weber. He states:

⁷⁷ Roberts, “Sen. Ed Markey.”

⁷⁸ MSNBC, “Rep. Ocasio-Cortez On The Democratic Party, Green New Deal, 2020 Candidates | MTP Daily | MSNBC,” YouTube video, 21:32, February 7, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wypN0PChAtg>.

what the Green New Deal is really about—just like the New Deal was about enshrining what the values and rights of our society truly are—with the Green New Deal, we’re trying to say every community, no matter your Zip code, no matter the color of your skin, has a right to clean water, has a right to clean air, has a right to good food and healthy communities, has a right to a livable future, and perhaps most importantly, has a right to a dignified life and good family-sustaining jobs.⁷⁹

As Weber alludes, the GND acts to “enshrine” values into a rights-based society—rights come along with values. The extent to which GND policy embodies these rights, they also strengthen the foundation for American values, here stressed as “dignity” and security. Similar to Markey, Weber references the New Deal era as a “true” patriotic symbol of the American identity—a marker of national glory in U.S. history.

While the Narrative references the FDR era as a source of inspiration for the GND, it is also important to note how the Narrative modifies some of the shortcomings of this era. As laid out in the New Consensus FAQ, the New Deal initiatives represented only partial completion of FDR’s highest ideals of SBR; while the New Deal programs did spread wealth and create the middle class, they also excluded certain women and people of color from these social and economic benefits in the process.⁸⁰ Moreover, the programs “fell short of providing access to affordable health care, higher education, and guaranteed work to all Americans.”⁸¹ But FDR did see these benefits as fully within the scope of federal responsibility; according to the FAQ, “President Roosevelt planned to address these remaining challenges after World War II through a visionary ‘Second Bill of Rights,’ but he died before the effort could begin.”⁸²

The storyline of FDR’s unfinished dream sets up the punchline for the Narrative: that the GND will help achieve what FDR aimed for but could not fulfill. The result, according to leaders, will be “the most serious solution... to redefine politics and establish a new social contract for America in line with the economic and ecological realities of the 21st century” that is “deeply just and radically inclusive.”⁸³ The

⁷⁹ Bozuwa et al., “Shift to a New Economy.”

⁸⁰ Gunn-Wright and Hockett, *Green New Deal*, 5.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Alexandra Rojas, “Justice Democrats Proud To Endorse AOC and Markey’s Green New Deal, call on House, Senate and 2020 Democrats To Endorse The Resolution,” Justice Democrats, press release, February 7, 2019,

Narrative therefore serves as more than just a framework for policies, but also, by referencing a “new social contract,” a statement of broader federal duty to the American public to “at long last redeem that great promise [of the Second Bill of Rights]—our *birthright* as Americans and as human beings.”⁸⁴

This arc of the storyline—that posits SBR as inalienable “natural birthrights” and acting as a foundation for a “new social contract”—shows how the Narrative constructs ideas of human rights through attempting to transform public consciousness of federal obligations and human rights. As follows, the Narrative’s role in redeeming the American birthright and creating a “new social contract” substantiates the GND as more than a pragmatic solution to face the twin crises, but rather a prioritization of morals: of embedding values in society that strengthen human rights, elevating the wellbeing and dignity of all Americans.

When viewed in perspective, this restructuring of federal obligations and rights also challenges those socio-economic power imbalances that have prevailed since the age of global economic restructuring.⁸⁵ It follows that a society restructured to provide economic and social human rights will actively stabilize the environment while promoting human dignity and equality: to requote the Director of New Consensus, “a fossil fuel economy that is designed to exploit and extract requires disposable people and places. What the GND says is no more disposable people and no more disposable places.”⁸⁶ This economic shift mirrors a value-systems shift from exploitation of people and planet, to investment; from disposability to inherent and renewable worth. It follows that the fundamental purpose of the GND is to “lay the foundation for a new economy where the dignity and value of all Americans are respected, affirmed, and rewarded, regardless of who they are and what they own.”⁸⁷

<https://www.commondreams.org/newswire/2019/02/07/justice-democrats-proud-endorse-aoc-and-markeys-green-new-deal-call-house-senate>.

⁸⁴ Gunn-Wright and Hockett, *Green New Deal*, 5.

⁸⁵ See Section 3.1 for a review of global economic restructuring.

⁸⁶ MSNBC, “The Green New Deal.”

⁸⁷ Gunn-Wright and Hockett, *Green New Deal*, 6.

Moreover, that the Narrative posits the “new social contract” as the moral alternative shows how the Narrative constructs human rights as a counter system to critically engage with the current political and economic systems.⁸⁸ When the Narrative says that the nation has reached the “moral equivalent of war,” it’s supposed that nation has reached a critical tipping point in its history. In this respect, the Narrative establishes GND as the morally *correct* decision. In implementing the Deal, the nation would make good on FDR’s unfinished agenda of the SBR, but in failing to do so, the nation would at best pursue moderate climate policies do not address the severity of the crises at hand. It follows that the former choice will go down in history comparable to the “new Deal, the Great Society, the moon shot, the civil-rights movement of our generation,” while the latter will progressively embolden ethnic and class division, ultimately acting as a death sentence for America and its children.

Overall, these constructions of human rights hold true whether the Narrative makes explicit “human rights” or not because ultimately, the legacy of FDR’s ideals highlighted the potential to create a *better society* than we live in now with accessibility to a holistic vision of human rights. In this respect, the expressive dimension of the Narrative constructs human rights in enshrining certain values, and breaking down power imbalances through the restructuring of economies and policies. In catering to the historical memory of FDR, and framing the Narrative as patriotic, it also becomes clear how the Narrative constructs human rights while simultaneously working within an American Exceptionalism framework.

4.3 Morally Validating Identities in Narrative

As Section 4.2 showed, the outward attempt of expressive activism uses human rights discourse to advocate for a return back to FDR ideals and policies. Section 4.3 is therefore interested in the inward

⁸⁸ Sjoberg, Gill, and Norma, “Sociology of Human Rights,” 41-42.

dimension of expressive activism—how the Narrative evokes human rights language to “validate the perspective and identities of those oppressed by particular relations and structures of power.”⁸⁹

In this context, I find that the Narrative—predominantly through the youth-led Sunrise Movement—uses rights discourse to morally validate the perspectives of young people, and that this validation also acts to expand the public consciousness of how human rights operate in different socio-historical contexts. Specifically, I analyze how the Narrative, by centering rights language around the identities of young people, validates the “moral authority” of the group, and pushes ideas about intergenerational justice into the public consciousness. This urges the public to consider whether actions committed now should also be accounting for the protection of young people to enjoy rights in the future. Centering the youth in the movement activism tangentially challenges power relations that value adult opinions over youth opinions.

