



Inventing Human Rights: A History

Lynn Hunt

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How were human rights invented, and how does their tumultuous history influence their perception and our ability to protect them today? From Professor Lynn Hunt comes this extraordinary cultural and intellectual history, which traces the roots of human rights to the rejection of torture as a means for finding the truth. She demonstrates how ideas of human relationships portrayed in novels and art helped spread these new ideals and how human rights continue to be contested today.

Inventing Human Rights: A History Details

Date : Published April 17th 2008 by W. W. Norton Company (first published 2007)

ISBN : 9780393331998

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Format : Paperback 272 pages

Genre : History, Nonfiction, Politics, Philosophy, Law

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From Reader Review *Inventing Human Rights: A History* for online ebook

Salim Alghamdi says

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Tammam Aloudat says

This is not a pure history of the human rights movement but an analysis from the point of view of the author of why did people come to identify with natural universal rights (because they learned to sympathise from novels among other things) and how people became individuals who cannot be subject to torture and inflicted cruelties because of their intrinsic value. She tells us about the tensions between rights being obvious yet needing to be stated and being universal yet applied variably. I really like the book and find it enriching but it is by no means a history of human rights, it is an analytical look at the causative factors of some aspects of human rights and it is brilliant at that.

Joseph Stieb says

This book attempts something monumental that most historians don't try to answer: What motivates people's shifts in moral perspective? How can we explain these often-rapid shifts in specific historical contexts. Specifically, Hunt tries (and mainly succeeds) in explaining why when human rights believers like Jefferson and the framer of the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen said that these rights were both universal and self-evident, why did so many people believe it and act upon it?

This is a trickier task that it first appears. Saying that something is self-evident requires that you avoid explaining its origins or philosophical justification. After all, if you explain why something is self-evident, it ceases to be self-evident. This makes Jefferson and co. out to be more radical than normally seen. The question then is why and how these rights became normal amongst so many Europeans and Americans. Hunt looks to the Enlightenment, but not just the philosophers. Rather, she shows how Enlightenment culture facilitated the prominence of many philosophical ideas that encouraged people to be unprecedentedly concerned with each other's rights and welfare.

Here's an example: The Enlightenment witnessed a sharp decline in the use of judicial torture as public and philosophical opinion turned against this practice. People had been coming to public tortures and execution for centuries for entertainment and communal justice, so why did their opinions turn in this particular period? Lynn argues that Europeans increasingly came to see and understand each other as having inner lives and feelings similar to their own. The tendency to recognize and respect the bodily and mental autonomy of others, even those on the lower rungs of society, grew in this period in connection with a culture that increasingly focused on people's inner lives. The biggest manifestation of this trend was the novel, a wildly popular invention of the mid 17th century. Novels were about ordinary people, and they focused on their inner struggles and emotions. They evoked empathy in their readers, an emotion always based in a sense of common humanity. Novels were only one cultural mode that encouraged this type of reflection about others. People also paid growing attention to personal space, hygiene, and manners as part of the turn towards

respecting the autonomy of others. A reading, increasingly humanist culture also focused less on religious abstraction and more on the humanness of the person. No longer could people be sacrificed for political or religious reasons. It was now their bodies and minds that needed protection, not their souls. Hunt argues that human rights ideology became self-evident out of a mix of reason and emotion. If you could see the inner life of a character in a novel, then you could most likely see and empathize with someone being tortured to death in the town square. Torture therefore became morally unacceptable as well as ineffective, as reformers like Beccaria argued. You could see that they were essentially like you but that they were also not you, and that they needed some level of protection. Human rights became a way of expressing philosophical arguments (because obviously people like Locke and Voltaire had a lot to do with this story) and a more inchoate but definitely real moral and emotional sensibility among many Europeans. Hunt does an excellent job explaining this complex dynamic.

This book is highly relevant for the present day. It's a good warning for us to avoid thinking that widely held ideas cannot change quite quickly. Remember that it hasn't even been 20 years since the Defense Against Marriage Act, and here we are in a nation in which political, public, and judicial wills have turned decisively in favor of gay rights. The book certainly has its limitations. Any study of moral sensibilities is difficult to test empirically and will always rely on a certain inherent logic rather than extensive proof. Still, this is one of the most enjoyable and intellectually stimulating books on the Enlightenment that I have read, and I highly recommend it to those interested in the crossroads of philosophy and history.

Last off, here's a great quote from Cesare Beccaria, tireless opponent of torture: "If I shall contribute to save from the agonies of death one unfortunate victim of tyranny, or of ignorance, equally fatal; his blessing and tears of transport will be a sufficient consolation to me for the contempt of all mankind."

