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# “The path of social justice”: A Human Rights History of Social Justice Education

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## Abstract

Although not often recognized, social justice education in the U.S. is historically and philosophically tied to the twentieth century's human rights initiatives. The efforts of human rights pioneers, such as those who authored the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, have indelibly shaped social justice efforts, including within education, in the U.S. Reframing social justice education in light of human rights gives clarity to and concretizes our work as social justice educators: It strengthens a vision of education as central to promoting rights and justice; it refocuses attention on a broader array of fundamental rights, and it explicitly contests our globalized and neoliberal context, a context heavily influencing educational reform.

In these days of difficulty, we Americans everywhere must and shall choose the path of social justice ... the path of faith, the path of hope, and the path of love toward our fellow man. (Inscription at the FDR National Memorial, Washington, D.C., from a campaign speech on October 2, 1932, in Detroit, Michigan)

FDR's words—spoken over 80 years ago—resonate profoundly in the twenty-first century. Around the world, we see vocal and public calls for more socially just economic and political arrangements: the Arab Spring, the Occupy Movement, labor rights rallies, and Save Our Schools marches.<sup>1</sup> In today's "days of difficulty," these movements share more than a call for social justice. Rather, at the heart of these twenty-first century protests is a call for fundamental human rights, which was also at the heart of FDR's vision of social justice: the right to work, for example, and the right to protest peacefully, to be free from discrimination, to join labor unions, to participate in democracy, and to be guaranteed adequate health care, shelter, education, and wages. Protection and enactment of fundamental human rights are at the core of these twenty-first century calls for social justice. This remains as true in education as in other justice movements. While critics decry calls for social justice as class warfare, the rise of the welfare state, or even anarchy, we believe that calls for social justice are simply calls for fundamental human rights.

To that end, we endeavor here to (re)historicize social justice—specifically social justice education—in the context of human rights. As we seek to understand today's social justice movements, we often turn to the protest movements of the late twentieth century, such as the Civil Rights and Women's Rights Movements. While these are important forebears, attention to them can ignore the justice work of earlier decades. Thus, we look here to the oft-overlooked Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and its sister documents (1945–1951)<sup>2</sup> arguing that they are an antecedent social justice manifesto that continues to shape global discourse about justice, equality, and social responsibility. We believe that a human rights orientation to social justice can concretize what is often critiqued as an amorphous, ideological standpoint, particularly within education (e.g., Stern, [2006](#); Will, [2007](#)).

Our ultimate hope is not to present a monolithic, over-simplified history of social justice—we know, for example, that another side to the story of the UDHR (and to today's resistance to social justice) is America's elevation of property rights above all other rights (Harris, [1993](#); Ladson-Billings & Tate, [1995](#)). We also recognize that there are multiple social justice histories; our goal is not to present The History, but to stimulate discussion about the roots of our work as social justice educators. Social justice critic Friedrich Hayek asserts: "Whole books and treatises have been written about social justice without ever offering a definition of it. It is allowed to float in the air as if everyone will recognize an instance of it when it appears" (cited in Novak, [2000](#), p. 11). We hope to respond to this criticism by pulling social justice back down to earth.

## THE UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS AS A SOCIAL JUSTICE MANIFESTO: HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In the first half of the twentieth century, after two world wars, the Great Depression, and the dismantling of colonial empires, the world was confronted with injustice, aggression, and economic collapse on a massive scale. In the wake of this, there was overwhelming global attention on the codification of a universal moral code, a code that included social justice at its core (Glendon, [2001](#); Ishay, [2004](#); Morsink, [1999](#)). For example, American President Woodrow Wilson, in his 1918 “Fourteen Points Address” calling for the creation of the League of Nations, argued that protecting and promoting social justice was central to global peace (Ishay, [2004](#)). This call was ultimately realized when, a few weeks after Germany's 1945 surrender in World War II, 51 nations signed the UN Charter (Glendon, [2001](#)).

The UN Charter has four goals: (1) to prevent future wars; (2) to establish international justice; (3) to promote social progress and improved standards of living; and (4) “to affirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small” (UN, 1945, Preamble). This affirmation of human rights can be seen as a pragmatic approach to defending social justice and as a tool outlining minimum standards of human dignity whose use could move the world toward greater justice (Appiah, [2003](#); Ignatieff, [2003](#); Koenig, [1997](#); Mower, [1979](#)).

The early years of the UN were marked by near-singular attention to a human rights—and, by extension, social justice—agenda (Morsink, [1999](#)). The first human rights treaties, the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide and the Nuremberg Principles, were written in direct response to what was seen as an ultimate act of social injustice, the Holocaust (Ishay, [2004](#); Morsink, [1999](#)). At its first General Assembly meeting in January 1946, the UN established a Human Rights Commission whose primary task would be to author an international bill of rights—what we now know as the UDHR (Glendon, [2001](#)).

The US, particularly President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, heavily influenced this agenda. For example, his “Four Freedoms” speech is frequently cited as the framework for the UDHR (Anderson, [2003](#); Glendon, [2001](#); Ishay, [2004](#); Johnson, [1987](#); Mower, [1979](#)):

The first is freedom of speech and expression—everywhere in the world. The second is freedom of every person to worship God in his own way—everywhere in the world. The third is freedom from want—which, translated into world terms, means economic understandings which will secure to every nation a healthy peacetime life for its inhabitants—everywhere in the world. The fourth is freedom from fear—which, translated into world terms, means a world-wide reduction of armaments to such a point and in such a thorough fashion that no nation will be in a position to commit an act of physical aggression against any neighbor—anywhere in the world. (F. Roosevelt, [1941](#), para. 73)

The “four freedoms” importantly hit on two central points in the consideration of human rights: one, that the rights to be protected were both civil/political and economic/social; and two, that international peace was itself a human right (Mower, [1979](#)). Moreover, these “four freedoms” reflect FDR's domestic vision of an economic and political system more just than unbridled capitalism: Economic freedom meant more than the freedom of markets; it meant that individuals should be guaranteed a freedom from want (Ishay, [2004](#)). FDR advocated for government guarantees of certain economic rights and protections, including job protection, economic security, and the sharing of progress. FDR explicitly named this vision “choosing the path of social justice,” as commemorated at his own memorial in Washington, DC.