While it is not atypical for young people to have strong leadership in social movements, the context of the twin crises allows the Narrative to place an affective investment in the youth identity. As the Narrative makes clear, unlike the lives of older people, the great majority of young people’s future lives can be mapped alongside the alarming IPCC predictions of ecological collapse; if swift action is not taken within the next 12 years to reduce emissions, future generations face certain ecological catastrophe. Additionally, reports reveal that the younger generations, starting with the Millennials, will be financially worse off than their parents’ generation.⁹⁰ In this respect, the youth serve the voice of the Narrative because they have one captivating feature in common: they have a certain sense of self-awareness that the decisions made today will either exponentially condemn or better their futures. This

⁸⁹ Stammers, “Social Construction,” 988.

⁹⁰ Lauren Leatherby, “Five charts show why millennials are worse off than their parents,” *Financial Times*, August 29, 2017, <https://www.ft.com/content/e5246526-8c2c-11e7-a352-e46f43c5825d>.

awareness is concisely encapsulated by a young Sunrise Member who states “what’s really absurd is that I have to grow up in a world on the brink of avoidable tragedy.”⁹¹

Within the Narrative’s centralization of the youth identity, moreover, is the understanding that the systemic injustices (racial, regional, social, environmental, and economic injustices) disproportionately affect vulnerable and frontline communities (indigenous peoples, communities of color, migrant communities, deindustrialized communities, depopulated rural communities, the poor, low-income workers, women, the elderly, the unhoused, people with disabilities and youth.) In this respect, many people may have intersectional identities (i.e. a young woman of color) that expose them to greater harm from the twin crises—this dynamic is noted in an interview with Sunrise Co-Founder Evan Weber: “As young people, our generation is both most screwed by the current economic crisis as well as climate change, and we know that that plays out along class and racial lines.”⁹² Therefore, while the Narrative positions young people as the central *messengers* of the movement, this identity only represents one group of the vulnerable and frontline communities. In other words, while the youth act as the united “we” in the Narrative’s use of rights discourse, we must also remember that their calls to justice peripherally represent the interests of vulnerable and frontline communities.

That is, at the center of the messenger identity is the idea that “young people have the right to good jobs and a livable future.”⁹³ This certainly does not exclude other people from claiming this “right”—indeed, as will be elaborated on in Chapter 5, the Narrative makes clear that this right expands to all people. Rather, it alternatively suggests that young people will suffer the “most” from the damaging outcomes of climate change and economic inequality. In this respect, there is an idea that young people make claims to rights because they anticipate a near future where those rights are fundamentally

⁹¹ Sunrise Movement (excerpt from Julia McKenna), “These 10 Op-Eds from Youth Climate Strikers Explain Their Need to Take Action,” Sunrise Movement (blog), Medium, March 18, 2018, <https://medium.com/sunrisemvmt/these-10-op-eds-from-youth-climate-strikers-explain-their-need-to-take-action-c2891e983a6f>.

⁹² Bozuwa et al., “Shift to a New Economy.”

⁹³ This phrase is coined by Sunrise. I elaborate on the phrase in the following Chapter.

degraded at. Ultimately, their calls to rights are about intergenerational justice; of pushing decision-makers to consider the long-term effects of their actions (or inaction), and the fair distribution of benefits and risks across generations.

Young people therefore have been described as effective messengers for intergenerational justice because they have what many commentators have identified as a “moral authority” on the issues of the twin crises:⁹⁴ the “right or power to act (or to direct others to act), based on the belief that the actor is moral, rather than on the actor having or needing some formal power to do so.”⁹⁵ As one Sunrise member says, “age is not a measure of knowledge. The climate movement is led today by young people because we have the most to lose and have the most to say about.”⁹⁶ In reference to the #FridayForFuture strikes⁹⁷, another member stated, “these rallies aren’t just about chanting and being on the news. They are about us defending our right to be heard and our right to a home, to clean air and water, and to a livable future.”⁹⁸ In this respect, the intergenerational justice championed by young people relates to the most universal moral of human rights: that all people, no matter their age, are born with certain rights and dignity that make their life as valuable as anyone born in any other generation.

The Narrative elevates this sense of moral authority by spotlighting the “deep lack of moral clarity”⁹⁹ of those decision-makers who continue to side with the fossil fuel industry. As Sunrise members note: “It is both irresponsible and immoral to ignore climate change.”¹⁰⁰ In this vein, the youth perpetuate

⁹⁴ Bill McKibben, “The Hard Lessons of Dianne Feinstein’s Encounter with Young Green New Deal Activists,” *The New Yorker*, February, 23, 2019, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/the-hard-lessons-of-dianne-feinsteins-encounter-with-the-young-green-new-deal-activists-video>

⁹⁵ “Moral authority,” Wikitionary, accessed April 1, 2019, https://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide/citation-guide-1.html#cg-book.

⁹⁶ Sunrise Movement (excerpt from Audrey Lin), “10 Op-Eds from Youth Climate.”

⁹⁷ The #FridaysForFuture strike is an international movement inspired by 15-year old climate activist and school striker Greta Thunberg. On May 4, 2019, over 100,000 students in the U.S. alone marched out of school to protest government inaction on climate change.

⁹⁸ Destine Grigsby, “I Protested for the Green New Deal at Mitch McConnell’s Office. Here’s Why,” *Teen Vogue*, February 27, 2019, <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/green-new-deal-protest-mitch-mcconnell-office-op-ed>.

⁹⁹ Sunrise Movement, Twitter post, December 20, 2018, 6:50pm, twitter.com/sunrisemvmt.

¹⁰⁰ Sunrise Movement (excerpt from Julia McKenna), “10 Op-Eds from Youth Climate.”

the logic that decision-makers have lost moral authority to talk on issues of the generation: “our government has repeatedly chosen profit over lives, so why would our government choose to do better now?”¹⁰¹ The consensus here is that politicians in power have actively neglected issues of climate change and economic inequalities for so long that this demonstrates that they have used their power in arbitrary ways that do not serve the public interest. The conception of moral authority flips the assumption that adults possess more logic than youth on issues of critical importance.

