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Human Rights in World History (Themes in World History)

Peter N. Stearns

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Defended by a host of passionate advocates and organizations, certain standard human rights have come to represent a quintessential component of global citizenship. There are, however, a number of societies who dissent from this orthodoxy, either in general or on particular issues, on the basis of political necessity, cultural tradition, or group interest.

Human Rights in World History takes a global historical perspective to examine the emergence of this dilemma and its constituent concepts. Beginning with premodern features compatible with a human rights approach, including religious doctrines and natural rights ideas, it goes on to describe the rise of the first modern-style human rights statements, associated with the Enlightenment and contemporary antislavery and revolutionary fervor. Along the way, it explores ongoing contrasts in the liberal approach, between sincere commitments to human rights and a recurrent sense that certain types of people had to be denied common rights because of their perceived backwardness and need to be "civilized". These contrasts find clear echo in later years with the contradictions between the pursuit of human rights goals and the spread of Western imperialism.

By the second half of the 20th century, human rights frameworks had become absorbed into key global institutions and conventions, and their arguments had expanded to embrace multiple new causes. In today’s postcolonial world, and with the rise of more powerful regional governments, the tension between universal human rights arguments and local opposition or backlash is more clearly delineated than ever but no closer to satisfactory resolution.

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