It was, however, Eleanor Roosevelt as chair of the UN Human Rights Commission who ultimately brought this vision to life in the UDHR (Glendon, [2001](#); Johnson, [1987](#); Mower, [1979](#)). At the time, Roosevelt was considered by many to be an outspoken advocate for social justice in America—serving as a board member of the NAACP, setting up a controversial concert for Marian Anderson at the Lincoln Memorial, and defying Jim Crow in Southern establishments (Anderson, [2003](#)). Narrow self-protection was understood by the Roosevelts as the enemy of social justice. Thus, Eleanor Roosevelt worked relentlessly to keep FDR's vision of social justice alive and like her husband, emphasized the collaborative protection of social justice (Lash, [1972](#)).

### Codifying Human Rights and Social Justice

[The UN members] believe that men and women, all over the world, have the right to live ... free from the haunting fear of poverty and insecurity ... They believe that science and the arts should combine to serve peace and the well-being, spiritual as well as material, of all men and women without discrimination of any kind. They believe that ... the power is in their hands to advance ... this well-being more swiftly than in any previous age. (UNESCO, [1949](#), p. 259)

In the initial work of the Human Rights Commission (HRC), there was a strong push to define human rights as racial anti-discrimination. After all, as a response to the Holocaust, such a stance was seen as paramount (Morsink, [1999](#)). This focus was widely supported by delegates from the Philippines, Egypt, India, the Dominican Republic, Cuba, France, the Soviet Republics, Latin America, and even Eleanor Roosevelt, who saw herself as an ambassador of pluralism (Glendon, [2001](#); Hareven, [1968](#)). In its survey of global rights traditions, UNESCO ([1949](#))<sup>3</sup> found anti-discrimination and acceptance of difference to be a common refrain.

From Wilson's initial call for the protection of social justice to the explicit discussion of justice in its Charter, the UN focused on advocating for and working toward this ultimate goal of anti-discriminatory social justice through the naming and protection of fundamental human rights (Ishay, [2004](#)). Although some of the most powerful governments (e.g., UK, USSR, US) strongly resisted this agenda, less powerful nations (e.g., China, Syria, India, Argentina) ultimately banded together to insist on the pre-eminence of human rights in the UN's mission (Anderson, [2003](#); Johnson, [1987](#); Morsink, [1999](#); Mower, 1997).

As understood by the UN delegates, human rights led to social justice by challenging unequal hierarchies of power, amplifying the voices of the weak, and by working to eliminate the root causes of conflict: poverty, discrimination, and exploitation (Glendon, [2001](#); Ishay, [2004](#); UNESCO, [1949](#)). President Truman described this nexus of concerns at the signing of the UN Charter: “Experience has shown how deeply the seeds of war are planted by economic rivalry and *social injustice*” (emphasis added; cited in Glendon, [2001](#), p. 238). Over 40 years later, Secretary General of the UN, Boutros Boutros-Ghali, echoed Truman in his description of one of the UN's primary aims as “address[ing] the deepest causes of conflict: economic despair, *social injustice* and political oppression” (emphasis added; cited in Andreopoulos, [1997](#), p. 11). This attention to economic, political, and social inequality remains the focus of social justice work in the twenty-first century.

What are the specific rights guaranteed by the UDHR that work toward social justice? Roughly, the UDHR included two categories of rights—(1) political/civil and (2) social/economic—and echoed FDR's “four freedoms”: “freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want [have] been proclaimed as the highest aspiration of the common people” (UN, 1948, Preamble). Furthermore, the UDHR declared the equality of all humans, the right to self-determination, and the freedom from tyranny, oppression, and exploitation. All persons—regardless of race, nationality, creed, gender, age, religion, or any other identity status—were granted rights to challenge injustice, barbarism, and oppression.<sup>[4](#)</sup>

In its 30 articles, the UDHR outlaws slavery, servitude, torture, arbitrary arrest, detention, and interference in private matters. It affirms equal recognition and protection before the law, fair trials, and innocence until proven guilty. It guarantees freedom of movement, residence, speech, religion, thought, and opinion. It also guarantees the right to asylum, to claiming a nationality, to marry and have a family, to own property, to change one's religion, to participate in government, to receive social security, to work at the job of one's choosing, to be paid an equal and living wage, to organize and join trade unions, to enjoy rest and leisure, to secure an adequate standard of living (with specific reference to food, clothing, housing, and medical care), to attend free and compulsory elementary schooling, to participate in an education promoting human rights and self-actualization, to engage in the cultural life of the community, and to experience international peace. Protecting these rights is what governments must do to foster a minimum level of social, political, and economic equality.

As is clear from this catalogue of guarantees, the UDHR conceived of human rights far more broadly than traditional Western civil rights, such as those articulated in the US Bill of Rights. In what was seen as a radical departure from the Western rights tradition, which focused only on personal liberties, the UDHR included rights for economic opportunity, protection, and development (Glendon, [2001](#); Ishay, [2004](#); Johnson, [1987](#); Richardson, [2000](#)). By doing so, two distinct rights traditions are codified in rights documents. The first tradition, Western civil rights, is associated with the British, French, and American revolutionary documents; civil rights protect property, life, and liberty as well as the freedoms of speech, religion, and assembly. In this tradition, the emphasis is on “individual liberty and initiative more than equality or social solidarity” (Glendon, [2001](#), p. xvii). On the other hand, dignitarian rights emphasize equality,

fraternity, and collective responsibility, balancing individual liberties with social responsibility. The state plays an active role in guaranteeing rights as well as protecting and providing for the needy. Dignitarian rights include the right to work, to education, and to basic subsistence. This tradition is most associated with social democracies, such as in Scandinavia and Latin America (Glendon, [2001](#); Ishay, [2004](#); Morsink, [1999](#)).