What is particularly interesting in this discourse, though, is how the youth, in directing their moral authority to challenge power relations, often interchange “adults” with “government.” One Sunrise member says, “if adults can’t do their jobs themselves, then the young people of the nation will take the wheel and steer away from the cliff we are currently barreling toward.”¹⁰² Another one writes: “the collective power of youth around the world is forcing adults to face the reality of climate change and its social impact. We are young, loud, and our concerns are valid.”¹⁰³ The conflation between government and adults assumes that all adults, even if they do not possess decision-making power, act complicity in systems that exploit the rights of youth.

The distinction between adults and government is important when considering Stammers’ analytical framework, which differentiates instrumental activism as challenging “existing agents, sites, and structures as power” from expressive activism as challenging “manifestations of socio-cultural power relations.”¹⁰⁴ It seems that, as the youth continue to move center stage in messaging the climate movement, they are not only challenging the (instrumental) authority of the government by invoking their rights to livable futures, etc., but also the (expressive) public culture that values adult opinion over youth opinion by invoking, for example, their “right to be heard.” In buttressing their “right to be heard”

¹⁰¹ Ibid, excerpt from Hannah Estrada.

¹⁰² Ibid, excerpt from Ashton Clatterbuck.

¹⁰³ Ibid, excerpt from Audrey Lin.

¹⁰⁴ Table 2.3

with moral authority, they attempt to expand the agency of youth beyond the political arena, to the infiltration of culture. One could then assume that to the extent that the youth assert their own moral authority, and continue to engage in disruptive forms of protest such as school striking, they also perpetuate a new public culture that positions youth as possessing a certain type of wisdom, ultimately challenging the dominant power relations that distribute excess authority to adults over children.

This supposition shows us how the connection between interpretation of expressive and instrumental dimensions of activism can morph into the other. As I will demonstrate, many of the findings shared in Chapter 4—among those, the perpetuation of a public culture of social and economic justice norms and the validation of youth identities— contribute meaning to the instrumental demands made on the state in Chapter 5. The following Chapter therefore aims to look at how rights discourse is used for specific demands, while still drawing on the broader expressive dimension of expanding public culture.

Chapter 5: Instrumental Dimension of Activism in Narrative

This Chapter shows how the Narrative constructs human rights through the instrumental dimension of activism. As opposed to the expressive dimension of activism, which aims to reconstruct or transform societal norms and values, the instrumental dimension constructs ideas of human rights by “demanding [specific] changes in social policy aimed at political and economic institutions,” that are “directly oriented towards achieving specific goals.”¹⁰⁵ These processes spatially manifest in direct confrontation between movement actors and “existing agents, sites, and structures of power.”¹⁰⁶

As noted in the Introduction, the GND pursues long-term and short-term goals. The long-term goal obligates the federal government to stop climate change and create millions of jobs in the process, whereas the short-term goal aims to shift the scope of political discourse on climate change (in other words, push political discussion to the “Left”.) As the two relate, the short-term goal effectively acts as a means to an end for any long-term goal of implementing transformative climate policy. The distinction between the two is important, as I believe the goals have different agendas in the construction of human rights—that is, while the long-term goal agenda uses and create explicit rights discourse to substantiate political demands, the short-term goal agenda uses and creates rights discourse to challenge the structure of political power in the Democratic Party, therefore making that long-term goal more practical.

I draw out these analyses in two sections. Section 5.1-5.2 shows how the Narrative employs rights discourse to substantiate demands for those long-term goals; how these rights discourse draws from the human rights regime; and how the Narrative’s use of rights discourse may be constructing new understandings of human rights in the U.S. Section 5.3 then shows how the Narrative has used these new understandings of human rights to challenge structures of political power, and in doing so, achieved the

¹⁰⁵ Stammers, *Social Movements*, 166.

¹⁰⁶ Table 2.3

short-term goal of strengthening the voices of those advocating for “radical” climate change policy that were once marginal.

5.1: Human Rights Demands: Good Jobs and a Livable Future

Sections 5.1-2 explores “rights claims”¹⁰⁷ in the Narrative, and how they align with or acquire meaning through the human rights regime—including human rights declarations, foundational treaties, principles, Special Rapporteur Reports, and UN Agendas. I ultimately show that while the Narrative makes no references to “human rights,”¹⁰⁸ it makes plenty of claims, references, and descriptions of rights that are present in the SBR and human rights regime, yet absent within the United States legal system. This use of rights discourse, I argue, expands conceptions of human rights within activism in the United States without making specific reference to “human rights.”

The most dominant rights discourse within the Narrative is “the right to good jobs and a livable future.” These rights directly confront the “twin crises” of economic inequality and climate change, and serve as the principle messaging across all civil society platforms. Concurrently, they are integrated into the Congressional resolution in a discrete design that refrains from explicitly codifying economic and social rights, as demonstrated in the interview cited with Senator Markey.¹⁰⁹ Though the discourse depicts the right to good jobs and a livable future as a joint concept, I first aim to breakdown the substance of the rights as they can be defined separately from each other. I will then analyze how the meanings of the rights claims interact together to inform a more complex “singular right” to good jobs and a livable future, and why forming a singular right is integral to expanding conceptions of human rights in U.S.

¹⁰⁷ A claim of entitlement to a right.

¹⁰⁸ Roberts, “Sen. Ed Markey.”

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.



Image 5.1: Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez joins Sunrise protestors in November. Credit: Sunrise Movement¹¹⁰

In the Narrative, the claim to a “right to a good job” describes “good jobs” as those that provide a “living wage” or a “family sustaining wage.” The prescriptive demand here is a federal jobs guarantee, a national policy that would obligate the government to provide living wage jobs to those willing to work. The resolution details the concept of a federal jobs guarantee in the “goals and objectives section” as “guaranteeing a job with a family-sustaining wage, adequate family and medical leave, paid vacations, and retirement security to all people of the United States,”¹¹¹ ¹¹² as well as provide the necessary training for these jobs. Moreover, the federal jobs guarantee, as described in the resolution, accompanies parallel efforts to promote workers’ rights that already exist in the United States, including “strengthening and protecting the right of all workers to organize, unionize and collectively bargain” and “strengthening and enforcing labor, workplace health and safety, and antidiscrimination.”¹¹³ In all, the guarantee would

¹¹⁰ Retrieved from <https://www.commondreams.org/views/2018/11/16/green-new-deal-bring-it-dont-forget-your-union-card>

¹¹¹ U.S. Congress, *Green New Deal*, HR 109, page 12.

