

Rethinking human rights education through radicality in the twenty-first century polycrisis

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Abstract: *The paper aims to assess the meaning of “radicality” in the context of human rights, and consider how this concept can be applied to human rights education. Concerned about multiple crises currently unfolding, the authors argue that the voices of young people should be amplified while supporting their ability to critically assess the issues of current systems and their negative effects on the rights of groups disadvantaged by oppressive systems. This includes the importance of dismantling Eurocentric approaches to human rights within the university context and the willingness to allow discussions around decolonial, courageous and radical thinking and action. Beginning with a brief analysis of the notion of radicality within the human rights framework, the paper then explores its importance in various forms of advocacy. Finally, the findings are translated into an educational context to offer educators food for thought.*

Keywords: *human rights education; radicality; decoloniality; activism; solidarity; multilateralism; polycrisis*

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1. Introduction: A historical perspective to radicality

Given the concerning developments that are currently unfolding, it seems particularly relevant and timely to ask: could radicalising human rights education contribute to maintaining the human rights framework's relevance in an increasingly extreme world? As much as human rights are supposed to function as a moral compass that everyone agrees on, reality draws a different picture. We are currently witnessing the biggest attacks on human rights and the multilateral system as a whole, including international humanitarian law, since its creation in the aftermath of World War II (Amnesty International 2025; ICJ 2025; United Nations 2025; ICRC 2024; Siddiqui 2025). The international multilateral system appears to be prone to a deep existential crisis (Wilson 2020).

Before approaching the multifaceted term of “radicality” (Poole 2015), it is important to situate the global context of human rights. Starting with a quick discussion around systemic risks, also referred to as “the polycrisis,” helps in situating and making the case for further radical approaches to human rights education. The modern world's polycrisis, including climate change as well as several armed conflicts, and its effects on multilateralism's credibility has led many observers and experts to wonder about how the late stage of capitalism will unravel (İşikara 2022; Harris 2021). Mack Penner (2022, 152) comments on the polycrisis by arguing that the crisis of capitalism is the result of industrial humanity's “deformed relationship with the natural world.” It has been argued that the systemic and existential threats developing all over the world cannot be addressed simply by taking a technical approach, but rather necessitate to first and foremost look at the “deep-structural dysfunction lodged at the very heart of our form of life” (Fraser and Jaeggi 2018, 2). Samuel Moyn (2018, 236) concluded that the emergence of the human rights system in parallel with the “death of socialism” was no coincidence. He highlighted that human rights are invaluable for fighting for a basic minimum living standard, yet they have failed to achieve equality. He then linked this to phenomena such as the incorrectly labelled “refugee crisis” and stated that ignorance toward equality results in harmful dynamics, including populist movements. In line with these arguments, there has been an increasing number of conversations around the need to link human rights education with the deep rooted elements that sustain the current capitalist model, namely colonialism, extractivism, and extreme wealth accumulation. For instance Gruber and Scherling (2020) argue that it is essential to “combine the question of genuine decolonization of human rights education and peace education with a critical examination of the neoliberal paradigm.”

Having established that the human rights framework is embedded in the neoliberal order, it seems particularly important to have a conversation around the need to revive its radicality. This is a rather disappointing development considering that the establishment of human rights as a

universal moral framework was once considered radical in itself as it asserts moral imperatives over State sovereignty (Lamb 2018). Nowadays, even States that might be prone to frequent human rights violations would only rarely admit that they disregard the international human rights system. However, this has not significantly improved the global human rights situation. Instead, we are witnessing a status quo that almost passively accepts grave violations of the framework. The global backlash on human rights is something dangerous for everyone, including future generations. At the same time, it might offer a window of opportunity. Because only a flawed system can be dismissed so easily, which demonstrates the need for reform and safeguards. So, where is the best place to discuss improving the multilateral system? It is unlikely to be among the same people who have promoted it for decades without acknowledging its flaws and it is unlikely to be among those who have ignored the injustices perpetuated by the current systems. We argue that a crucial part of the discussion should be taking place in universities. By young people and eventually for young people as this generation will have to live with the consequences of inaction – the consequences of a world in which a genocide can take place without accountability, people seeking safety drown right in front of our eyes, and a waste of resources for conferences that address such issues only painfully slowly, if at all. We need to use the current momentum that shows what exactly is not working and use it to create something better.

