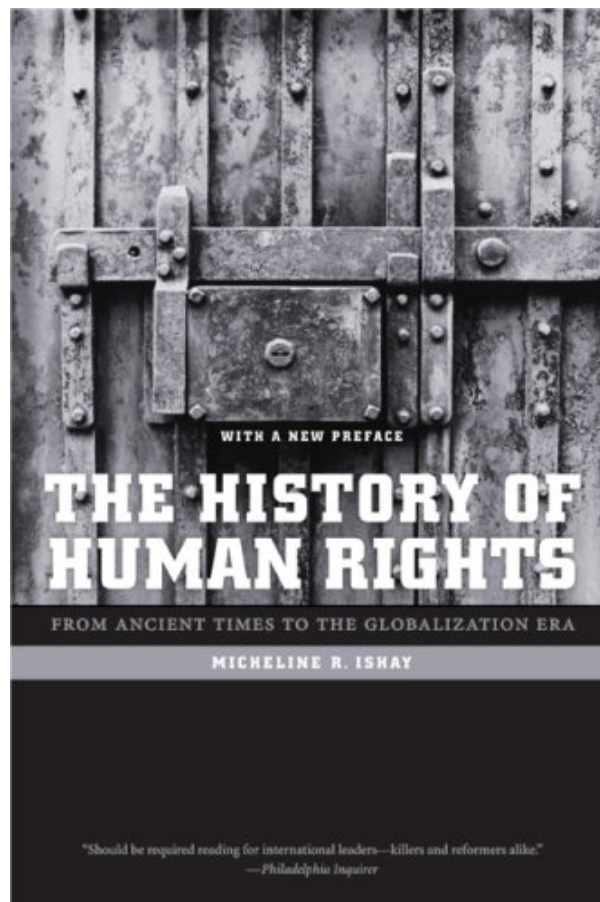
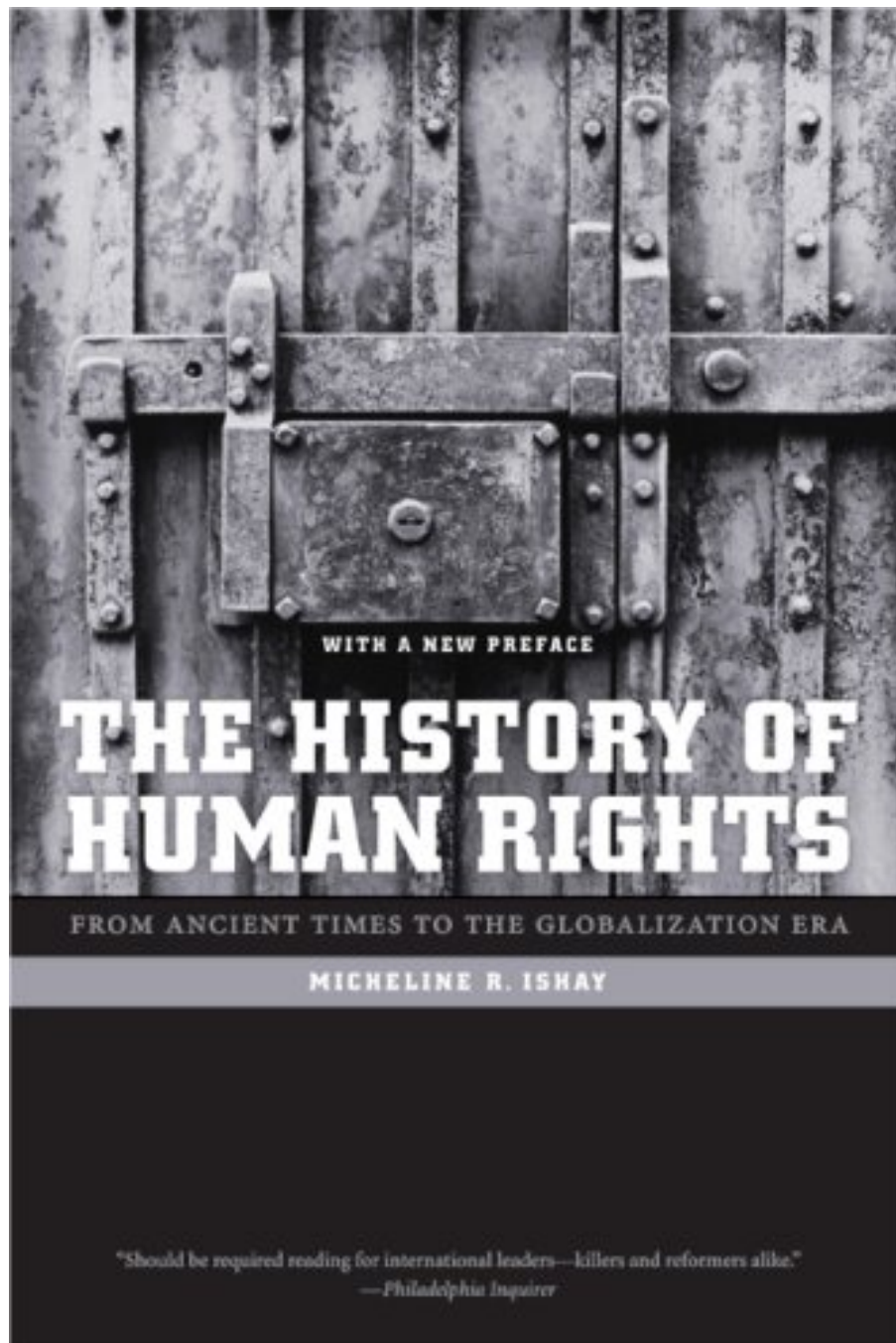