¹¹² The objective of the guarantee would “create high-quality union jobs that pay prevailing wages, hires local workers, offers training and advancement opportunities, and guarantees wage and benefit parity for workers affected by the transition.” (Ibid)

¹¹³ Ibid.

effectively act as a new type of legal socio-economic right that would entitle citizens to demand a living wage job from the federal government, while also strengthening existing workers' rights.

The idea of a federal jobs guarantee strongly resembles the human rights framework of the right to work, which was first enumerated in the UDHR of 1948. The Declaration, signed and drafted by the United States, says that "Everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable [sic] conditions of work and to protection against unemployment."¹¹⁴ It is added that "everyone, without any discrimination, has the right to equal pay for equal work; to just and favourable [sic] remuneration ensuring for himself and his family an existence worthy of human dignity."¹¹⁵ The right to work was also a central component of FDR's SBR, and later codified in the ICESCR as "the right of everyone to the opportunity to gain his living by work which he freely chooses or accepts,"¹¹⁶ as well as "the right of everyone to the enjoyment of just and favourable [sic] conditions of work, which ensure, in particular:" a wage that allows a "decent living for themselves and their families in accordance with the Covenant," with "equal pay for equal work," "fair and healthy working conditions," and lastly, "rest, leisure, and reasonable limitation of working hours."¹¹⁷ Moreover, the progressive realization component of the treaty obligates that "to achieve the full realization of this right shall include technical and vocational guidance and training programmes, [sic] policies, and techniques to achieve steady economic, social and cultural development and full and productive employment."¹¹⁸

As evidence shows, the "right to work" encompasses more provisions than the concept of the right to work freely, but serves as an effective protection against unemployment and unfair working conditions (including unfair pay, discrimination, unhealthy atmospheres, overworking, etc.) The core idea,

¹¹⁴ United Nations General Assembly, "Universal Declaration of Human Rights," December 10, 1948, Article 23, Section 3.

¹¹⁵ Ibid, Art 23, Sec. 2

¹¹⁶ United Nations General Assembly, "International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights," December 16, 1996, Article 6, Section 1.

¹¹⁷ Ibid, Article 7.

¹¹⁸ Ibid, Article 6, Section 2.

therefore, of the GND “right to good jobs” as it relates to the human rights “right to work,” aims to equip workers with the right to access living wage jobs, so that they have the economic means to attain a life worth living: a decent and dignified life. In this respect, the right to good jobs and the right to work are, very basically, a baseline means to living. This rationale is best related by Congresswoman Ocasio-Cortez’s in her remark, “I can tell you that most people want to be paid enough to live. A living wage isn’t a gift, it’s a right.”¹¹⁹ Essentially, the conversation of the living wage in the Narrative spotlights the fundamental purpose of human rights to promote an “existence worthy of human dignity.” Lacing these two ideas together—living wages and human dignity—we see the case for the GND as essential for human wellbeing.

Additionally, we see how the Narrative integrates the human rights principles of non-discrimination, equality and participation in the discourse on the right to good jobs, with a strong emphasis on providing jobs to FVC. Sunrise Movement co-founder Evan Weber stated, “by including this provision around a job guarantee, we can say that no matter what community you live in, or what your job currently is, it has the ability to diversify local and regional economies and assist with a just transition.”¹²⁰ The resolution additionally calls to “prioritizing high-quality job creation, and economic, social, and environmental benefits in frontline and vulnerable communities.”¹²¹ These provisions clarify that though good jobs should be available to everyone who desires one, they should be also concentrated on those communities who have been historically left out of federal investment in job creation by virtue of their identity—identity classes that align with groups protected under human rights regimes (like women, young people, disabled persons, elderly persons, indigenous persons and migrant communities.)

¹¹⁹ Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Twitter post, February 26, 2019, 2:37pm, twitter.com/AOC.

¹²⁰ Bozuwa et al., “Shift to a New Economy.”

¹²¹ U.S. Congress, *Green New Deal*, HR 109, page 11.

Additionally, the Narrative outlines rights-based principles of participation in the processes of job creation—as Congresswoman Ocasio-Cortez asserts, the GND mobilization must be led by “everyday people, workers, and frontline communities.”¹²² This provision is strongly substantiated in the resolution, which outlines an objective “ensuring the use of democratic and participatory processes that are inclusive of and led by frontline and vulnerability communities and workers to plan, implement and administer the GND mobilization at the local level,”¹²³ and supplemented in the provision allowing for citizens to benefit financially from their participation in building up the local economy: asserting that the “public receives appropriate ownership stakes and returns on investment.”¹²⁴ These sentiments, I would argue, fulfill the participation principle of Agenda 2030, which prioritizes decision-making power for people in community development projects.¹²⁵

Ultimately, this analysis shows that the Narrative’s conception of a “right to a good job” reconstructs human rights through aligning with principles of the human right to work and the human rights principles. The Narrative therefore sets the stage for an unprecedented public culture of work in American society, where a job may be a legal entitlement to any person of any background, and where that job must be “good:” providing a family-sustaining wage, safe and fair working conditions, equal pay for equal work, adequate leisure and paid vacation time, vocational/educational training, and retirement security, all while strengthening workers’ rights that already exist. Moreover, this policy must be implemented with specific attention to and leadership from FVC, particularly those struggling economically *and* whose current employment will be negatively affected by the GND’s transition away from non-renewable energy sources.

¹²² MSNBC, “Rep. Ocasio-Cortez.”

¹²³ U.S. Congress, *Green New Deal*, HR 109, page 12.

¹²⁴ *Ibid*, 10.

¹²⁵ United Nations General Assembly, “Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda For Sustainable Development A/Res/70/1,” adopted on September 25, 2015.