Early drafts of the UDHR took their list of rights largely verbatim from the 1948 Bogota Conference's Pan-American Declaration of Rights, a document in the dignitarian rights tradition. However, they also reflected the Roosevelts' American conceptions of social justice (Glendon, [2001](#)). For example, in FDR's 1944 State of the Union address, he outlined his "second bill of rights," which would ensure for every citizen a good education; a useful and remunerative job; a wage capable of meeting basic needs; adequate medical care; basic protection from the fears of old age, sickness, accident, and unemployment; and the right to a decent home (F. D. Roosevelt, [1944](#)). Similarly, Eleanor Roosevelt argued, "Unless one obtains freedom from want, one probably is not much interested in any of the other freedoms" (cited in Johnson, [1987](#), p. 36). Echoing Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs, political and social rights were meaningless unless individuals' basic physical and economic needs were first met.

This unlikely combination of rights traditions on opposite sides of the burgeoning Cold War—civil/political rights associated with the US and social/economic rights with the USSR<sup>5</sup>—demonstrates the HRC's deep understanding of the role of inequality in fomenting aggression and unrest. Reiterated throughout the drafting process were the assertions that political independence and economic sovereignty go hand-in-hand, that international security and civil rights are dependent on economic justice, and that genuine justice ensures an individual's personal and economic security (Glendon, [2001](#); Ishay, [2004](#); Morsink, [1999](#); UNESCO, [1949](#)). The language of human rights was seen as affording a broader vision of social equality and justice than civil or dignitarian rights on their own (Anderson, [2003](#)).

The UDHR also goes beyond American civil rights in its insistence on state responsibility (Glendon, [2001](#); Ishay, [2004](#); UNESCO, [1949](#); Morsink, [1999](#)). In Western rights theory, the role of the state is limited to ensuring that individual liberties (e.g., to speech, to property) are not compromised. However, according to the UDHR, the state is responsible for actively ensuring and providing for the economic and social welfare of its citizens through the guarantees of equal wages, decent housing, and social services. Whereas the civil rights tradition might simply guarantee an individual the right to work if he or she chooses and if jobs are available, the UN's articulation of human rights would instead guarantee that any individual who wants to work will work, with government initiatives providing employment when private markets do not, and that he or she will be given equal pay for equal work, earning enough to provide an adequate standard of living. In this, the government does more than protect against intrusions on individual liberty; rather, the government guarantees and provides a certain standard of living. Although contested by mainstream American rights philosophy, this was a widely supported rights philosophy, one that emphasized individual liberty and collective responsibility (Glendon, [2001](#); Ishay, [2004](#)).

## Working in the “Small Places”: Promoting Human Rights in Education

Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance, and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the UN for the maintenance of peace. (The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 26.2)

The UDHR guarantees for all people the right to education. While early drafts limited this to free and compulsory elementary education, the final document gives education a more prominent role in fostering respect for human rights. The Preamble itself names education as the primary vehicle for doing this: “This Universal Declaration of Human Rights ... shall strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these rights and freedoms” (UN, 1948, Preamble). The emphasis on education as the main arbiter of human rights reflects one of the many compromises made about the role of the state in protecting human rights (Glendon, [2001](#)). For example, American Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, who served under President Eisenhower and, like Eisenhower, was an opponent of the UDHR, argued that it was the role of education (and not governments) to foster a human rights culture (Anderson, [2003](#); Hareven, [1968](#)). Even UDHR drafter René Cassin attributed education with the most power to promote human rights:

Legal force of itself is only a secondary safety valve: it is the education of young people and even of adults that constitutes the primary and real guarantee for minority groups faced with racial hatred that leads so easily to violence and murder. (Cassin, cited in Osler & Starkey, [2000b](#), p. 94)

In the view of UDHR drafters, only education could cultivate human rights culture.

The UNESCO philosopher's survey (1949) revealed near global unanimity that education should “facilitate the mutual understanding of the peoples of the world” (p. 269) and ready citizens for their social responsibilities. By promoting the human right to education as something more than compulsory and free elementary education, the UDHR drafters answered the challenge of human rights education becoming “education for acquiescence or education for freedom” (UNESCO, [1949](#), p. 223), whether it would encourage critical thought about unequal power structures or maintain allegiance to the status quo. In the end, the UDHR, even with the support of opponents, came down on the side of education for freedom.

## Human Rights Muddles and the Cultural Imperialism of the UDHR

The UDHR is an imperfect vision of social justice. For example, it is frequently critiqued for promoting a compromised vision of human rights and social justice, warped by Cold War politicking (Anderson, [2003](#); Glendon, [2001](#); Morsink, [1999](#)). Human rights are also critiqued for the American exceptionalism embedded within them—that the US is above international rebuke and thus human rights are for export only (Jenkins & Cox, [2005](#)). The human rights



framework is also critiqued by feminist scholar Catherine MacKinnon ([1993](#)) for ignoring the rights of women.

Perhaps most worrisome, however, is the critique of the UDHR as culturally imperialist. It is common for human rights to be critiqued as a fundamentally Western construction that invalidates the right to cultural and political self-determination (Burke, [2006](#); Glendon, [2001](#); Howard, [1997](#) /1998; Ishay, [2004](#)). In addition to depicting universal rights as a Western imposition, critics also argue that the supremacy of individual rights over any kind of collective rights reflects Western priorities (Howard, [1997](#) /1998). These decries of cultural imperialism were strengthened when the UN denied colonial territories' demands for independence (Ishay, [2004](#)). Human rights were universal so long as they did not challenge traditional power structures.

