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Megan N. Patterson

University of San Francisco, mnpatterson3@usfca.edu

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Book Review

Emancipatory Human Rights and the University: Promoting Social Justice in Higher Education

By Felisa Tibbitts and André Keet (Eds.)

Routledge Press, 2024, 227 pages.

US\$42.36 (eBook), US\$136.00 (Hardback)

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*Review by Megan Patterson**

University of San Francisco

The Right to Education¹ is a human right that sits as a cornerstone of international development, education, and the advancement of social justice, but what exactly does it mean in practice? Many debates have risen from the logistics of accessing schooling for basic skills in literacy and numeracy to the responsibility of educational institutions to enfranchise students with not only human rights but increased life possibilities and the shaping of a more just world (Hartley, 2015). With an increasingly professionalized world and the global dominance of neoliberalism, is higher education becoming a basic need of learning? If so, what role does the

* **Megan Patterson** is a community organizer, critical scholar, and healing-justice educator. Her research has emphasized learning access in the fields of Education in Emergencies, non-formal community learning, and online youth social justice organizing. With a master's degree in human rights education, Megan's work explores global coalitions towards decolonization and liberation education praxis. mpatterson3@usfca.edu

¹ The *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UDHR) (1948) defines the Right to Education in Article 26 as universal and should be free and openly accessible to all through at least an elementary level. Higher Education is noted as needing to be 'equally accessible' based on merit, and that all learning must advance the development of the whole person while respecting and promoting human rights.

university play in delivering human rights and justice to students, faculty, and communities impacted by research? Editors Tibbitts and Keet (2024) open *Emancipatory Human Rights and The University: Promoting Social Justice in Higher Education* asking just these questions, considering both the practical and radical possibilities of higher education spaces to expand access to human rights and, in practice, act as a facilitating forum for the right to education and beyond. As this book speaks directly to educators, administrators, and staff within higher education institutions globally, the frameworks, field notes, and empirical research curate a narrative of how much work and reform are needed for higher education to be truly emancipatory.

Twenty-five scholars in the field of Human Rights Education (HRE) and higher education provide a lens into the values, responsibilities, and true motivations of higher learning. The book's twelve chapters are divided into three sections: *Theory*, *Looking Inside the University*, and *Looking Outside the University*. Editors Tibbitts and Keet explain how this organization helps give a broader view of higher education for its complex positioning as academic institutions – credited and often responsabilized with thought leadership on topics like human rights and social justice – and the practices and impact broadly of institutions on societies. Addressing the historic and ongoing role of higher education institutions in the colonial project and ongoing exploitation of Indigenous lands, the book opens with a tone of self-awareness, and expresses clear desire to elevate diverse perspectives and offer an expanded lens into the state of the field to include global north and global south scholarship. This book attempts to disrupt the structural violence of the university and historic western elitism of scholarship, which pervades publication about, among other topics, higher education.

In the first part entitled *Theory*, Tibbitts opens the section by analyzing what emancipatory human rights really mean, debating if higher education must be free to be included in the right, discriminatory practices of evaluating 'merit', and how higher education institutions must navigate international law and proceedings. Keet et al. then complicate the notion of *human rights*, noting its colonial roots and legacy of 'enforcement' projects

that have furthered both neo-liberalism and colonial agendas. Glasberg and Hughey, in Chapter 3, expand on Keet et al.'s contemplation on decolonization in the university by considering the epistemological forms of violence within the classroom, and Zembylas, in Chapter 4, suggests that perhaps a truly decolonial and emancipatory approach to higher education requires a complete rethinking of the institutions themselves and a de-romanticizing of the academy. Setting the stage for emancipatory human rights practices in the later sections, it is evident that there is no perfect model for how to (re-)structure higher education so that it may be a practical right for all in the advancement of rights and social justice, nor a way to absolve the inherent violence within the current university systems in regard to student exploitation and discrimination.

In Part Two, *Looking Inside the University*, the authors explore how the university's administrative and classroom dynamics interact with the advancement of social justice and equity. The chapters explore themes of responsibility, as Fisher and Gilbert in Chapter 5 evaluate how universities often reinforce structural violence through interactions with student activists while claiming justice-centered pedagogy. Gready et al. invoke the theme of 'protection' in Chapter 6 while exploring policies surrounding gender violence on campuses in South Africa and Uganda, evaluating performative policies and how 'protection' can defend students' rights or the reconstruction of colonial paternalism. Cortina and Quezada, in Chapter 7, evaluate discrepancies in women's representation in research and tenured positions in a university in Mexico as indicative of the university's shortcomings in facilitating gender equity in staff. Karnoff and Keet close the section with an evaluation of curricula in 24 universities across South Africa for how they explicitly interact with HRE and themes of 'social justice'; the authors note how South Africa has become something of a model for the rest of the world on how to implement human rights as a core tenet of socio-political structures post-apartheid, yet few substantive updates to curricula in higher education have taken place.

Looking Outside the University, part three of the book, examines communities impacted and included in university research, programs, and

professional fields like law, social work, psychology, and nursing. Cherry and Prevost in Chapter 9 and Pak and Moser-Mercer in Chapter 10 call forward how the university's responsibility to be emancipatory must reach beyond the classroom into research methods, from participatory action research to community-driven evaluation. Dijkstra and Hagedaars in Chapter 11 and Ramires and Rowthorn in Chapter 12 note the need to expand HRE and the emancipatory responsibilities of higher education to professional degree programs as well, identifying how core values of human rights are aligned with ethical obligations of fields like law, nursing, and social work. Each chapter shares common themes – highlighting the neoliberal overtones of higher learning both within traditional degree programs as well as professional licensure programs, calling forward the contemplations of the first part of the book: is an educational system permeated with structural violences which seeks to capitalize on learning and commodify the exploitation of often marginalized communities ever capable of being emancipatory?

The book advances a rigorous overview of current debates and theories within HRE and higher education, giving valuable insights into reformative work to increase the emancipatory capacities of the university while also providing practical insights into its shortcomings. Attempting to deliver on a challenging goal of giving a global perspective through dialogue between scholars of the global south and global north, the discourse and vision-setting of higher education as a human right is still western-dominated. While the authors expand the lens of learning to include programs in South Africa, Uganda, and Mexico, vital perspectives nonetheless are missing from the conversation, such as independent universities and tribal colleges, that could expand our understanding of how higher education can facilitate decolonization, social justice, and human rights. Most poignantly, however, this book calls forward an urgent need for increased scholarship and debate on the necessity of access to meaningful higher education in delivering on the right to education.

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