Throughout the Narrative, the discourse that focuses on the “right to a livable future” is less comprehensive than the right to good jobs. The phrase of a “livable future” carries a human rights dimension because it contains detectable references to interdependent rights: the right to life, which is well-established in the United States constitution and the human rights foundational texts, as well as the right to a habitable environment, which has been outright rejected in the United States court system and awaits a long journey to codification in the human rights framework. Moreover, the Narrative extends the right to a livable future to future generations, which, for all intents and purposes, are unprecedented legal demands even within the human rights regime. For these reasons, the Narrative of the right to a livable future cannot be grounded in one central human right as has been done for the right to work, but should be understood as a messaging tool that appropriates rights language to construct notions about how people access interdependent rights.

In order to draw the conclusions as laid out above, we must first look at how the Narrative discusses the right to a livable future. I have found no discourse that describes the right to a livable future in substantial depth; rather, the plethora of references to “livable futures” typically act as soundbites. Instead, I find that the right acquires meaning in (1) its interchangeable use with the “right to a stable climate” or a “habitable environment,” and also in (2) its evocation of intergenerational justice.

For example, in a promotional video for Sunrise, the Sunrise members noticeably exchange discourse of livable futures with that of stable climates. They state, “No matter the color of your skin, where your parents are from, or how much money you make, you are entitled to basic rights: to a good job transforming our country; to clean air, water and food; and to a stable climate able to sustain human civilization.”¹²⁶ They then demand politicians to “preserve the stable climate that human civilization has

¹²⁶ NowThisNews, “Why We Need Alexandria Ocasio Cortez’s Green New Deal | Opinions | Now This,” YouTube video, 3:23, February 16, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kZtmwWglw0k>.

depended on for millennia.”¹²⁷ The resolution similarly makes no mention of “livable futures,” but, in its provisions, aims “to secure for all people of the United States for generations to come... ‘a sustainable environment’ and ‘climate and community resiliency.’”¹²⁸

In this respect, that the Narrative demands a right to a *future* environment free from physical endangerment serves as a sort of anticipation of the crisis of climate change, which as elaborated on earlier, threatens ecological stability, and along with it “all of humanity and most forms of life with certain extinction.”¹²⁹ As discussed in Chapter 4, the Narrative also establishes a moral imperative to promote intergenerational justice, and protect young people and future generations’ access to rights in the future. In this vein, because the youth are fighting for their lives, the Narrative establishes “young people” as the primary rightsholder of livable futures. Thus, one could assume that the “the right to a livable future” cohesively captures the “right to a stable climate” as well as the prioritization of rights of young people and future generations.

Moreover, it seems that the focus on the right to a *livable* future benefits the Narrative because it appropriates the dominant American legal tradition of civil and political rights. As is true in both United States constitutional law and the human rights regime, rights to the environment and rights of younger/future generations are not written into the foundational legal texts whereas rights to life are. Cases seeking to legally obligate the federal government to mitigate climate change have succeeded on the claim that climate change inflicts on the fundamental right to life, liberty, property, as opposed to the claim that unstable climate systems violate younger generation’s rights to equal protection under the law. for future rights to.¹³⁰ One could then reason that the Narrative prioritizes the adjective “livable” in livable futures to encompass the protected constitutional rights codified into the United States legal

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ U.S. Congress, *Green New Deal*, HR 109, page 5.

¹²⁹ Gunn-Wright and Hockett, *Green New Deal*, 13.

¹³⁰ We see this in the playout of landmark climate cases in the United States court system today—for example, the pending federal case *Juliana v. United States*, which is seeking to legally obligate the federal government to mitigate climate change.

system and culture at large—another example of how the Narrative accentuates American Exceptionalism.

So what information does the discourse on “livable futures” construct as it relates to human rights in general? I believe that the discourse constructs the most fundamental understanding of what human rights are: an intermix of different rights attributed to all members of humanity across time and space, *not* merely a hierarchy of rights. In this respect, the right to a livable future importantly makes no reference to any one right in the American or international public consciousness. It forces people to interplay the words “livable” and “future,” and contemplate how different aspects of the environment in the future may impede access to rights. Going off this observation, I see the Narrative’s attempt to construct a cohesive right that brings together a range of different rights also resembling the struggles within the international community to institutionalize a rights-based approach to dealing with climate change.

We see this urgency unfolding today in the human rights community. Currently, there is strong momentum to institute a right to a sustainable environment within the UN. In the summer of 2018, the Special Rapporteur on the issue of human rights obligations relating to the enjoyment of a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment issued an official recommendation to the UN General Assembly to “recognize the human right to a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment.”¹³¹ Furthermore, in alignment with human rights advocates working on the issue of climate change, the OHCHR stresses the human rights principle of interdependency, stating that “all human beings depend on the environment in which we live,” and that “a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment is integral to the full enjoyment of a wide range of human rights, including the rights to life, health, food, water, and

¹³¹ Jonathan Watts, “UN moves towards recognising human right to a health environment,” *The Guardian*, March 9, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/mar/09/un-moves-towards-recognising-human-right-to-a-healthy-environment>.

sanitation.¹³² Within the regime already, the UN General Assembly Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights advocates for a human rights based approach to climate change, which has materialized in the Preamble of the widely-accepted 2030 UN Agenda (the Sustainable Development Goals).¹³³

There are also some human rights claims to intergenerational justice that can be sparsely found within the international human rights regime. Principle 1 of the Declaration of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment of 1972 states: “Man has the fundamental right to freedom, equality and adequate conditions of life, in an environments of a quality that permits a life of dignity and well-being, and he bears a solemn responsibility to protect and improve the environment for present and future generations.”¹³⁴ Agenda 2030, which purports to be guided by human rights, describes the SDGs as for “the full benefit of all, for today’s generations and for future generations.”¹³⁵ And in the Special Rapporteur report cited above, the Rapporteur concludes that, “Given the importance of clean air, safe water, healthy ecosystems and a stable climate to the ability of both current and future generations to lead healthy and fulfilling lives, global recognition of the right to a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment should be regarded as an urgent moral imperative.”¹³⁶

Overall, we can see that where the United States has resisted innovative perspectives on new rights by instead opting for the hierarchal approach that favors civil and political rights, human rights bodies have urged the international community to consider the nuances of rights as they go *beyond* the fundamental right to life, liberty, and property —namely, the role that a right to a sustainable environment could play in strengthening the protection of a stable climate, the need to protect human rights in pursuit of sustainable development as well as advocacy for the rights of younger and future

¹³² United Nations Office of the High Commissioner, “Special Rapporteur on human rights and the environment,” Environment, accessed April 1, 2019, <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Environment/SREnvironment/Pages/SREnvironmentIndex.aspx>.