Although the impetus for human rights did stem, in part, from an American vision, it was other UN members who became their most outspoken advocates (Mower, [1979](#)). It was China— included in a UN founding conference by the US as a token gesture—who pushed for the explicit inclusion of human rights, justice, and racial equality in the Charter. The three other participants—the US, the UK, and the USSR—fought these overt references (Anderson, [2003](#)). China was joined by leaders, such as Mahatma Gandhi (India), Carlos Romulo (Philippines), Charles Malik (Lebanon), Ho Chi Minh (Vietnam), Kwame Nkrumah (Ghana), Leopold Senghor (Senegal), and W.E.B. DuBois (US), in declaring the need for universal rights (Ishay, [2004](#)).

The aforementioned UNESCO philosophers' survey (1949) additionally confirmed that these rights were universal human rights. Although the codification of rights had been a Western undertaking (e.g., the Bill of Rights, the Declaration of the Rights of Man), UNESCO found that, “where basic human values are concerned, cultural diversity had been exaggerated ... a core of fundamental principles was widely shared in countries that had not yet adopted rights instruments and in cultures that had not embraced the language of rights” (Glendon, [2001](#), p. 222). Some of the most forceful arguments for human rights came from non-Western thinkers. Chinese delegate P.C. Chang, for example, strongly argued that rights were for everyone, not just Westerners (Glendon, [2001](#)); Chung-Sho Lo (UNESCO, [1949](#)) spoke of the Confucian responsibility of fulfilling duties to one's neighbors; and Indian philosopher Humayan Kabir (UNESCO, [1949](#)) discussed Islam as a model of human rights. When drafting the UDHR, the Human Rights Commission was deliberate about including these diverse voices and traditions. The earliest drafts were strongly influenced by the 1948 Pan-American Declaration of Rights and included rights from the constitutions of Scandinavia and the Soviet Republics as well as from Asian philosophy; later drafts included the perspectives of Asia and the Middle East.

African representation, save for South Africa, was strikingly absent; most Africans were still under colonial yoke (Morsink, [1999](#)). By the time of the human rights Covenants, however, many independent African nations played a prominent role in writing these binding treaties (Hareven, [1968](#)). Moreover, 22 post-colonial African constitutions make explicit mention of human rights, which also figure prominently in the Charter of the Organization of African Unity (Mower, [1979](#)). The language of human rights was central in anti-colonial and anti-imperialist

struggles. Even at the 1955 Bandung Conference, one of the first gatherings of what would subsequently come to be called the “Third World” nations, human rights were essential for challenging—rather than perpetuating—Western imperialism (Burke, [2006](#)).

What is blatantly missing, however, is any guarantee of minority or group rights (Burke, [2006](#); Howard, [1997](#) /1998; Morsink, [1999](#)). For the post-colonial world, cultural and group rights have been intricately linked to the right to self-determination. During the UDHR drafting process, there was significant pressure to guarantee minority rights and include the statement, “Cultural groups shall not be denied the right to free self-development,” but it was defeated (Glendon, [2001](#), p. 119). However, Eleanor Roosevelt, in particular, believed that minority rights did not apply in the Americas because of what she called the “assimilationist ideal” (Glendon, [2001](#)). In the end, the Americans won: There is no guarantee of group rights in the UDHR.

## HUMAN RIGHTS IN THE LATE 20TH CENTURY: A NEW INTERNATIONAL LANGUAGE OF JUSTICE

There are two sides to the human rights program. Freedom of expression, freedom of worship, freedom of suffrage. But much closer to the people in the new world is the question of something to eat and a better life. (Eleanor Roosevelt, cited in Johnson, 1987, p. 36)

By looking to this history of the UDHR, we can see that social justice in the era of human rights was broadly conceived as the protection of both individual liberties and economic security. Most central to this period's conception of social justice was an awareness of inequality, brutality, and oppression and the honoring of diverse cultural, political, and religious views. This conception of justice was guided by a sense of empathy, morality, and social responsibility. Human rights were the specific guarantees—for example, to equal pay, an adequate standard of living, or the freedom of thought—that could promote this vision of social justice. By codifying an international language for describing oppression, inequality, and brutality, these human rights documents provided a new framework for speaking out against injustice and inequality. By the 1950s, anti-colonial and developing world leaders from Africa and Asia were some of the strongest proponents of human rights—as seen, for example, in their prominence at the 1955 Bandung Conference (Burke, [2006](#)). Despite the compromises and Western worldview of the UDHR, the language of human rights was a powerful tool for challenging imperial domination.

### Human Rights and the American Civil Rights Movement

The time has arrived for the Democratic Party to get out of the shadow of states' rights and walk ... into the bright sunshine of human rights. (Hubert Humphrey, cited in Anderson, [2003](#), p. 124)

Human rights also became a central tool of the Civil Rights Movement in the US. In the immediate post-WWII context, the NAACP—under the executive direction of Walter White and the ideological and philosophical direction of W.E.B. Du Bois—looked to link the struggle for African American equality and justice at home to the global struggle against imperialism and for human rights (Anderson, [2003](#)). White noted in 1944:

[African Americans took] literally the shibboleths of the Four Freedoms ... [and] they intend[ed] to secure and enjoy those freedoms and to put an end to the old order in which men, solely because they are colored, can be worked to exhaustion, exploited, despised, spat upon and derided by those whose chief right to sovereignty is whiteness of skin. (White, cited in Anderson, [2003](#), p. 17)

The “four freedoms” went beyond civil rights by naming explicit human rights, including the right to an equal and living wage, the right to an education promoting citizenship and self-actualization, the right to adequate health care, the right to move freely and to choose one's residence, the right to a decent standard of living, and the right to marry whomever one wants (UN, 1948). These social and economic rights were a “lifeline” for those mired in the injustices of Jim Crow (Anderson, [2003](#)).

