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**Human Rights as Cultural Globalization:  
The Rise of Human Rights in Textbooks, 1890-2013\***

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**Abstract.** Although it wasn't always the case, human rights education (HRE) is now routinely celebrated in curricula and classrooms worldwide. In this chapter we first briefly review the evolution of HRE into a core concern for the international community and mainstream facet of mass schooling. Second, we provide an overview of common theoretical and methodological approaches and central themes in the academic scholarship on HRE, with an emphasis on school textbooks. In the final sections of the chapter, we turn to an under-studied aspect of the HRE phenomenon and a promising area for future research; namely, explaining why HRE has become so prevalent worldwide. To this end, we present new empirical evidence documenting the expansion of human rights discussions in textbooks worldwide over the twentieth century.

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## **Human Rights as Cultural Globalization: The Rise of Human Rights in Textbooks, 1890-2013**

Today the topic of human rights, and attendant values and skills, are routinely celebrated in schools. Although it wasn't always the case, human rights education (HRE) is now relatively common in curricula and classrooms around the world. In this chapter we first briefly review the evolution of HRE into a core concern for the international community and mainstream facet of mass schooling. We then offer an overview of common theoretical and methodological approaches and central themes in the academic scholarship on HRE, with a particular emphasis on work addressing the incorporation of human rights and related topics into school textbooks. In the final sections of the chapter, we turn to an under-studied aspect of the HRE phenomenon and a promising area for future research; namely, explaining why HRE has become so prevalent worldwide. To this end, we present new empirical evidence documenting the striking expansion of human rights discussions in textbooks worldwide over the whole twentieth century. Overall, HRE is best understood as a cultural phenomenon that has emerged in two phases: First, there was period of institutionalization in the years leading up to and in the wake of the two World Wars. A second period of rapid diffusion began in the 1990s with the end of the Cold War and entrenchment of neoliberal ideologies.

### **Background: The Rise of Human Rights Education**

The horrors of World War II had a major impact on the global human rights regime, which intensified dramatically in the post-war years, spearheaded by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) set forth in 1948. The development of HRE is intimately tied to

expansions in the scope of this regime over the second half of the twentieth century. During this time period, global human rights visions came to articulate human rights protections for a growing range of persons (e.g., children, women, minorities). In addition, they were transformed from a narrow legal emphasis into a broader social one, with an expanding array of social problems understood as human rights concerns and human rights foci incorporated into social institutions writ large (Elliott 2007). As part of these developments, and reflecting the growing importance of education as a social institution, human rights became an educational issue. A global curricular movement dedicated to HRE emerged and HRE organizations, publications, and programs proliferated tremendously (Suárez 2007; Ramirez, Suárez & Meyer 2007).

A critical early step in the evolution of HRE into a core concern for the international community came through its inclusion in the 1948 UDHR. Soon after, driven by a firm belief that ‘since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that defences of peace must be constructed’, the founders of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) took formal steps to spread teaching about human rights in schools internationally (ASPnet 2003, p. 5). In 1953 the Scheme of Co-ordinated Experimental Activities in Schools of Member States, as it was called at the time, was established to encourage the development of national education in accordance with UDHR principles (1952 UNESCO General Conference Resolution 1.341, quoted in ASPnet 2003, p. 5). The initial convening in Paris included 21 experts representing 33 secondary schools in 15 countries (ASPnet 2003, p. 7). Today the UNESCO Associated Schools Project, as it is now called, has multiplied into a global network of 10,000 educational institutions in 181 countries (UNESCO 2015; see also Suárez, Ramirez, & Koo 2009).

Until the 1990s, the expanding Associated Schools Project remained the centerpiece of UNESCO's human rights education activities. But in the 1990s, with the end of the Cold War and collapse of the Soviet Union, new opportunities for more global cooperation emerged and other HRE efforts multiplied rapidly. The United Nations (UN) established a decade for HRE starting in 1995 and continued with this work through the World Programme for Human Rights Education run by the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). This program promotes HRE across all levels of education (primary through tertiary) and for a range of participants (from educators and state officials to law enforcement and military) (OHCHR 2015). Beyond UN efforts, HRE activities became a growing focus for non-governmental organizations (NGOs). New NGOs dedicated to the issue were established and existing human rights NGOs, such as Amnesty International, integrated HRE into their programs and strategies (Suárez & Ramirez 2007). Today, the topic of HRE has received a renewed emphasis as part of the Sustainable Development Goals, which aim to ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills to promote sustainable development, including through HRE. The following section, which surveys the field of academic studies pertaining to HRE, offers insight into the incorporation of HRE into national education curricula.