Fiona says

If I had written a book of non-fiction, I would have liked it to end up like this one. Lynn Hunt is a history professor, specialising in the French Revolution, which means I like her already, and the central argument of *Inventing Human Rights* is that the growth of certain types of novels during the Enlightenment, amongst other things, directly contributed to a different conception of "self" and personal boundaries, as well as changing how people empathised, which turned the tide of public opinion against judicial torture and ultimately resulted in the human rights revolution. She looks at three of my five all-time-favourite pieces of legislation ever, which are the US Declaration of Independence, the French Declaration of the Rights of Man, and the UN Declaration of Human Rights (if you're wondering, the other two spots on my top five are the European Convention on Human Rights and the combined Geneva Conventions - I am nothing if not consistent). She charts the meaning of human rights, and rights language, from the lofty ideals of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, through Bentham's attack on the concept of natural rights, to the way in which talking about universality actually contributed to "biological" and "ethnic"-based racism, as people scrambled to try and find other bases to justify their bigotry.

Natural law is a really odd thing. I gather philosophers mean something a bit different by positivism, but broadly speaking in jurisprudence, the positivist view is that law is only what society makes up itself, whereas the natural law view suggest that there are some laws that are part of nature, they exist universally, it doesn't matter whether we admit to having them or not. Such as "no extra-judicial killing". The first thing they tell you (read: told me) at law school is "you will probably not believe in natural law quite so much by the end of this year". Anyone who still believe that natural law is a useful concept at the end of first year ends up gravitating towards human rights, which is pretty much what I did. The rest is history.

The language we use to describe human rights - calling them inalienable, purely by virtue of being human, a

minimum standard of treatment for all individuals regardless of characteristics - that's the language of natural law. As Hunt says, starting out with "We hold these truths to be self-evident" - you don't get much more natural law-ish than that. She charts the history of people saying "of course it's self-evident!" from (impliedly) Samuel Richardson to the abolitionists, and people saying "that's really not self-evident at all!", from Bentham to Lenin. She lingers largely in France and the US - she's a French Revolution specialist at UCLA, so, obviously - and there's a lot of fascinating history going on here.

A few issues. This is really readable, but I feel like there's a fair bit missing, especially from the beginning. The books Hunt talks about as case studies in discussing the advancement of empathy - she picks three of them, and two thirds of them are by Samuel Richardson. Why *not* Tom Jones? Why not Robinson Crusoe or Tristram Shandy? For that matter, protagonists who are ordinary people are not a uniquely C18th invention - why didn't Chaucer manage to spark a rights revolution? There's a lot more to say here, and I'd have liked a bit more of the gaps filled. She asks the question, why is it the West where all of this stuff starts - I'd have liked to hear a bit about the rest of the world, if only to explain why she wasn't going to talk about it in detail. ("Not my specialism" is a totally valid reason!)

Nevertheless, as a two-hundred-page whistlestop tour through individual rights, Hunt writes a broad and accessible book. It's a great primer, with a light touch, and I think this is a book I'm going to be lending out, which is great. 3.5 stars and a hearty recommendation. Maybe there's still room in the market for my long-time-forthcoming magnum opus on how Speculative Fiction Maketh Man.

Carla Coelho says

This book is a happy example of an instructive and readable work. Lynn Hunt focuses on highlighting socio-cultural evolution in the emergence of human rights as we know them today, solidified in the 1948 Declaration of Human Rights. In this context, she writes about the importance of the epistolary novel that emerged in the seventeenth century as a means of overcoming social barriers and developing empathy, a gateway to concern for others. The author focuses on the history of the United States and France, analyzing the victories and also the gaps in documents such as the Declaration of Independence of the first and the French Revolution. At a time like the world we live in, this work is a milestone in the reflection on human rights and a stimulus to continue a work that is far from finished.

Este livro é um feliz exemplo de um trabalho instrutivo e de leitura agradável. Lynn Hunt debruça-se sobre o relevo da evolução sócio-cultural no emergir dos direitos humanos tal como hoje os conhecemos, solidificados na Declaração de Direitos Humanos de 1948. Neste quadro, escreve sobre o relevo do romance epistolar surgido no século XVII como meio de superação de barreiras sociais e de desenvolvimento da empatia, porta de entrada da preocupação com os demais. A Autora debruça-se sobre a história dos Estados Unidos da América e da França, analisando as vitórias e também as lacunas de documentos como a Declaração de Independência do primeira e da Revolução Francesa. Num momento como o que vivemos em termos mundiais, esta obra é um marco na reflexão sobre os direitos humanos e um estímulo para continuar um trabalho que está longe de estar terminado.