The following paper is divided into three parts. First, we discuss what radicality means in the context of human rights. Second, we assess how we can advocate for human rights, in a radical manner. And lastly, we use the findings to assess what this means for human rights education. Throughout this paper with normative character, we analyse the idea that human rights education globally is not radical enough. As human rights professionals with academic backgrounds in political science, international relations, and law, we aim to highlight some of the topics that were missing from our human rights education. Although we recognise that our own academic experiences may not reflect the entirety of the human rights academic field, we use it as the basis for our analysis in the hope of sparking a debate that will encourage educators to allow more radical approaches to human rights advocacy in their teaching.

2. Assessing and defining radicality

The need to inject more radicality into human rights education refers to the reality that most human rights advocates still establish their normative frameworks from within the Western liberal order (Berger 2023). The Overton window for human rights advocates remains largely influenced by what is commonly accepted from a Western point of view (Woldeyes and Offord 2018). Radical refers to the need to take a look at what is “pertaining to roots,” which implies that a political use of “radical” requires to reach down to the very roots of the topic of discussion (Poole 2015). To

think and act radically today is to swerve preexisting conventions tactfully. It is, in a word, “to disidentify with the dominant discourse and power.” T. J. Demos (2021, 23) describes radicality as “the desire for fundamental societal transformation.” This definition will be the basis used in this paper when referring to “radicality.” In this context, power appears to be a key variable in situating radicality, particularly with regard to who is given power and why.

In today's world, defenders of human rights are globally discredited, attacked, or prosecuted by those who hold the power to do so. As previously mentioned, human rights, the idea that each and every one of us are born with the same rights and a concept initially created to function as a common ground between all nations, is questioned; making it, unfortunately, once again a radical concept in itself in today's twenty-first century.

Nevertheless, it remains challenging to provide an objective definition of what exactly is “radical” or what “radicality” represents in a human rights context. What is perceived as radical largely depends on the stakeholders involved, the geographical context as well as the political reality that is shaping a particular situation. However, it is possible to assess the normative framework that currently surrounds the creation of human rights knowledge, and what approaches and tactics are underrepresented when educating the next generation of human rights professionals. A key trigger to the development of this topic is the emergence of a new world order where the human rights normative framework, which is largely Western-led, is being openly challenged by emerging nations that operate under different paradigms. This is where the notion of “radicality” emerges. In this context, it does seem crucial that human rights professionals must embrace a decolonial process to move away from a mainly Western-centric approach to its interpretation and operationalisation. In other words, what place is left for radicality in a human rights normative framework which is largely Western-led?

This comprehensive system of laws, principles, and institutions that define, promote, and protect human rights is largely produced in the Global Minority, or if based in the Global Majority, acting as an entry point for “Western” interpretation as opposed to a grounded, locally-led and owned outlook on human rights. Speaking of human rights as an institutionalised framework of ideas, values, and principles implies to look at the historical circumstances under which it came into existence. Many of the components that make the Universal Declaration of Human Rights very much predate the establishment of the Declaration itself and subsequent legal frameworks and institutions. Recognising that human rights is not a Western liberal idea, but rather finds roots across cultures and geographies, opens the door to a broader debate looking at the extent to which human rights can be tapped into to resist Western-led colonialism

and extractivism, as well as imagine and promote a world beyond Bretton Woods institutions. Taking away the perceived centrality of Western human rights allows for educators to free themselves that human rights can only be fully fulfilled as part of a liberal Western society.

3. What is radical human rights advocacy?

It is not sufficient to merely promote or discuss radical ideas when teaching human rights, we must also discuss how to translate them into practical action and positive results. There are two main approaches to human rights advocacy. The first approach is advocacy from within the system, in which civil society organisations participate in international human rights mechanisms such as the Universal Periodic Review, or meet with decision-makers. The second approach is advocacy from the outside: protests, strikes, boycotts and other forms of activism that come from the people. System-conform advocacy is not radical, but foreseen. Even when conducted by a movement such as Amnesty International, it is in line with the system created to uphold human rights. Pressure imposed from the outside, however, has the potential to be radical. The question is, what makes certain forms of activism radical and are they ultimately more successful than advocacy from within.