### **Surveying the Field: Studies of Human Rights Education**

The proliferation of HRE efforts has been reflected in a substantial academic literature on the topic. Here, we first present an overview of HRE scholarship and then delve into a particular strand more extensively: academic studies of the treatment of human rights in national textbooks and curricula. The dominant theme in the literature on HRE pertains to the development of pedagogical approaches and definitions (for example, Tibbitts 2002; Bajaj 2011). Early on,

Tarrow (1987) distinguished between education *as* a human right and education *about* human rights. Others have emphasized education *for* human rights, defining HRE as teaching young people to promote human rights and related elements of peace, justice, and tolerance (Flowers 2000; Osler & Starkey 2010). Synthesizing several approaches, Tibbitts (2002) identified three models of HRE, each associated with particular target groups, content, and strategies – the Values and Awareness Model, the Accountability Model, and the Transformational Model. The three models underscore the multiplicity of goals underpinning HRE as a whole, including the transmission of knowledge and values, training in the protection of human rights, and individual human empowerment. In a contemporary examination of the field, Bajaj (2011) identified two areas of broad agreement among scholars and practitioners. First, HRE includes both content and process (see, for example, Tibbitts 2005). Second, and related, HRE should also aim to foster particular values and produce action (see, for instance, Flowers 2000). In this spirit, the vast majority of HRE scholarship is dedicated to refining teaching theories and practices, often via case analyses of particular programs or countries.

A notable research strand, however, zooms in on national textbooks and curricula to understand how the topic of human rights has been incorporated into school materials. Much of this literature consists of rich and primarily qualitative country case studies and small-n comparisons (see e.g. Firer 1998; Karaman-Kepenekci 2005; Suárez 2008; Moon & Koo 2011). But in recent years, cross-national, quantitative studies of textbook data have emerged to complement case research (Ramirez, Bromley, & Russell 2009; Meyer, Bromley, & Ramirez 2010; Russell & Tiplic 2013). Collectively, this scholarship signals a dramatic rise in human rights discussions in textbooks in recent decades. For instance, a quantitative study of 465 textbooks from 69

countries published between 1970 and 2008 found that while only one fifth of textbooks published prior to 1995 discussed human rights, almost half of the books in the sample did so in the years from 1995 to 2008 (Meyer, Bromley, and Ramirez 2010). Additionally, there is evidence that historical events are today depicted in terms of human rights: for example, Bromley and Russell (2010) find that textbooks around the world increasingly frame discussions of the Holocaust in terms of human rights violations. Many qualitative studies that incorporate a longitudinal angle point to similar findings. In an analysis of South Korean civics textbooks between 1981 and 2004, Moon and Koo (2011) find that material on human rights began to appear in their sampled books in the 1990s. Similarly, Suárez (2008) identifies increased discussions of human rights in a sample of civics textbooks from Argentina and Costa Rica in the past two decades. Rich qualitative case studies highlight tensions and complexities around this growing incorporation of human rights in textbooks. For instance, human rights are often (and perhaps increasingly) presented as abstract concepts, de-coupled from local social problems, with human rights violations highlighted elsewhere, but not at home. In a study of Israeli textbooks, Firer (1998) finds that human rights issues are presented in “objective language” that made no reference to “the problems of minorities and their significance for Israel” (198).

While selected textbook studies have focused exclusively on human rights, the topic is often studied in relation to the question of how textbooks more broadly incorporate multicultural and cosmopolitan, rather than exclusively nation-based, notions of citizenship. Indeed, there is a sizeable related literature on textbook narrations of diversity rights, centering for example on gender and women (Blumberg 2008; Nakagawa & Wotipka 2016), minorities (Yamada 2011; Çayır 2015), and refugees and immigrants (Hintermann et al. 2014). Despite growing

incorporation of diversity rights into textbooks in all world regions (Terra & Bromley 2012), a persistent theme in the literature is that this incorporation has been uneven. For instance, a quantitative study found that minority rights were emphasized more in liberal democracies (Bromley 2014). And in-depth qualitative studies across world regions continue to find patterns of omission and stereotyping of marginalized population groups, notwithstanding increasing coverage of diversity rights (see the studies cited above for various groups). Beyond scholarship focusing directly on (human) rights, textbook studies of global and region-based citizenship offer additional insights, as these citizenship notions tend to embrace human rights principles (see e.g. Keating 2009; Buckner & Russell 2013).