Eli says

2.5 stars

This wasn't very cohesive and it felt contradictory. At the end of the introduction, she said her argument was how epistolary novels and empathy helped further human rights. She only really talked about novels in the first chapter and then went off to talk about other things. It just felt like I was reading more than one book. And then the last chapter is titled "The Soft Power of Humanity: How Human Rights Failed Only to Succeed in the Long Run." But then she says that "human rights is in need of rescuing" in that chapter. You can't say it succeeded and then say it needs rescuing. You also can't measure human rights on a success/failure binary, especially in our world. Human rights have neither absolutely succeeded or absolutely failed. They have succeeded and failed and will continue to succeed and fail. I feel that the success/failure binary she hints at here oversimplifies the situation of human rights and also completely ignores the injustices that many marginalized communities still face today. Human rights have not succeeded in the end. But they have not necessarily failed either. Also, this entire book is Eurocentric, so know that going in if you decide to read it.

Ed says

Hunt begins by locating the rise of human rights with the rise of the novel. Eighteenth century literary culture encouraged readers to identify directly and intensely with those unlike themselves--learning to feel what was called sympathy then and is called empathy now for characters on the pages of "Clarissa", "Pamela" (Richardson) and "Julie" (Rousseau) led to the ability to identify with people in utterly different conditions than that of the reader. Individuals discovered or developed profound feelings for the autonomy and well-being of other human beings.

She writes that "rights must be natural (inherent in human beings), equal (the same for everyone) and universal (applicable everywhere)" but they were considered universal for some but not for women and only eventually for free black men, Jews, Catholics (in England), Protestants (in France) and slaves (except in the United States).

Her chapter on torture is a cogent discussion how the views of 18th century Italian philosopher Cesare Beccaria on legal punishment have influenced the intellectual, moral and political views and practices of kings and emperors, philosophers and revolutionaries, intellectuals and pamphleteers on torture, the death penalty and public criminal proceedings. It is one of the strongest and most incisive sections of the book. Hunt goes a bit overboard in the chapter on the French revolution, discussing it in greater detail than necessary in such a slender volume--which makes sense because she is a specialist in the French revolution.

Joel says

In my first year of humanitarian work I was called on to help start up a program in Kosovo after the end of that bloody conflict. Ethnic cleansing they called it, genocide without the murder I suppose. I was 21 or 22, wet behind the ears – young and idealistic. I was going to change the world! I went into Kosovo walking alongside the new UN government, setting up shop in Prisen as we all began to work with the people who were returning in rivers from Albania and Macedonia to help winterize their homes for the coming frigid Kosovar winters and to get winter wheat planted before the earth became frozen and hard; a crop to begin that painful process of recovery.

From there, after the program was on its way, I was sent into the Democratic Republic of the Congo – Goma specifically and Bukavu where the second civil war had just started. Who knew it was going to be the worst war since WWII. Africa's world war. I was still green – and plunged from one crisis to the next, literally flying from Tirana in to Kigali and driving across the border into Goma – I was struck by the difference

between these two conflicts.

Kosovo – a population of maybe two million. The response? 35,000 NATO soldiers; every NGO on the planet (including “Clowns Without Borders” – its nice to know Clowns also have no borders); every UN agency. The work divided up into quadrants, funds flowing in for relief work which were staggering in their scope. Then Congo – I was there even before the incompetent peacekeepers. Uruguayans setting up prostitution rings, but this was before then. The sound of the silence of Congo’s civil war was deafening. In Kosovo we’d had the beating of helicopters and the crunch of friendly tanks and the huge parties with hundreds of foreigners who had come to help the little blond refugees. In Congo? A few haggard aid workers chain smoking and drinking themselves into early graves.

There has been much written on this of course, donor fatigue and the like. But all the analysis comes down to one word – empathy. With whom we identify has a great role in how we react to the evils we see around us.

I just finished reading Lynn Hunt’s well-written book “*Inventing Human Rights*”. First what it is not, it is not a story about westerners inventing human rights. Human rights – by their very “self-evident” nature have always existed; they weren’t dreamt up in a bar in Oxford or Geneva. The book might better be called “*Re-discovering Human Rights*” but I’d probably go with a different title – “*Human Rights and the Discovery of Empathy*”. Because that’s what this book is about. It is a well-researched and well-written account of how, coming out of the renaissance and the enlightenment and the industrial revolution people in western Europe began to rediscover their humanity, but more importantly the humanity of others, through the process of empathizing. The author chooses an interesting entry into this topic, the beginning of novel-writing in Europe. And how reading novels like *Clarissa* helped revolutionize the way people thought about other people by putting themselves in others’ shoes – in the abstract. The book then goes into the epic fights (legislative and in public opinion) against torture; on writing the different declarations which we hold now almost for granted; the pitched battle against slavery – as step by step humans rediscovered why we are different, and above the animals. Lynn avoids the religious arguments into the “Truths we hold self-evident” or the “Laws of God written on the hearts of men” or the “Laws of Nature and of Nature’s God” – which is why the book is misnamed. Nevertheless as one in an endless series of tomes to help us figure out how we saved ourselves as a species from the rack and debtors prisons and enslavement – “*Inventing Human Rights*” belongs alongside others such as “*Liberalism: The Life of an Idea*” and “*The Triumph of Liberty*” to lead us in understanding the nature – and responsibility – of our humanity.