¹³³ UN General Assembly, Preamble in “Agenda 2030.”

¹³⁴ United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, “Declaration of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment,” June 16, 1972.

¹³⁵ UN General Assembly, Preamble in “Agenda 2030.”

¹³⁶ UN Conference on Human Environment, “Declaration.”

generations. So ultimately, the human rights regime has engaged in more serious conversation of rights as they relate to the environment than the United States government, and the Narrative of livable futures, by integrating the concept of a right to a stable climate and intergenerational justice, echoes this human rights capacity to deeply consider how relates relate and effect each other, and structure a more complex role that rights should play in combatting climate change.

As I have explored this theme of interdependency as situated *within* the right to a livable future, I would also purport that the theme extends to interdependency *across* the rights invoked in the Narrative, namely, the right to good jobs. Structuring a right around the basic concept of *livable* futures in fact resembles the parallel objective of the right to good jobs—that is, to acquire the economic means to *live* with security and dignity on a day-to-day basis (several “values” laid out in Chapter 4.)¹³⁷ The placement of the two rights together shape a comprehensive messaging framework (“the *right* to good jobs and a livable future), with the underlying focus on a sustainable approach to living amidst the economic crisis that effects a large majority of people every day, and the increasing ecological one, which will *grow* to have massive implications for the way everyone lives. The rights then aim towards the same objective of having a dignified life, but can be differentiated in their temporal application.

5.2: Human Rights Demands: Adequate Standard of Living

The Narrative also demands a range of other socio-economic human rights that contribute interdependent meaning to the right to good jobs and livable futures. These demands reflect the human rights to an adequate standard of living, the right to health, and the right to education, and they respond to the “layered crises” as outlined in Section 4.1, which include “life expectancy declining while basic *needs*, such as clean air, clean water, healthy food, and adequate health care, housing, transportation,

¹³⁷ We see this theme revisiting Congresswoman Ocasio-Cortez’s tweet, where she says, “I can tell you that most people want to be paid enough to *live*.” (See Footnote 119)

and education, are inaccessible to a significant portion of the United States.”¹³⁸ Though these rights are not central to the messaging of the Narrative to the extent that good jobs and livable futures are, they supplement the Narrative of transitioning towards a more *livable* society, where all people have access to important resources that make life dignified. It is also important to note that while the Narrative does not make a cohesive consensus on whether these layered crises all entail explicit rights claims as opposed to “needs,” Markey’s insight about discretely drafting of rights into the resolution provides us with the clarity to interpret these “needs” as rights.¹³⁹

In a few instances, the Narrative has invoked rights claims for clean air, water, and food, healthy communities, affordable, safe, and adequate housing and health care—claims that all strongly resemble the human rights framework of the right to an adequate standard of living and the right to health. In an interview, Evan Weber stated that the GND ensures that everyone “has a right to clean water, has a right to clean air, [and] has a right to good food and healthy communities.”¹⁴⁰ Prior and separate to the inauguration of the GND, Congresswoman Ocasio-Cortez has also advocated for both housing and health care as a “human right” in her campaign platform, which the Justice Democrats helped shape.¹⁴¹ ¹⁴² This discourse is replicated in the resolution, which advocates for providing “access to clean water, clean air, healthy and affordable food,” “affordable, safe, and adequate housing,” “high-quality health care,” and “access to nature” to all people.¹⁴³

Though social and health services exist in the United States today, the issue is that many people do not have *access* to these services and, at times when people do receive the benefits of these services,

¹³⁸ U.S. Congress, *Green New Deal*, HR 109, page 3.

¹³⁹ Roberts, “Sen. Ed Markey.”

¹⁴⁰ Bozuwa et al., “Shift to a New Economy.”

¹⁴¹ “Alexandria Ocasio Cortez’s Platform,” Housing as a Human Right, Ocasio2018, <https://ocasio2018.com/issues#housing-as-a-human-right>.

¹⁴² Alyssa Bailey, “Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez: Trump Can’t Deal With a Girl From the Bronx,” *Elle*, June 29, 2019, <https://www.elle.com/culture/career-politics/a21999812/alexandria-ocasio-cortez-stephen-colbert-appearance/>.

¹⁴³ U.S. Congress, *Green New Deal*, HR 109, page 13-14.

it is oftentimes of inadequate nature. Still, that the federal government provides these services imply that disadvantaged classes of people are entitled to them. Drawing off this point and Markey's insight, the Narrative is not calling on the codification of these rights, but rather invoking rights in order to put pressure on the federal government to implement *better* policy that consistently and reliably secures equal access to food, water, housing, healthy communities, and health care.

In playing out this messaging, the Narrative use of rights discourse on adequate standards of living and health reflects ideas found in the UDHR and the ICESCR. With regard to the right of an adequate standard of living and the right to health, the UDHR says that "Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services."¹⁴⁴ The ICESCR would later go onto differentiate rights to an adequate standard of living and health, outlining the former as "the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living for himself and his family, including adequate food, clothing and housing, and to the continuous improvement of living conditions," and the latter as "the right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health" including "the improvement of all aspects of environmental and industrial hygiene" and "the creation of conditions which would assure to all medical service and medical attention in the event of sickness."¹⁴⁵

Here, we can see how the human rights regime groups a range of rights to material items and health services into progressively improving "standards of *living*" as well as critical health services that keep people *alive*. The underlying objective is clear yet again: to sustain human life that is dignified. Thus, to the extent that the Narrative establishes basic needs as integral to sustaining life, it is also constructing ideas about human rights-- that people deserve to live, that access to a good standard of living should not be conceived of as a privilege, but as an inherent right. Moreover, that the Narrative makes a point about

¹⁴⁴ UN General Assembly, "UDHR," Article 25.

¹⁴⁵ UN General Assembly, "ICESCR," Articles 11-12.

how basic access to needs relating to adequate standards of living and health are in decline, it also constructs ideas about progressive realization. In this vein, the Narrative presumes that the richest nation in the world should be aiming to improve life for all of its people over time. To remain ambivalent in face of these challenges is a failure on behalf of the government to play an active role in the betterment of living conditions.