Despite this growing literature on HRE pedagogies and incorporations into school materials, relatively little work is dedicated to understanding *why* HRE developed into such a prominent worldwide emphasis in curricula and classrooms, a point to which we now turn.

### **A Remaining Puzzle: Explaining Human Rights Education**

In contrast to the extensive focus on applications of human rights in curricula and teaching, the question of why we see the rise of HRE has received little attention. This gap exists because it is typically taken-for-granted that HRE will change student attitudes and actions in ways that promote the creation of a more just and peaceful world; with this baseline assumption the answer to why HRE expands is obvious. However, two features of HRE suggest there is more to the story. First, there is little systematic evidence that HRE contributes to its ultimate goal of contributing to a more just and peaceful world – and it is implausible to design research to definitively show an overall causal connection using current social science methodologies.

Naturally, many factors that play into transgressing human rights principles rest far outside the scope of classroom control. Due to the complex causes of human rights violations, the possibility for developing causal evidence linking any one HRE program to subsequent events seems unrealistic. Instead, HRE rests on a deep faith that it is plausible a causal link exists (or, at a minimum, that it is morally correct to provide HRE regardless of ultimate impact). Second, the diffusion of HRE is decoupled from any particular context where it might seem most needed. HRE expands worldwide following World War II rather than emerging in specific local situations. In view of these considerations, it bears asking why HRE has expanded. This question is particularly salient because many countries still struggle with basics like literacy and numeracy, and others face intense pressure to improve subjects like math and science. In the face of competing demands on schools, including intense pressure to prepare students for specific jobs, why has HRE become a core feature of education around the world?

To tackle the puzzle of HRE expansion, a handful of sociological studies have turned to a cultural explanation. This research posits that the worldwide spread of human rights stems from the rise and globalization of a culture that privileges individual rights, empowerment, capabilities, and responsibilities above alternative, more collective bases of social order (Meyer et al. 1997; Meyer & Jepperson 2000; Elliott 2007; Meyer, Bromley & Ramirez 2010). These scholars argue that global diffusion indicates that broad cultural forces are at work; individual citizens and countries are reconceptualized as deeply interconnected in fundamental ways that go beyond economic or political necessities (Meyer et al. 1997). Focusing specifically on the expansion of HRE, Ramirez, Suárez and Meyer (2007, p. 35) describe how ‘the current emphasis on human rights education reflects a growing understanding of the individual person as a



member of a global society rather than as mainly a national citizen. Cultural and political globalization all work as important motors in this process, generating standardized educational models of human competencies (Rychen & Tiana 2004), and of national progress (Ramirez & Meyer 2002).’ Although these studies provide some explanatory purchase on understanding the global expansion of HRE, a drawback has been that the explanations point to the end of World War II as a major driver of cultural globalization, but data existed only for later decades making it impossible to examine the War’s effect.

With new data collected from a content analysis of 1,008 social science textbooks from 100 countries, we here present a first look at the expansion of human rights going back to 1890. In our sample, social science textbooks include history, civics, social studies, and geography textbooks. The majority of analyzed books come from the excellent collection at the library of the *Georg Eckert Institute for International Textbook Research* in Germany. We supplemented them with books from university libraries, as well as from personal collections and local bookstores around the world. As it is not feasible to randomly sample textbooks, our selection was largely dictated by availability, but we tried to achieve as even a distribution over time and across countries as possible. Finding books for the first half of the twentieth century proved to be the most difficult, due to availability and because we only sampled independent countries. 83 per cent of our sampled books are thus published after the end of World War II. History books make up the largest proportion (52 per cent) and social studies the smallest (eight per cent). Each book in our sample was analyzed by a native or near-native speaker using a standardized survey that measured among other aspects whether the book explicitly discussed human rights.

Figure 1 charts the rise of human rights narratives in textbooks from 1890 to 2013, graphing twenty-year moving averages of the proportion of books in our sample mentioning human rights. There is early expansion in the decades prior to World War II; growth then remains tamed until a steep increase starting in the 1990s. Overall, the figure offers striking evidence for the incorporation of human rights in textbooks over the course of more than one hundred years.