We have already assessed that radicalism can be defined as opposing the status quo. However, this does not necessarily mean that “radicals” have to opt for radical means to promote their ideas. According to Böttcher (2017, 75), this is one aspect that distinguishes a radical from an extremist—radicals do not have to be violent, but according to her definition, they are often open to rational argumentation. At the same time, as mentioned earlier in this paper, radicalism is context-dependent. Thus, a radical form of action in one context can be entirely “normal” in another (Bee and Chrona 2023, 722). In a nutshell, it is difficult to determine when an action can be described as radical. However, it is necessary to discuss, also in a university context, which (radical) means might be necessary to achieve change when the tools provided by the international framework seem insufficient.

Therefore, in the following paragraph, we will briefly discuss the necessity of human rights advocacy outside of established systems. We will divide this advocacy into four typical forms of activism and invite the reader to discuss its potential further, including in a university context.

1. Social media activism

The undeniable importance of social media in human rights advocacy is clear. For smaller non-governmental organisations, social media is crucial for fundraising. For large institutions such as the United Nations or the European Union, it bridges the gap with society by highlighting their importance and successes. For individuals, social

media is often performative; it is supposed to show that one cares. We most likely all vividly remember the AI-generated “All Eyes on Rafah” picture that went viral in 2024. More than 47 million people have shared it (Davies and BBC Arabic 2024) – at a time when the outrage over Israel’s military actions in Gaza had already reached the mainstream. The mere sharing of the post has little to do with radical activism. However, it is interesting to consider whether the judgement would be different for social media engagement that sparked an entire movement.

Noelle-Neumann (1977) has coined the term “Spiral of Silence” to describe the phenomenon that people tend to adapt to the opinion they assume is prevalent in their surroundings and keep their, possibly differing, opinion for themselves in order not to risk isolation. Consequently, it is the fearless that are capable of initiating change of the public opinion and eventually related policies (Noelle-Neumann 1993, cited in Đurđević 2025, 92). Đurđević (2025) has applied the theory on one of the most successful online campaigns of our generation, the #MeToo movement, which eventually left the mere online sphere and had tangible results on the lives of women globally. The same applies for the Black Lives Matter movement, which also started on social media and eventually became a global mass protest (Maqbool 2020). Of course, the movement could not overnight change the issue of systemic racism. But it led to people questioning themselves and their beliefs. It led to people educating themselves and reflecting on their own problematic behaviour. Radical was not sharing the black square on Instagram, but what happened afterwards: Something shifted in the core beliefs of the majority. We tried to unlearn. And unlearning, as well as means to promote the process of unlearning, should find its way in the curricula of human rights courses.

2. Collective activism

Collective activism can take up different forms, including but not limited to protests, strikes and boycotts. Whereas not every collective action can be described as “radical,” we argue that there is a decisive factor that qualifies certain collective actions as radical, which is the question if we are dealing with an act of solidarity that leads to a power-shift towards the local level. Kapczynski (2018) used the example of HIV/AIDS activists to describe how solidarity can be built at the local level, while still using international human rights institutions. Radical activism does not mean that institutional action becomes obsolete – instead the aim should be that both complement each other. Kapczynski rightly concludes the necessity of shifting our idea regarding where the human rights movement takes place. It should not be limited to Geneva, Brussels, and New York, but also be present on the streets when people come together because they perceive a situation as unjust and eventually decide to stand up against it in solidarity.

Evidently, not every action taken is effective. Collective action can be disruptive but should be targeted and useful. And universities could be one of many places to discuss how action can be created in an inclusive, non-performative, and consequent manner. Human rights education should include discussions about what every single one of us can do to strengthen human rights. And how this can be achieved in a collective manner, as the individual rarely holds the power to initiate change (Bee and Chrona 2024, 729).

3. Civil disobedience

Civil disobedience is partly defined by the “use of illegal actions” (de Gaia 2012), and is therefore likely to be perceived as radical by the majority. Indeed, acting against a State’s existing legal framework falls under the definition of radicality assessed at the beginning of this paper. In Germany, civil disobedience has found its place in law school curricula, as Gustav Radbruch’s formula (1946, 107) – developed in the aftermath of the country’s crimes under the Nazi regime – is widely discussed. Radbruch argued that positive law generally deserves priority, but can be disregarded if it goes against the principle of justice to an unbearable extent. Mégret expanded the threshold for civil disobedience to include not only international crimes as defined by the International Criminal Court, but also systematic human rights violations and the undermining of democratic systems (Mégret 2008, 29). He also highlights civil society’s growing use of civil disobedience in violation of domestic law to fight for rights enshrined in international legal frameworks (Mégret 2008, 3). A good example is the Extinction Rebellion movement, which states in their declaration of rebellion (2019): “to secure the solutions needed to avert catastrophe and protect the future. It becomes not only our right, it becomes our sacred duty to rebel.” Eventually, discussions around legitimacy, usefulness and necessity of non-violent civil disobedience are highly relevant in today’s context of multiple crises and therefore merit a multidisciplinary discussion in universities that assesses not only historic success stories, but also questions of legitimacy and (unjust) criminal liability.

