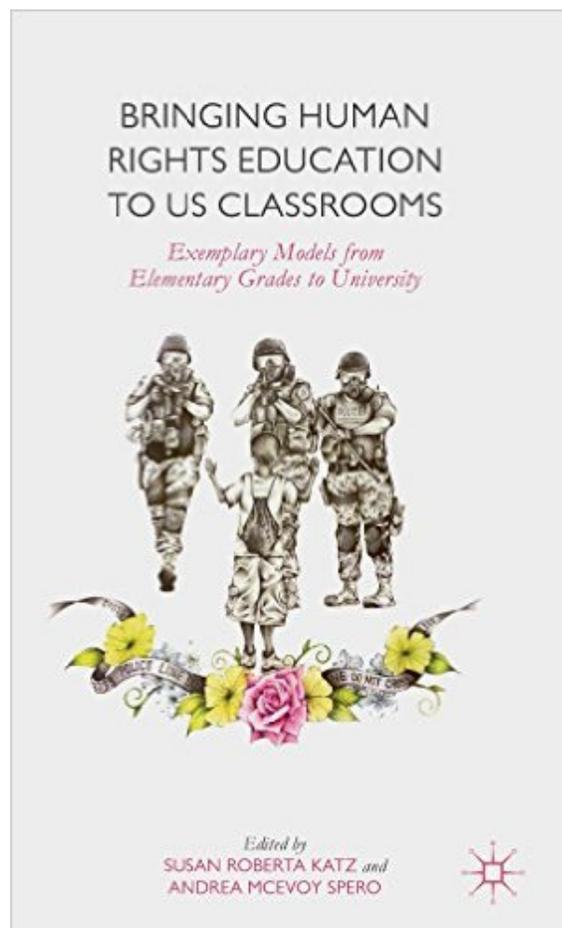


# RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

## Bringing Human Rights Education to US Classrooms: Exemplary Models from Elementary Grades to University by Susan Roberta Katz and Andrea McEvoy Spero (Eds.)

Reviewed by Michael Bennett



**Bringing Human Rights Education to U.S. Classrooms: Exemplary Models from Elementary Grades to University (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015)**

As Susan O'Malley and I discuss in the introduction to this issue of *Radical Teacher*, we have come to appreciate through the process of gathering and editing the essays included here that there is a growing and vibrant community of teachers dedicated to Human Rights Education (HRE). Katz's and Spero's edited volume does an admirable job of providing this community with the tools and information needed to apply the insights of HRE in a range of classroom settings, from elementary school and a junior high science class to a college course in Asian American Studies.

The two introductory chapters (one by Felisa Tibbitts and one by the editors) provide a helpful overview of HRE. They also caution that HRE is built on contested terrain. Tibbitts traces this contestation to the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), which was developed mostly by nation states of the Global North that emphasize "individual rights," as opposed to the emphasis on "collective rights" by indigenous groups and nations in the Global South; she notes that HRE is still resisted at times because of this legacy of thinking about human rights in a "top-down and hegemonic manner with little knowledge or respect for local culture" (4). Katz and Spero also train a critical eye on HRE, noting the contradiction between the U.S.'s self-image as a beacon of human rights and its failure to ratify many of the most fundamental human rights treaties (most notably being the only nation not to ratify the Convention on the Rights of the Child). They trace this contradiction to two sources: "U.S. 'exceptionalism' and a neoliberal, market-economy approach to education" (19). Though the subsequent essays in *Bringing Human Rights Education to U.S. Classrooms* are more interested in the nuts and bolts of providing HRE rather than a critical analysis of human rights discourse from a radical perspective, they provide some useful models for teachers that could be adopted and adapted from a variety of political perspectives.