The Narrative lastly implements a human rights discourse on the topic of education. While I have not found any discourse coming from leaders of the movement that outright claims a right to education, Senator Ocasio-Cortez has advocated for tuition-free public college and trade school in her election campaign, and we see these demands reflected in the resolution. With regard to higher education, it calls on “providing resources, training, and high-quality education, including higher education, to all people of the US, with a focus on frontline communities,”¹⁴⁶ and with specific regard to trade school, it aims to “offer training and advancement opportunities... for workers affected by the transition.”¹⁴⁷ Though the Narrative has not explicitly invoked a right to higher education, the provision of free college and trade school would depart from the current conditions of education in the United States today, whereby the large majority of college students lack access to college, or are graduating with debilitating amounts of debt.

In this respect, the Narrative’s language on education aligns with the UDHR and the ICESCR to the extent that it advocates for equal access to higher education as a means to effectively participate and contribute to society. The UDHR introduces the right as follows: “everyone has the right to education,” and states that “higher education shall be made equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.”¹⁴⁸ The ICESCR says that “education shall enable all persons to participate effectively in a free society,” and

¹⁴⁶ U.S. Congress, *Green New Deal*, HR 109, page 11.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 12.

¹⁴⁸ UN General Assembly, “UDHR,” Article 26.

highlights the responsibility of the government to progressively aim for equally accessible higher education, stating that “higher education shall be made equally accessible to all, on the basis of capacity, by every appropriate means, and in particular by the progressive introduction of free education.”¹⁴⁹ It is therefore clear how the Narrative, which calls on “training and advancing opportunities” alongside within GND policies, constructs human rights ideas of education as a tool to participate in society and advance socio-economic mobility.

Sections 5.1-5.2 have thoroughly outlined how the Narrative constructs human rights within the limitations of American Exceptionalism. While there is an understanding that the United States will not be codifying economic and social rights into its legal system, the Narrative still draws ideas from human rights regimes in order to frame certain provisions for economic and social security. This resonates in the explicit rights claim for a “right to a livable future and good jobs,” as well as the less explicit focus on improving standards of living in the U.S. As demonstrated, these demands would change the structure of U.S. society by unprecedented lengths; it’s therefore compelling to look at how these demands are unfolding in the political context. In other words, how are people *reacting* to these demands? It’s my belief that the reactions already demonstrate a shift in thinking about ideas of human rights.

5.3: Claiming Political Power Through Narrative

Alongside using rights-discourse to demand the federal government to implement the GND, instrumental activism has also achieved a peripheral, short-term goal: to effectively create a new politics of climate change. This shifting of politics has moved political discussion from debating modest low-impact forms of climate policy, like carbon taxes, to high-impact transformative policy that would actually

¹⁴⁹ UN General Assembly, “ICESCR,” Art 13.

meet the crisis of climate change in strength and scope.¹⁵⁰ It has also given media spotlight to climate change where there was once none.¹⁵¹

I believe that this translation of the construction of rights discourse into political and media spotlight is playing out in how the Narrative directly confronts the political power of the Democratic Party. Through developing a “No Fossil Fuel Money” pledge for candidates leading up to the 2018 midterm and 2020 elections, staging sit-ins in the offices of prominent Representatives and Senators (like House Leader Nancy Pelosi, Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer, and Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell), and “birddogging” (“publicly asking politicians direct questions about their stance on the Deal, forcing them to choose a side on record”)¹⁵², the Sunrise Movement has effectively created a litmus test for progressive climate advocates. The Democrats that support the Deal are lauded on the Sunrise social media platform, while those that do not are publicly shamed.

The most famous example of shaming occurred in response to the birddogging encounter that went viral between establishment Democrat Senator Diane Feinstein of California and a group of Sunrise protestors ranging from ages 7-16. On February 22 2019, children of California visited Senator Feinstein’s office to ask her to support the GND in the Senate vote.¹⁵³ She replied that “that resolution will not pass the Senate. And you can take that back to whoever sent you here,” calling the plan unrealistic, telling the children that “you didn’t vote for me,” and urging the children to consider looking at her “own” GND bill. The media responded immediately, with many people chastising the Senator for her demeaning tone; the encounter gained such notoriety that Saturday Night Live reenacted it in a comedy skit the following weekend. In response to the encounter, a leader of Sunrise wrote an official statement that read: “I can’t

¹⁵⁰ Jon Weiner, “Naomi Klein: The Green New Deal Is Changing the Calculus of the Possible,” *The Nation*, February 22, 2019, <https://www.thenation.com/article/naomi-klein-green-new-deal-climate-change/>.

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¹⁵² Sunrise Movement Homepage, <https://www.sunrisemovement.org/>.

¹⁵³ Guardian News, “Dianne Feinstein rebuffs young climate activists’ calls for Green New Deal,” YouTube video, 3:17, February 23, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jEPo34LCss8>.

believe our senator just looked a room full of children in the eyes and told them that she does not support the only plan that will provide them a livable future.”¹⁵⁴ Senator Feinstein, by clearly failing to meet the political standard certification of the Sunrise Movement, was, in effect, pressured by more conservative environmental organizations like the Sierra Club to refrain from introducing her more moderate climate policy.¹⁵⁵

This encounter demonstrates how Sunrise’s political mobilization of young people exerted political influence over a person in extreme power, and also prevented the introduction of a more moderate bill into Democratic debate. In the process of this public shaming, Sunrise weaved conceptions of rights discourse into the political standard—most visibly seen in the reference to “livable futures.” In this example, moreover, it is integral to revisit the discussion in Chapter 4.3—that the youth identity colors the political framing of protest and rights claims. They recognize that while they do not have the political rights to pressure decision-makers with their vote, they possess a unique moral authority. It becomes clear then how the youth members have elevated the political power of their voices in political spaces.

The right to good jobs and livable futures has also materially infiltrated Capitol Hill: as mentioned in the Introduction and Section 5.2, during the first sit-in in Nancy Pelosi’s office, which boasted over 1,000 protestors and brought the GND into mainstream media, the majority of the protestors wore shirts that read, “we have a right to good jobs and a livable future.”¹⁵⁶ Thus, to the extent that the media has flocked to cover the GND, we also can presume that constructions of human rights become integrated into that same mainstream coverage, pushing ideas of human rights into the mainstream.