Moreover, the UDHR drafting process revealed the power of human rights language to shame America's discriminatory practices. Throughout drafting, both the US and the Soviet Union regularly used the language of human rights to call attention to one another's hypocrisy. Using the language of human rights, the US was periodically named as the same kind of discriminatory state as the burgeoning apartheid regime of South Africa (Anderson, [2003](#); Dudziak, [2000](#); Glendon, [2001](#); Hareven, [1968](#); Ishay, [2004](#); Johnson, [1987](#)).

A human rights framework also supported post-WWII fights for equality. For example, returning black veterans launched the “Double V” campaign of WWII—“Victory at home, victory abroad”—in which they linked their fight for justice and democracy in Europe to the fight for African American equality at home. The NAACP also challenged Winston Churchill's “racing” of the four freedoms of the Atlantic Charter—he claimed that these freedoms were for Whites only—by demanding a seat at the negotiating table of the UN. Using the language of human rights even empowered African American leaders to challenge President Truman's belief that African Americans wanted “justice, not social equality” (Anderson, [2003](#), p. 2) by arguing that social and economic equality were necessary correlates for social justice.

In addition, African American organizations thrice petitioned the UN to intervene on behalf of the U.S.'s human rights violations against African Americans: the National Negro Congress's 1946 petition, A Petition to the United Nations on Behalf of 13 Million Oppressed Negro Citizens of the United States of America; the NAACP's 1947 petition, An Appeal to the World; and the Civil Rights Congress's 1951 petition, We Charge Genocide. All three petitions were an attempt to lift the struggle for racial equality and justice in the U.S. to an international arena, both because such an international focus might pressure the U.S. into taking greater action at

home and because it explicitly connected the struggle for African American equality with the struggle for equality, justice, and human rights internationally (Anderson, [2003](#); Dudziak, [2000](#)).

None of these petitions were ultimately successful at triggering UN intervention; they were actively silenced and stymied by UN leadership, including Eleanor Roosevelt. Despite this, the petitions were successful at publicly humiliating the U.S. for its civil and human rights violations (Anderson, [2003](#); Dudziak, [2000](#); Glendon, [2001](#)). The language of human rights proved to be a powerful way, both domestically and internationally, to challenge U.S. inequities and injustices. This power was the very reason that Roosevelt and the other U.S. representatives worked so hard to prevent African Americans from linking their domestic struggle with human rights. Opponents knew that doing so might open the U.S. to international critique and intervention (Dudziak, [2000](#); Hobbins, [1998](#)). Unfortunately, the tangle of Cold War politics eventually led the NAACP and other civil rights leaders to abandon this more powerful human rights platform for the limited equality afforded by civil rights alone. Historian Carol Anderson ([2003](#)) goes so far as to argue that the Civil Rights Movement ultimately failed because it could not maintain a human rights connection. Inequality persists because of repeated human rights violations in education, health care, and housing—violations that “have just become part of the accepted day-to-day grind for black America” (Anderson, p. 272).

## Human Rights, Protest Movements, and Social Justice Principles

I have the audacity to believe that peoples everywhere can have three meals a day for their bodies, education and culture for their minds, and dignity, equality and freedom for their spirits. I believe that what self-centered men have torn down, men other-centered can build up. I still believe that one day mankind will ... be crowned triumphant over war and bloodshed, and nonviolent redemptive goodwill will proclaim the rule of the land. (King, [1964](#), para. 7)

While the NAACP and early civil rights leaders may have abandoned human rights, later social justice movements (e.g., the Women's Rights Movement, Gay Rights Movement, Latino Rights Movement) explicitly drew on human rights in their vision of social change—in the descriptions of and goals for their work, which correspond directly to the UDHR's list of rights.

## Human Rights as Social Justice

Both Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X longed to transform the Civil Rights Movement into a human rights movement (Anderson, [2003](#)). King wrote his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” (1963) while imprisoned for work on behalf of the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights and spoke eloquently about the demands of the “human rights revolution” (King, [1968](#)). Malcolm X (1972) argued, “How is a black man going to get ‘civil rights’ before he first wins his human rights? If the American black man will start thinking about his human rights, and then start thinking of himself as part of one of the world's greatest people, he will see he has a case for the United Nations” (p. 207). In this, he echoed what the NAACP and the CRC had argued in

their petitions to the UN: human rights superceded and subsumed civil rights. Moreover, civil rights could only be granted to citizens, to humans; as long as the U.S. continued to deny African Americans their human rights, they would remain less-than-human in the eyes of white America and remain persecuted and oppressed.

King and Malcolm X were not alone in their orientation to human rights. In its 1966 Statement of Purpose, the National Organization of Women (NOW) declared:

We ... believe that the time has come for a new movement toward true equality for all women in America, and toward a fully equal partnership of the sexes, as part of the *world-wide revolution of human rights* now taking place within and beyond our national borders. ... We realize that women's problems are linked to many broader questions of social justice; their solution will require concerted action by many groups. Therefore, convinced that human rights for all are indivisible, we expect to give active support to the common cause of equal rights for all those who suffer discrimination and deprivation. (Friedan, [1966](#), para. 1, 13; emphasis added)

Similarly, two of the most active advocacy groups within the Gay Rights Movement orient themselves to human rights—the Human Rights Campaign and the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission (IGLHRC), which works to “improve the lives of those who experience discrimination and abuse because of their sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, and to achieve a world with human rights for everyone, everywhere” (IGLHRC, [2012](#), para. 1. Finally, Cesar Chavez described the United Farm Workers’ (UFW) struggle as “seek[ing] our basic, God-given rights as human beings. ... To the growers and to all who oppose us, we say the words of Benito Juarez: ‘Respect for another's right is the meaning of peace’ ” (UFW, [2008](#), The Movement, para. 4). Human rights were central the UFW's labor struggles.