[Figure 1. Global Expansion of Human Rights in Textbooks, 1890-2013

Source: textbook data (line graph); timeline adapted from Suárez & Ramirez (2007).]

Table 1 gives insight into this expansion by region. For each region, it reports the proportion of books mentioning human rights, divided into three historically meaningful time periods: the years up to the end of the two World Wars (1890 to 1945), the post-World War II and Cold War period (1945 to 1989), and the post-Cold War era (1989 to 2013). It shows worldwide increases: growth in human rights coverage is evident in each region, particularly in the post-Cold War period, when the changes in most regions are highly significant.

Regional variation remains even in the latest era, however, with only about one third of textbooks in the Middle East and North Africa and in Eastern Europe and Central Asia mentioning human rights, and around 65 per cent of those in Sub-Saharan Africa doing so. The notable rise of human rights discourse in textbooks from Sub-Saharan Africa suggests that these countries are highly susceptible to global models, perhaps not surprising given the extensive involvement of global actors in the region. As is to be expected considering the cultural underpinnings of human rights, Western textbooks feature human rights discussions prominently. Textbooks from Latin America also incorporate human rights at high rates (46 per cent of books

in the latest period) and show early expansion. Prior research has similarly noted the prominence of human rights discourse in Latin American textbooks (Suárez 2008). In the first time period, textbooks from East, Southeast, and South Asia show the highest coverage of human rights. We believe this may be due to the specifics of our sample. The books that mention human rights in this time period are all civics textbooks (from China). As illustrated below, civics books contain consistently higher discussions of human rights than books in other subjects, which suggests that the prominence of human rights in early Asian books is likely due to their subject orientation.

Table 1. Proportion of Textbooks Mentioning Human Rights, 1890-2013, by Region <sup>a</sup>

	1890-1945	1946-1989 <sup>b</sup>	1990-2013 <sup>c</sup>
West (North America, Western Europe, Australia, New Zealand)	0.20	0.29	0.55***
East, Southeast, and South Asia	0.30	0.35	0.41
Eastern Europe and Central Asia	0.17	0.16	0.30†
Latin America and Caribbean	0.07	0.26*	0.46*
Middle East and North Africa	0.08	0.20	0.31
Sub-Saharan Africa	0.00	0.18**	0.65***
All Regions	0.19	0.25	0.45***

Note \*\*\* p<.001, \*\* p<.01, \* p<.05, † p<.1, two-tailed tests.

Source: textbook data.

<sup>a</sup> The number of books for each region by time period is: West (96, 140, 139); East, Southeast, and South Asia (27, 55, 69); Eastern Europe and Central Asia (24, 49, 82); Latin America and Caribbean (14, 53, 41); Middle East and North Africa (12, 54, 54); Sub-Saharan Africa (2, 56, 30). The total number of books by time period is: 175, 408, 425.

<sup>b</sup> Significance indicates t-test comparing difference between means or percentages of periods 1 and 2.

<sup>c</sup> Significance indicates t-test comparing difference between means or percentages of periods 2 and 3.

Overall, the key insight from Table 1 is that despite enormous differences in the historical legacies and contemporary geo-political conditions worldwide, we see a strikingly similar pattern of expansion of human rights discussions. Specifically, there is a period of gradual increase and institutionalization, followed by a statistically significant increase marking a period of rapid diffusion in most regions of the world since the 1990s.

Table 2 offers a look at our data by subject category. For each subject, it shows the proportion of books mentioning human rights, divided into the three time periods. All subject categories show substantial increases in human rights discussions over time. Again, the post-Cold War era features the most expansive growth, with all changes statistically significant, many of them highly so. As with regions, variation persists, even into the latest era. Only about 13 per cent of geography books mention human rights, in contrast to as much as 70 per cent of civics books and around half of history books and books mixed across the categories. In general, civics textbooks stand out with consistently high incorporation of human rights themes, not surprising given the subject's concern with citizen rights: even in the first period, 57 per cent of civics books mention human rights. As a whole, Table 2 confirms the findings of Table 1: human rights discussions in textbooks increase across all subject categories, with the most dramatic expansion witnessed in the post-1989 time period.