# **THE HISTORY OF HUMAN RIGHTS: FROM ANCIENT TIMES TO THE GLOBALIZATION ERA BY MICHELINE R. ISHAY**



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### Review

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Micheline Ishay recounts the dramatic struggle for human rights across the ages in a book that brilliantly synthesizes historical and intellectual developments from the Mesopotamian Codes of Hammurabi to today's era of globalization. As she chronicles the clash of social movements, ideas, and armies that have played a part in this struggle, Ishay illustrates how the history of human rights has evolved from one era to the next through texts, cultural traditions, and creative expression. Writing with verve and extraordinary range, she develops a framework for understanding contemporary issues from the debate over globalization to the intervention in Kosovo to the climate for human rights after September 11, 2001. The only comprehensive history of human rights available, the book will be essential reading for anyone concerned with humankind's quest for justice and dignity.

Ishay structures her chapters around six core questions that have shaped human rights debate and scholarship: What are the origins of human rights? Why did the European vision of human rights triumph over those of other civilizations? Has socialism made a lasting contribution to the legacy of human rights? Are human rights universal or culturally bound? Must human rights be sacrificed to the demands of national security? Is globalization eroding or advancing human rights? As she explores these questions, Ishay also incorporates notable documents—writings, speeches, and political statements—from activists, writers, and thinkers throughout history.

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#### Human Rights and Indigenous Peoples

By Peter N. Jones

Human rights are rights considered to be held by individuals simply because they are part of the human species. They are rights, in essence, shared equally by everyone regardless of sex, race, nationality, or ethnic background. They are universal in content. Despite this fairly straight forward definition, the recognition of human rights by individuals, groups, societies, states, and nations has been a constant battle across both space and time. Throughout the centuries groups or societies have failed to recognize certain human rights of individuals, groups, and cultures while at the same time recognizing those of others. Likewise, conflicting political traditions have elaborated different components of human rights or differed over which elements had priority. Today, the manifold meanings of human rights embodied in this definition reflects this process of history and change.

Presenting this long and conflicted history in one of the more accessible and comprehensive editions to date, *The History of Human Rights* by Micheline R. Ishay is the authoritative text on the subject. Using the main points developed in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the book chronicles the clashes of ideas, social movements, and armies that comprise the history of human rights. This history, although largely told from a Western perspective does encompass the perspective of those who have struggled to obtain them. Framing the history of human rights development through six core arguments, *The History of Human Rights* offers not only a comprehensive history and analysis, but also the basis for a discussion of where human rights needs to progress. This last component is what gives this book particular importance for indigenous peoples. As lucidly covered through six in-depth chapters, one of the final battles in the history of human rights will be over the rights of cultures, and particularly the inherent rights of indigenous peoples and their cultural lifeways in relation to state, national, and international rights.

Beginning with the controversy of human rights and religion, Ishay argues that each great religion contains important humanistic elements which have contributed to our modern conceptions of rights. For example, in the West, the impact of Judeo-Christian morality and ethics has been central to the development of human rights. As Ishay notes Judeo-Christian morality was secularized, separated from politics, and strengthened in influence by the advent of capitalism and colonialism in Europe, largely at the expense of other notions of ethics. Because of the development of capitalism in Europe, Judeo-Christian ethics became secularized with the progress of the Reformation (16th century) and the democratic revolutions of the eighteenth century, finally being transformed into a liberal discourse that dominates our current conception of human rights.