¹⁵⁴ Claudia Koerner, “These Kids Demanded Senator Feinstein Support The Green New Deal But Got A Very Blunt Rebuttal Instead,” *BuzzFeed News*, February 22, 2019, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/claudiakoerner/senator-feinstein-children-green-new-deal>.

¹⁵⁵ Aída Chávez and Ryan Grim, “The Viral Confrontation With Dianne Feinstein Had A Political Impact Most Pundits Missed,” *The Intercept*, March 1, 2019, <https://theintercept.com/2019/03/01/dianne-feinstein-green-new-deal-sunrise-movement/>.

¹⁵⁶ Sunrise Movement, “1000+ youth sit-in.”

This phenomenon has certainly contributed to the shifting of power relations, not just as illustrated between youth and adults, but within the Democratic Party. As noted in Section 2.1, Congresswoman Ocasio-Cortez has effectively served as a bridge between the “informal” social movement and the “formal” political establishment. Her willingness to create wedges within the established Democratic party represents a departure from the entrenched partisan lines on climate change.¹⁵⁷ Here, she describes the perceived effect she has had on the Party. Responding to critics of the GND, she said in an interview:

“I’m trying and you’re not. So until you do it, I’m the boss. *The power is in the person who’s trying, regardless of the success.* If you’re trying, you’ve got all the power, you’re driving the agenda... Green New Deal is creating all of this conversation. Why? Because no one else has even tried. So people are like oh it’s unrealistic, oh its vague, oh it doesn’t address this one thing. And I’m like you try. You do it. Because you’re not.”¹⁵⁸

Ocasio-Cortez alludes here that acquiring media and political attention on the GND is form of power because it directs the “agenda,” and moreover, that this power is triumphant over inaction. This idea holds truth in light of the current development of the GND. While many critics continue to dismiss it¹⁵⁹, and Republicans attempt to sabotage the resolution,¹⁶⁰ the truth of the matter is that attention is not letting loose on climate change policy and the GND. In fact, due to the GND Narrative, climate change has emerged as a central 2020 election issue.¹⁶¹ The Narrative has therefore instilled the sense that action on climate change is inevitable— a sentiment cemented into U.S. electorate at large.¹⁶² Whether that climate action will adapt to those human rights principles of justice represents the overarching obstacle of the movement.

¹⁵⁷ Grim and Gray, “Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez Joins Environmental Activists.”

¹⁵⁸ NowThis News, “Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez Fires Back at Green New Deal Haters | Now This,” YouTube video, 3:00, February 26, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SgvFf5Irywc>.

¹⁵⁹ David Roberts, “Fox News has united the right against the Green new Deal. The left remains divided,” *Vox*, April 22, 2019, <https://www.vox.com/energy-and-environment/2019/4/22/18510518/green-new-deal-fox-news-poll>.

¹⁶⁰ Susan Davis, “Senate Blocks Green New Deal, But Climate Change Emerges as Key 2020 Issue,” *WBUR News*, March 26, 2019, <https://www.wbur.org/npr/705897344/green-new-deal-vote-sets-up-climate-change-as-key-2020-issue>.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁶² McElwee, “People Actually Like the Green New Deal.”

Chapter 6. Conclusion

Ultimately, this paper has documented the range of ideas related to human rights in the GND Narrative. I've shown that the Narrative is more than about mitigating climate change, but about reconstructing conceptions of economic and social rights in the United States. This plays out in the Narrative's reference of FDR's Second Bill of Rights as a "birthright," its invocation of socio-economic rights like the right to good jobs, and also its call to a "new" human right of a livable future. The Narrative attributes social meaning by constructing them *expressively* as emblematic of American values of security, equality, prosperity, and dignity, and *instrumentally* as essential to human survival. By situating the United States at a point of moral crossroads, the Narrative has also successfully capitalized on the historical memory of the New Deal era and catered to a patriotic sentiment aligned with American Exceptionalism. In constructing human rights as so, the Narrative has acted as creative praxis for human rights in the United States.

The power struggles that play out in GND activism will continue to reveal the strength of the movement. Thus far, the Narrative has successfully placed a wedge within the Democratic Party on the topic of climate change, "forcing" politicians to publicly choose their stance on climate policy—this in effect, has shifted the Party to the Left on climate change, and redefined what policies are considered to be "progressive" or "moderate." Moreover, the Narrative has also planted ideas of socio-cultural reclamations of power, placing a moral authority in youth through questioning the power of "adults" and the government, while also promoting a "power to the people" message that promotes government *investment* in humans as opposed to *exploitation* of humans. As time progresses, the movement will need to continue to challenge arbitrary forms of power to keep up the momentum on justice-based climate action.

When looking at the Narrative in perspective, it is clear that the Green New Deal has achieved what many social movements only hope for. In this respect, we must continue to pay attention to how the GND embeds human rights into the Narrative. After all, whether people consuming the media and political news are actively aware of whether human rights are embedded into the GND message is not necessarily critical here—what’s important is that, because of the GND, *ideas* that relate to human rights are being brought into the mainstream: there are images circulating of young people wearing shirts and holding signs for the “right to good jobs and a livable future;” Democratic presidential contenders are running their campaigns on concepts once perceived to be outlandish, like intergenerational justice,¹⁶³ and, most importantly, social and economic justice are now normalized talking points of climate policy discussions. With all the signs pointing towards climate change as a central issue in the U.S. presidential campaigning trail, the GND is rounding up to be an extremely compelling movement for human rights scholars, sociologists, and concerned citizens alike to watch in the coming few years.

¹⁶³ Savannah Smith, “Pete Buttigieg wants ‘intergenerational justice.’ What’s that?” *NBC News*, March 9, 2019, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/2020-election/pete-buttigieg-wants-intergenerational-justice-what-s-n978316>.

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Appendix A: Definitions

- Grassroots organization: an organization that mobilizes ordinary people, and does much of its operations on the ground.
- Moral Authority: the authority to speak on an issue by virtue of position.
- Neoliberalism: a political and economic philosophy, which posits that “free markets” and less government regulation will distribute the greatest amount of prosperity to the greatest amount of people.
- Political Economy: an area that concerns the intersection of political and economic structures
- Public Consciousness: the collective awareness of a group.
- Social Movement: the coordination of people and organizations towards achieving a social change.

Appendix B: Abbreviations

- GND: Green New Deal
- FVC: Frontline and vulnerable communities
- GER: Global economic restructuring
- SBR: Second Bill of Rights