Table 2. Proportion of Textbooks Mentioning Human Rights, 1890-2013, by Subject<sup>a</sup>

	1890-1945	1946-1989 <sup>b</sup>	1990-2013 <sup>c</sup>
Social Studies Textbooks	0.00	0.29**	0.52*
Civics Textbooks	0.57	0.53	0.70†
History Textbooks	0.16	0.25†	0.46***
Geography Textbooks	0.00	0.03	0.13*
Mixed Textbooks	0.19	0.24	0.50*
All Subjects	0.19	0.25	0.45***

Note \*\*\* p<.001, \*\* p<.01, \* p<.05, † p<.1, two-tailed tests.

Source: textbook data.

<sup>a</sup> The number of books for each subject category by time period is: Social Studies (2, 28, 50); Civics (14, 60, 54); History (123, 214, 186); Geography (9, 77, 71); Mixed (27, 29, 64). The total number of books by time period is: 175, 408, 425.

<sup>b</sup> Significance indicates t-test comparing difference between means or percentages of periods 1 and 2.

<sup>c</sup> Significance indicates t-test comparing difference between means or percentages of periods 2 and 3.

Taken together, our data points to a remarkable, worldwide, and non-subject specific rise in human rights narratives in textbooks between 1890 and 2013, with the most dramatic expansion taking place in the 1990s and 2000s. Of course, our analysis is limited in that we are measuring

simply whether books mention human rights, without examining in detail *how* they are discussed. Furthermore, our coverage is evidently limited in some regions and time periods, and we do not have textbooks from every single country. It is also difficult to ascertain how much the books in our sample were utilized. Nevertheless, the expansion of human rights we find over the course of the twentieth century is impressive and robust whether we look at regional or subject-specific variation. Complementing insights on context-specific patterns and histories of HRE from the studies above, these findings highlight the value of conceptualizing the rise of HRE as broadly driven by the globalization of cultural individualism in the last half of the twentieth century, particularly the most recent neoliberal period.

### **New directions**

The success of human rights as a discursive project is astonishing. Today, HRE has spread worldwide and it takes many different forms and meanings. On the one hand, the term's ambiguity leads some to worry the phrase has little meaning. As Osler and Starkey (2010, abstract) describe: "Campaigners, politicians and the media cite human rights to justify or challenge anything from peaceful protest to military action. The phrase "human rights" appears to be a slogan in need of a definition." And certainly, in the course of expansion, human rights language is sometimes appropriated in rather bizarre ways (e.g. pirates can claim human rights violations when arrested at sea, dictators can purport to protect certain types of human rights such as economic welfare while violating other principles). On the other hand, the potential for multiple interpretations likely helps explain the phenomenal expansion of human rights discourse. Bajaj (2011: 507-8) argues "the mutability of HRE is its strength. That different organizations with distinct social bases and worldviews ground themselves in this discourse

suggests the richness and possibility of HRE... The diversity of contexts in which HRE can and has been implemented is indeed a testament to its relevance, adaptability, and promise as a lasting educational reform.”

Many studies seek to categorize, describe, and evaluate various HRE approaches, but little research has examined the extent to which it expands globally or attempted to explain why this growth occurs. Here we have drawn on new analyses to show that the most rapid discursive increase occurs since the 1990s in most of the world. These findings show that the construction of an international human rights regime in the wake of World War II provided a foundation for HRE, but its spread was more limited until the end of the Cold War. A likely interpretation of this pattern is that following the collapse of communism, individual human rights (rather than more state-centric citizenship rights or collective cultural rights) emerged as the social counterpart to increasingly dominant neoliberal economic and political ideologies. As a whole, it is difficult to assess whether the expansion of HRE contributes to peace and justice in the world. But our research suggests that independent of its actual contribution (which is unknown) the HRE project is tied to particular (neoliberal) cultural underpinnings that, if changed, would alter its attractiveness as an educational model.

The implications and dynamics involved in this phenomenal spread of HRE to diverse contexts worldwide present a fruitful and much needed area for future research. Given the malleability of HRE as a concept, we need to know more about the factors shaping its form and meaning in different contexts. How do policymakers, curriculum designers, and educators translate HRE models into particular local and national settings? How do unique national needs and priorities

shape what form HRE takes? Vast demographic, cultural, and political differences between the countries adopting HRE in curricula and classrooms offer unique opportunities for understanding what elements of HRE are compatible with different social and educational landscapes.

Moreover, future research could usefully focus on how HRE is reconciled with more traditional notions of rights tied to national citizenship. Education systems have long been tasked with nation-building and the likely complex interactions between HRE and such nation-centric educational foci deserve much scholarly attention.

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