The case that the greatest piece of technological advancement in history was Gutenberg’s press is one that could be well-argued using this book; that is when everything started changing in the west – and the world.

On a personal note – I am very glad she started with making the case for fiction (a novel), and I feel somewhat vindicated for the sneers I receive in choosing literary fiction as my avenue for expression. There are too many people today who arrogantly and ignorantly announce to the world “I don’t read fiction” – probably not even knowing what they’re saying. Empathy – it is what I try to do with my fiction, to connect people to situations that they probably don’t think of. “*I, Charles, From the Camps*” the first person account of a black man from a refugee camp who becomes an LRA soldier in Uganda. “*Lords of Misrule*” about a Tuareg boy who joins jihad.

But I digress. Read Lynn Hunt’s excellent book, and then continue on to the others I recommend and keep learning. We are losing our humanity – social media and hate are taking it from us – lets rediscover our humanity, and with it the rights not of ourselves but of others.

Arbeitslose etc. ausgeschlossen) sowie vor allem der Empathie als Anerkennung anderer Menschen als Individuen. Dabei stellt Hunt die in meinen Augen zweifelhafte These vor, dass vor allem der aus der Ich-Perspektive geschriebene Briefroman ab Mitte des 18. Jahrhunderts eine große Rolle gespielt hat.

Die Autorin nennt vor allem die drei Romane Pamela (1740), Clarissa (1747/48) von Richard Stephenson sowie Rousseau's Julie (1761) vor. Durch die Empathie sei ein klassenübergreifendes Bewusstsein entstanden, auch gefördert durch die (langsam) steigende Alphabetisierung.

Mir scheint die These, dass gerade der Roman eine große Rolle gespielt haben soll ehrlich gesagt etwas weit hergeholt, zumindest ohne weitere Argumente/Belege. Hunt gibt aber auch weitere Faktoren wie Ausstellungen, Portraits etc. als Gründe für ein mehr an Empathie an, führt diese aber leider (mit Ausnahme eines kurzen Abschnitts über Porträtmalerei) nicht weiter aus. Da die Empathie einer der wichtigsten Punkte bei ihr ist fehlt so leider inhaltlich etwas.

Die weiteren, gefühlt nicht so sehr in die Tiefe gehenden Kapitel gehen auf die unterschiedlichen Herangehensweisen in den verschiedenen westlichen Ländern in Bezug auf Menschenrechte ein, aber auch auf die Schwierigkeiten der Anerkennung der Menschenrechte nach Veröffentlichung der Declaration of Independenc' und der *Declaration of the Rights of Man. Das folgende 19. Jahrhundert wird verhältnismäßig kurz abgehandelt, allerdings wird auf die wichtigsten Punkte, die der Akzeptanz der allgemeinen Menschenrechte entgegenstanden, eingegangen:

- Sklaverei und die allgemeine Nicht-Anerkennung in den Kolonien
- der steigende Nationalismus, der die Menschenrechte auf die eigene Nation beschränkt und damit das Ideal des Universalismus untergräbt
- Sozialismus und Kommunismus, die den allgemeinen Menschenrechten lange entgegenstehen (so wurden die allgemeinen Menschenrechte in der Sowjetunion etwa erst unter Gorbatschow offiziell anerkannt, also knapp 200 Jahre nach der französischen Revolution)
- dem Aufkommen eines biologischen Rassebegriffs zur Unterstützung des Nationalismus. Durch den Rassebegriff entstehen Hierarchien, die biologische Erklärung der Unterschiede zwischen Menschen ist der Hauptgrund, wieso Frauen von den allgemeinen Menschenrechten bis teilweise weit ins 20. Jahrhundert (bzw. außerhalb des Westens bis heute) ausgeschlossen waren.

Ach ja, am Ende wird auf wenigen Seiten noch auf die Entstehung der UN Declaration of Human Rights eingegangen und deren Umsetzung auf der Welt beleuchtet.