This leads to Ishay's second major argument in *The History of Human Rights*: that our modern conception of rights, wherever in the world they may be currently voiced, are predominantly European in origin. Not only are they largely founded on a secularized version of Judeo-Christian ethics, but that their current definition largely originated out of this European beginning. As Ishay correctly argues, this does not imply that Western rights are reducible to contemporary free-market liberalism, but rather that the human rights vision currently depicted as liberal is in fact indelibly molded by the socialist ideals that grew out of nineteenth-century European industrialization and secularized Judeo-Christian ethics.

As Ishay clearly articulates, the two documents most responsible for modern legal formulations of human rights are the American Bill of Rights and the 1789 French Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen. Both of these documents were the result of various social movements in the pre-industrial era. When industrialization took over in Europe and America, becoming an all consuming process, these documents coupled with the previously secularized Judeo-Christian ethical thought became the guiding ideologies in human rights definitions.

As such, our modern liberal take on human rights is also indebted to the social thought of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Ishay's third argument). Current attempts at asserting universal human rights, as *The History of Human Rights* argues, are defensive mechanisms against either liberal or socialist ideologies, since these ideologies presumably represent the oppressive legacy of Western imperial and colonial domination of the world.

The fourth argument in *The History of Human Rights* builds on the previous three, as the progress of human rights moved from individual to social, and finally cultural in scope. As such, Ishay contends that cultural rights must always be informed by, and checked against, a universalist perspective of human rights.

Like religious rights, the notion of cultural rights, so strongly advocated by liberal nationalists in nineteenth-century Europe (and later championed during the twentieth-century post-colonial struggle) was largely rejected by socialists because it caused a disjunction between group solidarity and universal human rights (p. 131). Challenging liberal ambiguities, many socialists pointed out that the primary beneficiaries of cultural rights were more often particular groups or individuals within the culture, and not the culture as a cohesive whole.

If we cannot trace the history and development of human rights in a linear fashion of progression from the individual to the social to the cultural, how can we say there has been any progress made in their development? This is Ishay's fifth argument: has there been any progress through history towards a universal set of human rights. Her contention is that there has been, although not necessarily through the recognized mechanisms. This in spite of President Roosevelt's 1945 proclamation that the United Nations would "spell the end of the system of unilateral action, ... the balances of power, and all the expedients that have been tried for centuries - and have always failed" (Roosevelt 1950: 570).

In short, universal human rights are always potentially endangered by particularist and vague conceptions of rights framed in terms of the "national interest," "national security," the right to "individual self-determination," or "cultural rights." Therefore, we must constantly keep vigilance on those who are in power and those who define human rights and their scope. This last point leads to *The History of Human Rights'* final point; a question rather than an argument.

Is globalization a boon or a threat from a human rights perspective. This is an especially important question when looking at the human rights progress in terms of indigenous peoples. As Ishay argues, and I would agree, the answer is that globalization has the potential to be a boon for human rights, but that we are not

there yet. With the development of global information technology, Human Rights Peacenet, Indigenous Peoples Issues and Resources, Amnesty International, and a multitude of other websites human rights advocates now have unprecedented possibilities for fighting. One cannot overlook the success of the human rights community's "infopressure" on the Mexican government during the Chiapas rebellion or the human rights "infoactivity" during the turbulent events in Tiananmen Square or against Indonesia's repression in East Timor.

However, we have not reached a nadir, we are still fighting an uphill battle. Not only has globalization opened new networks and avenues, but it has also allowed unprecedented human rights violations to occur. The illegal war in Iraq, China's occupation of Tibet, and the taking of land and natural resources from indigenous peoples are just a few. Human rights are still not universal. The best way to fight for their universal application is to know their history. The History of Human Rights is the best place to start. By knowing where we have come from, and how we got here, we can positively move forward. The History of Human Rights should be on everyone's reading list.

Make a difference. Know the history. Change the future.

[...]

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European History?

By M. Ruddy

Although much of the book provides a good background for much of Western history though the goggles of Human Rights, it at time seems to skip and distort aspects of it. How did benevolent religions sanction large scale war? Robespierre was not a champion of human rights by killing 20,000 people. Why are human rights still so in danger today? Don't get me wrong though, if you are looking for a historical read and do not have a lot of knowledge about European History, pick this up.

9 of 12 people found the following review helpful.

Human rights history is great, and badly needed.

By Francesco Lovecchio

Highly recommended to everybody. The book is an attempt to provide an account of the evolution of human rights over time and through political and philosophical thought. The author is well versed in political science and shows it off in this book while surfing in a very wide literature. It is well written. Two drawbacks in this beautiful book: not enough history of human rights; a scarce attention to those movements which paved the way to future developments but were unsuccessful at first. Great piece of work anyway! Look forward for Vol. II.

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