4. Violence

Beyond non-violent civil disobedience lies the question of whether violent means can ever be legitimate when confronted with extreme injustice. Given the highly controversial nature of this topic, the widespread belief among human rights advocates that harmful means cannot be justified, and the potential incentive that discussions around this topic might offer, debates about the legitimate use of violence are rarely touched upon in university and non-university contexts. This paper does not argue for the necessity of violence for the sake of human rights. However, it argues that violent means should be discussed in an academic context to understand why some people perceive it as their last resort and how to prevent this. This question is particularly relevant when discussing the right to self-

determination. Freeman thoroughly analysed the issues underlying the right to self-determination, including the presumption that the Western-model of a nation-State functions as a “universal recipe for stability and justice” (Freeman 1999, 358). He furthermore highlights the international community’s reluctance to argue in favour of a right of secession, which potentially promotes the use of violence instead of preventing it (Freeman 1999, 369). Human rights education should address these issues, with the aim to promote peace and security while recognising systemic injustices and the oppression of peoples globally. Palestinians are currently receiving the most attention when discussing the right to self-determination, also due to the horrific events unfolding in Gaza for many years, and in particular since October 2023. Nevertheless, an interview Abu Moghli (2020, 18) conducted with a Palestinian student in 2014 captures what the disregard of the rights of a people can mean for their perception of human rights: “It does not matter what methods we use to resist, we will always be dehumanized and called terrorists.” Abu Moghli (2020, 18) then suggests that human rights education becomes meaningless if it fails to establish a connection to lived oppression. Therefore, educators should aim to provide practical pathways to human rights advocacy that take into account people’s lived experiences. By doing so, they can offer alternatives to violence while expanding traditional means of advocacy. Ultimately, the goal must be to comply with the UN Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognised Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, which specifically asks for peaceful means to promote human rights (UN General Assembly 1998). Nevertheless, it is necessary to discuss why people opt for violence instead and how this can be prevented.

5. Conclusion and implications for human rights education

System-aligned human right advocacy often misses radicality and the willingness to give up power and/or privileges. It is therefore our responsibility to act in solidarity with those who are not protected by a system that is still deeply embedded in differentiations on the grounds of skin colour, passports, financial backgrounds, and other characteristics that perpetuate privileges for some and disadvantages for others. In order to disturb this dynamic, we need both radical thinking and radical action. And as discussed in this paper, traditional human rights education in universities is one of the most important avenues for transformative change.

Nevertheless, some aspects need to be kept in mind. First of all, universities remain places that are not open for everyone. Access to education is still a privilege and discussions about human rights, including its radicality, should be accessible for all. People with lived experiences of human rights issues are more likely to bring greater diversity to debates than people for whom such issues remain theoretical. Besides universities,

non-formal human rights education should not be disregarded and can represent an important tool to ensure that the majority of people do not feel alienated by human rights discourses and have access to them if they wish so.

Human rights education should be bold. It should aim to distance itself from Eurocentric perspectives, strive to be sensitive in its language, and open to discuss decolonial theories. Keet and Rafaely (2025, 470) thoroughly assess the correlation of human rights and decolonisation and suggest that the discourse around the latter can be particularly more critical in comparison, because it has not been as institutionalised as human rights yet. Nevertheless, we should aim to show the same level of courage when it comes to educating on human rights.

We would like to conclude this paper by suggesting a couple of recommendations that universities could adopt to enable more radicality throughout their curricula:

1. **Enable** students to critically analyse existing legal frameworks and question their inherent biases.
2. **Elevate** the stories of those who are least represented in conversations about human rights and recognise their legitimacy as sources of knowledge.
3. **Encourage** greater access to knowledge production centres in the global majority, moving beyond the usual centres (e.g. Brussels, Geneva, New York).
4. **Expand** the range of people and countries studied to include contexts that are often overlooked.
5. **Establish** greater legitimacy for non-formal advocacy methods (e.g. civil disobedience) free from assumptions and prejudices.

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