



## Critical human rights, citizenship, and democracy education: Entanglements and regenerations

Michalinos Zembylas and André Keet (eds). Bloomsbury Academic, London, 2018. 240 pp. Bloomsbury Critical Education series. ISBN 978-1-3500-4562-0 (hbk), ISBN 978-1-3501-3879-7 (pbk), ISBN 978-1-3500-4563-7 (ePUB), ISBN 978-1-3500-4565-1 (ePDF)

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My reading of this text does not come from within the field of citizenship (CE), democracy (DE) or human rights education (HRE). I am an outsider as far as the debates between CE, HRE and DE go. My interest in the problems at hand is my history as a social justice activist and scholar particularly within the field of adult learning and education (ALE). My doctoral thesis 35 years ago, which was entitled “Education for democratic participation”, studied education processes within anti-apartheid social movements – the issues of citizenship, human rights and democracy are therefore very “close and personal” to my perspective while being framed differently from those of CE, HRE and DE.

This edited collection addresses “critical” readings of CE, HRE and DE. It brings together a compendium of 13 chapters to engage with provocative questions about the possibilities for human rights, democracy and citizenship education to probe the basic assumptions on which they are fostered. The question is whether human rights, citizenship and democracy education can “simultaneously engage in understanding and undermining the new world in the process of becoming...” (p. 5).

The editors state (p. 6) that there are two overarching goals driving this collection which are addressed in two separate parts: (1) the first part (chapters 2–7) provides theoretical work that cultivates a critical view of human rights, democracy and citizenship education and revisits these categories to advance socially just educational *praxis*; and (2) the second part (chapters 8–13) highlights case studies that redefine the purposes, practices and approaches in education for a better configuration with the justice-oriented objectives of human rights (HRE), democracy (DE) and citizenship education (CE).

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The practices of HRE, DE and CE are interwoven in ways which are difficult to separate out. This is reflected in the broad definitional parameters of these three educational areas. Whereas CE refers to education that aims to promote citizens playing an active part in democratic life through the exercise of rights and responsibilities, DE has its educational focus on the idea, practices and principles of democracy, and HRE seeks the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms.

The expansion of human rights as the dominant moral language of our age, and its constitutive relationship with constitutional democracies and their related conceptions of citizenship have been taken up primarily within these three pedagogical areas. As the editors elaborate, these educational forms were consummated with the adoption of the *United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training* in December 2011 (UN 2012)<sup>1</sup> and the endorsement of global CE as a strategic priority within UNESCO's education programme (2014–2017). Most countries through government and civil society initiatives attempted to include CE into school curricula with concomitant schemes on curriculum development, teacher education and implementation plans. The expansion of educational forms on citizenship, democracy and human rights around the globe have been tracked in the authoritative "Education for All" reports.

The major conundrum which this book addresses is how practitioners and scholars challenge the very foundations of CE, DE and HRE, which are riddled with contradictions. One of the most blatant ones, described by Michalinos Zembylas (p. 35), is how everyone is supposed to have human rights, yet the reality is very different, as most people are denied full exercise of these rights. The roots of these contradictions, it is argued, are in the "modern tradition, which is a *colonial* condition" (ibid.). HRE therefore needs decolonising strategies which interrogate how Eurocentric thought, knowledge and power structures dominate present societies, and how that thought and knowledge have consistently undermined colonised people. These strategies could be translated into decolonising pedagogy and curricula which could promote a critical and transformative orientation towards HRE.

In the Afterword, Lis Lange contributes to the discussion in important ways. She asserts that CE, DE and HRE have limited emancipatory capacity, since they fail to engage with their own political, philosophical and systemic origins. She does not distinguish between the three categories, arguing (p. 226) that democracy, citizenship and human rights are all constitutive parts of the discourse of (European/Western) modernity and are equally tied to the history of capitalism. She is not concerned with the possible pedagogies, but with the understanding of the concepts of democracy, citizenship and human rights and their limits to bring about substantive change in the world.

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<sup>1</sup> UN (United Nations) (2012). *United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training*. Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 19 December 2011. A/RES/66/137. New York: United Nations. Retrieved 17 July 2020 from <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N11/467/04/PDF/N1146704.pdf?OpenElement>.

Lange reminds us that the logic of capitalist accumulation is intrinsically contradictory to human rights, citizenship and democracy especially in this current phase. Theoretical discussions about human rights, democracy and citizenship need to be located within the broader problem of social transformation and its possible directions. The concepts have been “tamed”, depoliticised, and there needs to be a “re-politicization of rights” (p. 233).

The editors acknowledge that this volume is a modest effort which is not able to provide answers to the challenging questions that they have posed. But it does advance scholarship in the entanglements of CE, DE and HRE. The collection constitutes a provoking exploration of the field, calling on all of us to be ever more critical.

As an outsider to this book’s specific field, but an insider to struggles around democracy, citizenship and human rights within social movements, I wonder whether it would not be possible to have these seemingly distinct worlds in conversation with one another in the interests of re-politicisation of democracy, citizenship and human rights. Cognisant of the explosion of social movement struggles taking place globally in support of the rights of black people, women, workers, children, nature, and so on, the connection of HRE, CE and DE to these movements is critical and does demand attention.

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