Insgesamt betrachtet ist das Buch durchaus interessant zu lesen, lediglich manche Argumente klingen mir ohne weitere Ausführung / Belege sehr weit hergeholt. Zusammen mit dem sehr gestauchten 19. Jahrhundert und dem ganz kurzen 20. Jahrhundert sowie teils bekannten Informationen (Nationalismus, Rassismus etc. als Negativfaktoren sind allgemein bekannt) ohne genauere Bezüge zu den Menschenrechten bleiben zum Schluß nur drei Sterne übrig. Dennoch ist das Buch für den ein oder anderen, der sich für politische Ideengeschichte interessiert vielleicht interessant, und aufgrund des kompakten Umfangs ist es auch schnell gelesen.

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In all, I really loved the perspectives offered in this book and loved how each point was tied to historical fact. Even if you don't agree with the conclusions Hunt draws from those facts, I highly recommend mulling the entire book over!

Kimba Tichenor says

This book sets out to explain how the concept of human rights, i.e. rights owing simply to one's status as a human, rather than as a member of a particular political community, gained widespread currency. She traces the origins of human rights to the eighteenth-century Western Enlightenment and tries to make the argument that it emerged at this point in time because there was a fundamental change in how ordinary individuals related to one another and in how they thought -- namely they developed empathy: "I am trying to refocus attention on what goes on within individual minds...Attention has been focused on the social and cultural contexts, not on the way individual minds understand and reshape that context. I believe that social and political change -- in this case, human rights -- comes about because many individuals had similar experiences, not because they inhabited the same social context but because through their interactions with each other and with their reading and viewing, they actually created a new social context...For human rights to become self-evident, ordinary people have to have new understandings that came from new kinds of feelings" (34).

To make this argument, she opens by endeavoring to show how a new genre -- the epistolary novel -- changed the way in which Westerners (specifically British, French, and American) apprehended the emotions of others. While she does not try to claim that novels alone led to empathy, she does not identify any other contributing factors. However, the main problem is that author fails to present sufficient evidence at multiple levels that the epistolary novel had this impact and if so how exactly this new concept of empathy became entangled with political thought. For example, she states at one point, "The capacity for empathy is universal because it is rooted in the biology of the brain" (39). So if this is the case, it would suggest that human beings long before the 18th century demonstrated empathy. Thus, she would need to demonstrate a qualitative difference, as well as a quantitative one, in how empathy was expressed in the 18th century as opposed to other centuries. But she provides little or no background on earlier expressions of empathy. So one might say, perhaps she simply means a quantitative difference in its expression in the public sphere. So while she provides examples of the reading public's reactions to epistolary novels (primarily from elites), she provides her reader with no real evidence as to how widespread this phenomenon was. Is it in fact changing the "ordinary individuals" perception of the world? And who she includes in the category "ordinary" is never specified. These oversights may simply result from the book's length. At a mere 214 pages (not counting appendices or notes), there is just not sufficient space to document such a sweeping change in the history of emotion.

The second chapter of the book focuses on changed attitudes toward the use of state torture and its implication for the invention of human rights. She notes that in Europe and the United States in the 18th century, a fairly rapid reduction in the use of torture techniques occurred. She links this development to 3 phenomena: 1) increased empathy 2) new emphasis on the integrity of the body 3) the rise of secularism stripped torture of its religious moorings, thus changing its meanings for the public. In making this argument, what she fails to problematize is the reemergence of torture as a viable interrogation technique since the attack on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. If a reduction in the use of torture techniques is key for human rights gaining widespread currency, then what impact does its reemergence have on the currency of human rights in the post-9/11 world? The war on terror was often framed as a human rights issue and yet initially the United States utilized torture as a key element in that war. Water boarding as practiced by the CIA, events at Abu Ghraib, not to mention the detention of possible terrorists without recourse to due process at Guantanamo Bay all attest to this fact. So perhaps the relation between torture and the language of

human rights is more complicated than the author suggests, given that sometimes that language becomes weaponized against real or imagined enemies. It becomes a means of creating "the other".

There is no doubt that the author raises some important questions about how the language of human rights gained acceptance and about how changes in how we perceive others and the world around us impacts our understanding of human rights. That said, the book skips over vast periods of time -- dedicating a mere 30-some-odd pages to the period following the 1948 UN declaration. Moreover, Hunt presents a history of human rights that assumes a unilateral diffusion of human rights from the global North to the global South. In short, she never considers the many grassroots movements in Asia and South America who appropriated the language of human rights in the 1970s and 1980s in order to move their local struggles onto the international stage and how this appropriation transformed the international debate on human rights.
