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## BOOK AND MEDIA REVIEWS

# Joy as a pedagogical tool for critical human rights education.

Simmons, W.P. (2019). *Joyful Human Rights*. Philadelphia: Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press. 304 pp., US\$75.00 (hardcover) ISBN 9780812251012

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For several years now, researchers and practitioners alike have advocated for a critical human rights education (HRE), emphasising the opportunities such an approach brings to the teaching and learning of rights, while at the same time warning about the severe consequences a lack of critical analysis can create (Bajaj, Cislighi, & Mackie, 2016; Keet, 2015; Osler, 2015; Zembylas, 2015).

A critical HRE has a number of aspects: it acknowledges the limitations of rights; it helps individuals to recognise dominant discourses, oppressive structures, systemic inequalities and marginalized voices; and it encourages a critical examination of the historical, contextual and social issues related to human rights abuses and violations while engaging in dialogues that bring multiple experiences, perspectives and voices into the discussion. There are multiple proposals on how to engage in such a critical HRE; e.g. focusing on empathy (Zembylas 2015), contextualising participants' lived experiences (Bajaj et al, 2016; Martínez Sainz 2018), or decolonising concepts and strategies in this field (Osler, 2015; Zembylas & Keet, 2019).

The notion of joy is not usually present in proposals for a critical HRE, although after reading William Paul Simmons' book, I would argue there is a strong case for its inclusion; joy can serve as a provocative framework for researchers and practitioners to re-think assumptions, challenge common practices and question the aims of HRE. In 'Joyful Human Rights', Simmons proposes a new approach to analysing, discussing and—ultimately—understanding human rights. This approach is based on the concept of joy. The book, thus, serves as an invitation for educators and researchers to rethink how human rights are commonly taught – mostly with a focus on tragedies, abuses and violations – and why a shift in the narrative towards joy can be beneficial.

The book is divided into two sections. In the first one, Simmons identifies the absence of joy in the dominant discourses of human rights, maps the historical and philosophical roots of this absence and develops the theoretical foundations of his proposal from a phenomenology of joy that is based on Lacan's psychoanalytic postulates about joy and suffering, Audre Lorde's notion of the erotic, and contemporary postulates of affect theory. He builds his arguments upon the ideas of *jouissance*, erotics and transgressive affect to explain what joy is, what it implies, and how it is experienced by individuals and groups. In the second part of the book, Simmons focuses on whom he considers the major human rights actors – victims,

perpetrators and activists – and elaborates on how members of these groups experience joy. He does this in order to challenge the conclusions commonly drawn from their experiences and to discuss the importance of new perspectives and nuances in the discourse of rights.

Using joy as an analytical tool to examine human rights violations and triumphs allows Simmons to make important connections between the individual and social experiences of actors and their relationships with key concepts such as voice, agency, recognition and empowerment. For this analysis, Simmons systematically uses historical examples and material from different media (movies, documentary films and photographs), as well as biographies and personal narratives of activists, perpetrators and survivors of human rights abuses. The author makes a noteworthy effort to have diverse experiences and voices represented in his proposed examples, and this is one of the book's main strengths. The book allows the reader to consider paradigmatic cases for the discussion of human rights, such as the Holocaust or the Civil Rights Movement, from a new perspective. However, it also invites us to learn from less known tragedies, activists and martyrs. Furthermore, the interplay between historical and contemporary examples strengthens Simmons' arguments. Neither is he afraid of discussing extremely controversial topics, such as joyful martyrdom. He examines the historical origins of martyrdom storytelling as a form of human rights advocacy and activism, and provides a subsequent analysis of contemporary martyrs in the Middle East.

There are clear advantages in a book for researchers and practitioners interested in a variety of themes in the field of human rights, from those looking into the lived experiences of individuals and groups in the light of abuses, survival and human rights 'wins' to those interested in the historical origins of the dominant discourses and narratives. However, the theoretical section of the book and the concepts the author uses to ground his phenomenology of joy might come across as convoluted for some readers and for scholars from disciplines outside social theory. Although it is an advantage for readers to have prior knowledge or a specific interest in this field, the author does a good job of systematically providing information on his core concepts, and this allows the less familiar reader to follow his arguments. Overall, Simmons's book succeeds in opening up a more critical discussion of rights by posing challenging questions and objections. One of his key questions is whether the solemnity around human rights abuses – and therefore the lack of joy as an important concept in the dominant narrative – causes more harm than good by inhibiting critical examination and uncomfortable discussion?

For educators and practitioners, this book could serve as a catalyst to think about joy, comedy and humour as pedagogical tools for a more critical HRE. The final chapter about human rights winners is one of the sections that best exemplifies this. Simmons presents multiple accounts of individuals that present themselves as not merely victims or survivors of human rights abuses, but primarily as whole individuals full of possibilities, as human rights winners. These accounts explain how individuals can reclaim their personhood through joy, and demonstrate the powerful possibilities for teaching and learning about rights that emerge from a framework of joy. Simmons' proposal is a relevant invitation for those working in HRE to imagine ways in which joy can help to shift the dominant narratives of rights. In this sense, this book is a well-timed and relevant contribution to human rights education.

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