### Cultural Pluralism as Social Justice

In their vision of social justice, these twentieth century movements commit to cultural pluralism, as does the UDHR. Because universal human rights originated as a means of protecting humanity from the brutality of state-sponsored racism, human rights are fundamentally guided by a commitment to cultural pluralism (Ignatieff, [2003](#); Osler & Starkey, [2000a](#), [2000b](#)). Figueroa ([2000](#)) explains,

Citizenship (in a plural society) involves commitment to the society in its diversity; openness to, and indeed solidarity with and respect for, the different other, in particular the “ethnically” different; acceptance of the basic equal worth of all people, of the rights and responsibilities of all; and a rejection of any form of exploitation, inequitable treatment or racism. (p. 57)

A social justice commitment to diversity is about far more than acceptance of difference or watered down tolerance. Rather, it is more akin to pluralism or “the [civic and social] engagement that creates a common society from all that plurality” (Eck, [2006](#), para. 1). In this,

social justice, like human rights, explicitly fights against discrimination. After all, the persistence of institutional racism (and sexism, ableism, classism, and homophobia) is a direct threat to human rights and to democracy (Ignatieff, [2003](#); Osler & Starkey, [2000a](#)).

Many social justice protest movements grew in direct response to the stubborn persistence of institutional racism. In doing so, these protest movements articulated and fought for a vision of the world in which cultural pluralism was realized and in which diverse voices and experiences were not only honored but also made integral to civil society. For example, the American Indian Movement (AIM) states that one prong of its mission is the restoration and revival of native cultures (Wittstock & Salinas, [2008](#)); the National Organization for Women (NOW) “envision[s] a world where there is recognition and respect for each person's intrinsic worth as well as the rich diversity of the various groups among us” (NOW, [1998](#), para. 6); and United Farm Workers’ (UFW) Chavez warned that, “Preservation of one's own culture does not require contempt or disrespect for other cultures” (UFW, [2008](#), Culture, para. 1). In a pluralistic society, cultural difference and disagreement are not threats to a socially just civil society; rather, they enrich and ensure a civil society committed to social justice.

### **Voice as Social Justice**

A corollary to cultural pluralism as social justice is a commitment to amplifying the voices of those made weak and the oppressed. After all, at the heart of universal human rights is providing “an avenue of power for the disadvantaged” (Richardson, [2000](#), p. 82) by allowing the claims of victims to speak louder than the claims of oppressors and by preventing the tyranny of marginalized groups (Ignatieff, [2003](#); Spencer, [2000](#)). Amplifying the voices of the weak and oppressed is how human rights—and ultimately, social justice—are realized. AIM works toward this end by insisting on the rights of native peoples to interpret treaties and to address the federal government (Wittstock & Salinas, [2008](#)), while the Human Rights Campaign actively works to elect officials who will speak on behalf of LGBTQ individuals (2008). Providing the opportunity for the voices of the less powerful to be heard is central to the human right to self-determination.

### Economic and Social Rights as Social Justice

However, the most fundamental way that social justice movements align with a human rights framework is in their constant demands for the economic and social rights guaranteed in the UDHR: equal pay for equal work, living wages, adequate health care, social support for the impoverished, equitable and meaningful education, and reducing the gap between rich and poor. Political philosopher Amy Gutmann ([2003](#)) argues, “Starving people are denied their human agency. They are also being denied their dignity, and they are being degraded. They are not being treated as agents with a human life to lead” (p. xii). The social justice movements of the late twentieth century recognized this and advocated for the economic and social rights of all citizens: AIM vows to “reclaim and affirm health, housing, employment, economic development, and education for all Indian people” (Wittstock & Salinas, [2008](#), para. 11); NOW ([1998](#)) “envision[s] a world where social and economic justice exist, where all people have the

food, housing, clothing, health care and education they need” (para. 5); the Gay Liberation Front ([1969](#)), after the Stonewall Riots, demanded the right of homosexuals to own their businesses and run their own organizations; the UFW struggled not merely for employment security and rights but also for the protection of the physical health of farm workers by protesting the use of pesticides (Chavez, [1989](#)); Martin Luther King, Jr. and Myles Horton launched a Poor People's Campaign in which multiracial, impoverished Americans could demand economic justice (Jackson, [2007](#)); and the Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act (2004) demanded that individuals with disabilities be afforded equal educational opportunities. All of these movements are centrally concerned with the litany of social and economic rights guaranteed by the UDHR.

### State Action as Social Justice

Finally, these social justice movements understand the complicity of the state in perpetuating inequality—and thus the state's responsibility for eliminating inequality. King ([1967](#)) famously declared when speaking out against the war in Vietnam:

True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar; it is not haphazard and superficial. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring. A true revolution of values will soon look uneasily on the glaring contrast of poverty and wealth. With righteous indignation, it will look across the seas and see individual capitalists of the West investing huge sums of money in Asia, Africa and South America, only to take the profits out with no concern for the social betterment of the countries, and say: “This is not just.” (para. 46–47)

This is precisely the perspective called for by a UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education when arguing that schools (a vehicle of the state), rather than trying to correct the “socially excluded” individuals themselves, need to recognize and address the systemic exclusions and discriminations that oppress students—to understand that “socially excluded” students are excluded through state actions and inactions—and to understand that it is a human rights obligation to address these systemic inequalities (Alderson, [2000](#)).