The best pedagogical essays that form the core of this volume do an admirable job of keeping the contradictions of HRE in view. For instance, in the process of discussing the connection between human rights and the social construction of race and gender in "Bringing to Life Human Rights Education in the Science Classroom," Annie S. Admian makes the point that efforts to engage in HRE are undermined by the U.S.'s failure to live up to the education standards established in the UDHR, such that "U.S. public schools often embody sites of punishment and failure, rather than sites of sustenance and hope" (70). Jessie Blundell's "Each One, Teach One: The History and Legacy of the Black Panther Party (BPP) for an Elementary School Audience" explains how the BPP represented a return to the roots of the Black Radical Tradition that the mainstream Civil Rights movement had largely abandoned. Blundell brought this message home for her elementary school students in San Francisco by focusing on a local human rights campaign to free the SF 8—members of the

BPP who were jailed in 2007 for refusing to give testimony regarding a 1971 case that was reopened by former San Francisco Police Department inspectors who had since been deputized as Homeland Security agents. In my favorite of the pedagogical essays, "Tout moun se moun 'Every Person is a Human Being': Understanding the Struggle for Human Rights in Haiti," Victoria Isabel Durán points to the multiple ironies of trying to engage in HRE in and about Haiti, a country devastated by the legacy of colonialism, domestic dictators, and U.S.-led "humanitarian interventions" resisted by President Aristide's appeals to the UDHR before he was deposed and then replaced by the United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH) that has since been accused of several violations of human rights that were codified by the UN. The mind reels.

Even the "exemplary lessons" I most appreciate in this volume are, for my taste, a little too full of jargony Ed School Speak (rubrics and repetitive lesson plans and worksheets). One could argue that these are necessary components of the genre of exemplary lessons, but the writing is sometimes weighed down by the uninspired prose and insufficiently self-critical and overly instrumentalist analysis of the genre. This is especially a problem for the essays that are more prescriptive than descriptive, which often come off as preachy. Also, the essays focused on college courses are less innovative and interesting than those dealing with primary and secondary education. I suspect that some of these limitations have to do with the fact that all of the pedagogical chapters are drawn from final projects submitted by graduate students in the University of San Francisco's HRE program. Though this narrow focus is understandable given the innovative character of the program in which the editors teach, one wonders if the volume would have fewer clunkers had the publication process been opened up to human rights educators working outside the confines of one program.

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The most intriguing and radical essays in this volume are those that frame it: Olga Talamante's "Foreword" and K. Wayne Yang's "Afterword: Will Human Rights Education Be Decolonizing?" Talamante discusses how her experience of being imprisoned and tortured during the Dirty War in Argentina awakened her to the discourse of human rights, which shaped her activism from the successful campaign that ended military aid for the Argentinian junta to her current struggles as director of the Chicana/Latina Foundation in support of the undocumented. Yang's afterword is both engagingly written and critically engaged in recognizing that too often "the very powers that enforce Human Rights are the human rights violators" (225). In recognizing this contradiction, Yang turns to a model of critical pedagogy that draws on the Black Radical Tradition and movements for Indigenous survivance. Yang invokes Malcolm X and the practice of red pedagogy (drawing less on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

than on the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples) for models of HRE that recognize how too often “the legal concept of ‘Human’ has continued to mean a settler and a property owner whose ‘Rights’ to land, life, and liberty are actually entitlements enforced by settler nation-states” (226). These lenses lead him to conclude that “human rights are not achievable in a colonial setting; human rights are achieved through self-determination” (234), which provides a necessary sense of critical awareness that is absent from some of the volume’s essays that are essentially paeans to HRE.

Though I wish that more of the “exemplary models” that form the core of the volume were as politically astute as the essays that frame and introduce them, *Bringing Human Rights Education to U.S. Classrooms* performs a useful pedagogical function. At its best, the text provides models for radical teachers who want to develop courses on HRE or incorporate lesson plans about human rights discourse for a variety of classroom settings and course offerings. And even the less overtly radical lesson plans could be tweaked with the help of the political lenses offered in the framing essays and introductions. Some would say that it is too difficult to provide elementary students with the radical tools of critical pedagogy and socio-political understanding, but the best of the essays here provide evidence that this is not the case.

Radical teaching happens from pre-school to graduate school, as this volume helpfully reminds us.



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