### CLARIFYING SOCIAL JUSTICE EDUCATION THROUGH THE UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS

Teaching for social justice might be thought of as a kind of popular education—of, by, and for the people—something that lies at the heart of education in a democracy, education toward a more vital, more muscular democratic society. It can propel us toward action, away from complacency, reminding us of the powerful commitment, persistence, bravery, and triumphs of our justice-seeking forebears—women and men who sought to build a world that worked for us all. Abolitionists, suffragettes, labor organizers, civil rights activists: Without them, liberty would today be slighter, poorer,

weaker—the American flag wrapped around an empty shell—a democracy of form and symbol over substance. (Ayers, [2008](#), para. 1)

Given the connection between human rights and social justice and the central role of education in promoting both, twenty-first century social justice education can be understood as fulfilling the vision of global justice and human dignity promoted by the UDHR. To make this claim, it is important to clarify social justice education—a complicated task, as there is not a uniform definition for social justice education. Gloria Ladson-Billings ([2006](#)) argues that social justice education is “less a thing and more an ethical position” (p. 40).

Two theories of social justice are often used to frame social justice education and to clarify its ethical commitments. The first is John Rawls’ (1971) theory of distributive justice, in which injustice is rooted in macro-level, political/economic structures that cause exploitation and material deprivation and prevent self-actualization. The second framework is Nancy Fraser’s ([2003](#)) dualism of the politics of redistribution and the politics of recognition. In this theory, Fraser acknowledges that injustice can stem not just from one’s unfair exclusion from the macro-level political and economic order but also from the denial of one’s lived experience, identity, and culture. Justice, then, is not simply the redistribution of material resources but also the recognition and acceptance of diverse perspectives and experiences. Justice is about economic rights, political rights, and about cultivating authentic pluralism.

Theories of social justice education use these frameworks as a jumping off point. For example, Cochran-Smith ([2008](#)) describes teaching for social justice as an intellectual approach to the inescapably political work of schooling. The three key components to her theory—equity of learning opportunities, respect for social groups, and teaching through tension—lead to the promotion of students’ learning and the enhancement of their life chances. Teaching for social justice must connect “distributive justice, which locates equality and autonomy at the center of democratic societies, with current political struggles for recognition, which challenge the school and knowledge structures that reinforce the disrespect and oppression of social groups” (p. 12). Another articulation is North’s (2006): If the ultimate goal of social justice is the restructuring of the political economy—ensuring the UDHR’s economic and political rights—then social justice education must “challenge the existing hierarchies of power, embracing difference [and] challenging cultural imperialism” (p. 510). Finally, Grant and Agosto (2008) describe social justice as the aim of education, in that social justice is a regulative system of fairness that ensures the security of citizens, pushes for distributive equality and interrogates why distributive inequalities exist, and aims for the elimination of institutionalized domination.

Social justice education is, ultimately, education for freedom, by which the promotion of basic human rights and dignity fosters social change: “Teaching for social justice is teaching that arouses students, engages them in a quest to identify obstacles to their full humanity, to their freedom, and then to drive, to move against those obstacles. And so the fundamental message of the teacher for social justice is: You can change the world” (Ayers, [1998](#), p. xvii). By embracing cultural differences and promoting pluralism, by challenging cultural imperialism and unequal hierarchies of power, by interrogating material inequalities and advocating for



economic justice, and by equipping students with the skills necessary to be active and responsible democratic citizens, social justice education is working for a world that honors fundamental human rights. Social justice education promotes “the full development of the human personality” (UN, 1948, 26.2), unhindered by systemic human rights violations and social injustices.

Twenty-first century social justice education realizes the vision for education established in the UDHR: to educate about basic human rights and fundamental human dignity, to foster the dispositions and attitudes that will protect human rights, and to allow for individuals’ full self-actualization and personal development. To this end, social justice education emphasizes equipping students with the tools necessary to fulfill their democratic responsibilities (Ayers, [2008](#); Cochran-Smith, [2008](#); Grant & Agosto, [2008](#)) with a central tool being critical thinking (Applebaum, [2009](#); Cochran-Smith, [2008](#); Gutmann, [1999](#), 2003). In social justice teaching, this critical thinking is honed through curricular attention to inequality, injustice, and the violation of human rights. Take, for example, Gutstein's (2008) high school math classes, in which his students apply mathematical knowledge, such as probability, to current events to analyze them through the lens of social justice: In one example, his students used probability skills to determine the statistical likelihood that the black defendants in the Jena 6 case could have “randomly” received the all-white juries that they did. In social justice pedagogy, the central purpose of the skills and content of K-12 schooling—literacy, numeracy, scientific and historical inquiry, the arts—is to raise students’ critical consciousness and to develop students who can be advocates for social justice. This is the precise role of education laid out in the UDHR.

A former Director General of UNESCO explained, “Education for human rights and democracy in the last analysis means the empowerment of each and every individual to participate with an active sense of responsibility in all aspects of political and social life” (cited in Spencer, [2000](#), p. 28). Education for human rights, like Ayers’ (2008, para. 1) description of social justice education as “the heart of education in a democracy, education toward a more vital, more muscular democratic society,” is committed to preparing students to participate in a deliberative democracy that values diversity, social responsibility, and human dignity and rights. This type of education is a means of resisting the systemic perpetuation of inequality and discrimination. This articulation of “education for freedom,” or education that encourages students to examine their world through the lens of both social justice and empathy, was central to Eleanor Roosevelt's initial vision of human rights (Harevan, [1968](#)). She explained this role:

Where, after all, do universal human rights begin? In small places, close to home—so close and so small that they cannot be seen on any maps of the world. Yet they are the world of the individual person; the neighborhood he lives in; the school or college he attends; the factory, farm, or office where he works. Such are the places where every man, woman and child seeks equal justice, equal opportunity, equal dignity without discrimination. Unless these rights have meaning there, they have little meaning anywhere. (E. Roosevelt, [1958](#), para. 2)

For Roosevelt, schools were both the seedbeds for and the ultimate realization of human rights, where citizens first learned about and first experienced human rights. This, according to Glendon (2001), is what is most striking about the UDHR: “[T]he most remarkable feature of the Declaration [is] its attention to the ‘small places’ where people first learn about their rights and how to exercise them responsibly—families, schools, workplaces, and religious associations” (p. 240). Without these “small places,” human rights and social justice will never be realized.

## CONCLUSION: SOCIAL JUSTICE AND HUMAN RIGHTS EDUCATION IN AN ERA OF GLOBALIZATION

In the post-WWII context, the NAACP understood that white supremacy transcended national borders. The treatment of African Americans at home was intimately linked to colonial and imperial domination the world over (Anderson, 2003). This insight into the internationalism of oppression rings even more true today. In an era of globalization<sup>6</sup> and the “primacy of property rights over human rights” (Sleeter, 2008, p. 144), a social justice framework is even more critical: equality, justice, and human dignity are necessary for challenging global imperialism.

By moving beyond a simplistic understanding of social justice education and instead linking it with a human rights history, we are connecting the work of American anti-oppressive educators more explicitly with the work of global educators and activists around human rights education. Social justice education may be semantically unique to the United States, but it is not substantively unique. Human rights and social justice education share commitments and pedagogies that challenge systemic inequalities, promote democratic competence, and advocate for education as a tool of human empowerment and social change (Andreopoulos & Claude, 1997; Osler, 2000). Most importantly, both human rights and social justice education challenge the prevailing view that twenty-first century education serves the needs of global capital (Grant & Grant, 2007; Lipman, 2001; Sleeter, 2008). Instead, in the language of human rights and in the aims of social justice, we see a mandate for education that contributes to self-realization and to a flourishing and whole life. This vision not only reframes education as a public good rather than a marketable commodity; it also demands that education be directed toward cultivating an informed and democratic citizenry. Human rights and social justice education can empower citizens to contest the marketization of their education, their democracies, and themselves.

Finally, we want to make clear that this human rights history of social justice is more than a theoretical call for reimagining pedagogy. It has a place in K-12 curriculum and teaching. Human rights are frequently left out of social justice conversations because human rights are frequently left out of American renditions of history. Thus, part of bringing a social justice and human rights pedagogy to life is teaching about human rights: their development across cultures and world philosophy, their legal predecessors, their codified birth during the mid-twentieth century, their connection to social movements, their controversial nature. Social justice educators often call for the inclusion of social justice content in the K-12 curriculum. As

we argue here, human rights are an important sibling of social justice and need to be considered and included as fundamental social justice content. Teaching students about human rights and social justice is essential if students are to become advocates for human rights and social justice.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>These are references to a variety of political and social movements occurring from 2010–2012.

The Arab Spring refers to the series of uprisings throughout the Middle East and North Africa in the Winter of 2010 and the Spring of 2011, beginning with the successful overthrow of the Tunisian government and including the Egyptian protests and ejection of President Hosni Mubarak. These uprisings were largely demands for increased democratic participation and less authoritarian rule. The Occupy Movement, which speaks out against social and economic inequality, was a protest movement inspired in part by the Arab Spring. Beginning in North America in 2011—with the best-known protest occurring in New York City's Zuccotti Park—it subsequently spread all over the world. Save Our Schools was another protest movement in 2011 and 2012 speaking out against educational inequality in the US and organizing against the neoliberal reform policies of local cities and the Obama administration.

<sup>2</sup>While we are focusing on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), two human rights documents were written and ratified at the UN from 1945–1948: the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide and the UDHR. The UDHR was intentionally written as a statement of general human rights aims without reference to enforcement; its supplemental, legally binding treaties on human rights—the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights—were written in 1966 (Glendon, [2001](#)).

<sup>3</sup>Concurrent to the Human Rights Commission's work on drafting the UDHR, the United Nations Educational and Scientific Committee (UNESCO) set about surveying philosophers, politicians, scholars, scientists, and educators the world over in order to determine if there were such a thing as universal human rights. UNESCO collected its responses and submitted them to the Human Rights Commission as evidence of and guidance for universal human rights as well as a warning about the limits of crafting a universal declaration. While the HRC did not use UNESCO's survey, most of UNESCO's findings correspond to the UDHR (Glendon, [2001](#); UNESCO, [1949](#)).

<sup>4</sup>While sexual minorities are outspoken advocates for social justice in contemporary society and while they often figure in a listing of marginalized and oppressed identities, it is

important to note that LGBTQ individuals were not explicitly included in the original concern for human rights or in the UN's codification of human rights.

<sup>5</sup>Of course, aligning social/economic rights and civil/political rights along Cold War ideologies is a gross over-simplification, particularly its conflation of socialism and communism. As pointed out, dignitarian rights have long been associated with socialist societies—social democracies in Scandinavia, Latin America, and Europe. Socialism is an economic system built on cooperative management of the economy, as opposed to an economy of unregulated free markets. There is a vast range of what this can look like in practice. Communism is one extreme—a frequently totalitarian political and economic system with an ideal of a classless and stateless society. A socialist economy is compatible with a democratic political system; communism is not.

<sup>6</sup>We are primarily concerned with globalization as the process of “increased economic, cultural, environmental, and social interdependencies and new transnational financial and political formation arising out of the mobility of capital, labor and information, with both homogenizing and differentiating tendencies” (Blackmore, [1999](#), p. 33). It is characterized by the growing international centrality of capital markets and by the reframing of “all social relations, all forms of knowledge and culture in terms of the market,” with “[a]ll human production and all sites of social intercourse, all services that a society establishes for the common good ... potential targets for investment and profit making” (Lipman, [2001](#), para. 33). However, we recognize that there are, in fact, multiple globalizations. In all of them, we see two trends: Increased inequality and increased possibility for trans-national social protest.

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