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# Universal Human Rights in Progressive Thought and Politics

Part Four of the Progressive Tradition Series

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*With the rise of the contemporary progressive movement and the election of President Barack Obama in 2008, there is extensive public interest in better understanding the origins, values, and intellectual strands of progressivism. Who were the original progressive thinkers and activists? Where did their ideas come from and what motivated their beliefs and actions? What were their main goals for society and government? How did their ideas influence or diverge from alternative social doctrines? How do their ideas and beliefs relate to contemporary progressivism?*

*The Progressive Tradition Series from the Center for American Progress traces the development of progressivism as a social and political tradition stretching from the late 19th century reform efforts to the current day. The series is designed primarily for educational and leadership development purposes to help students and activists better understand the foundations of progressive thought and its relationship to politics and social movements. Although the Progressive Studies Program has its own views about the relative merit of the various values, ideas, and actors discussed within the progressive tradition, the essays included in the series are descriptive and analytical rather than opinion-based. We envision the essays serving as primers for exploring progressivism and liberalism in more depth through core texts—and in contrast to the conservative intellectual tradition and canon. We hope that these papers will promote ongoing discourse about the proper role of the state and individual in society, the relationship between empirical evidence and policymaking, and how progressives today might approach specific issues involving the economy, health care, energy-climate change, education, financial regulation, social and cultural affairs, and international relations and national security.*

*Part four of the series examines the important role of human rights in the development of progressive thought and activism both domestically and globally.*

# Introduction

*All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.*

— Article 1, *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*

These two elegant sentences from the opening article of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, or UDHR, constitute a clear and compelling statement of progressive values and represent the culmination of centuries of philosophical thought about the rights and duties of humanity.

Although the primary ideas of freedom, equality, and solidarity expressed in this document arise from multiple sources and contexts, American progressives in the 20th century played a defining role in turning the concept of full and equal rights for all into a tangible expression of international opinion and concern. Leading progressives from Jane Addams and W.E.B. Du Bois to Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt—who chaired the committee that drafted and passed the UDHR—built on the political thought of the nation’s founders and the activism of abolitionists, suffragists, and civil rights leaders throughout the 18th and 19th centuries. These activists led the charge to enshrine the core belief that all people, by virtue of their common humanity, are guaranteed certain rights, freedoms, and opportunities necessary to lead meaningful and secure lives.

The 30 articles of the UDHR, unanimously adopted by 48 countries in the General Assembly of the United Nations on December 10, 1948, spell out in concise detail the consensus foundations for all free and democratic nations. These principles—nonbinding goals rather than concrete laws—include explicit rights to life, liberty, and self-determination; fair and equal legal treatment under law; freedom of thought, expression, and movement; and a range of social and economic goods including employment, equal pay, food, housing, health care, and education.

The notion that all people enjoy inherent rights by virtue of being human beings may seem self-evident to most Americans today. But for the bulk of human history, and much of our own nation's past, most people lacked guaranteed political, social, and economic rights. The great majority of human beings throughout time have been consigned to some form of slavery, serfdom, oppression or autocratic rule in practice, even with major religious and philosophical traditions defending the inherent dignity and worth of individuals. This remains true, unfortunately, for significant numbers of our fellow human beings living in authoritarian or unjust societies today.<sup>1</sup>

World opinion eventually shifted from a view that defended the priorities of the privileged above all others toward explicit guarantees of individual liberty under government with the rise of Enlightenment thinking about the rights and duties of man, and the revolutionary wars for independence successfully fought in America and France. Social movements across the world, including the progressive movement in the United States, rose up to help turn the ideals of human equality and guaranteed liberty into practice through efforts to eliminate slavery; to ensure civil rights for all regardless of gender, religion, or belief; to protect the vulnerable; and to establish the social and economic means for the least well off to fully enjoy these rights.

A new global consensus emerged after the world collapsed into chaos, aggression, and mass slaughter during World Wars I and II that lasting peace required the protection of individual rights and freedoms in all countries. The global community took strong steps to turn this consensus into institutional practice first by creating the League of Nations, which was mostly ineffective and eventually failed with the rise of German aggression and economic depression in the 1930s, and later the United Nations.

In the 50 years since its signing, the UDHR and subsequent treaties and covenants designed to implement its vision have been a guiding source for social and political movements seeking individual rights and emancipation from oppressive governments and mistreatment by other groups. One document obviously did not eliminate future crimes against humanity or eradicate political persecution, but it did set in motion a wave of political reforms that would ensure that such behavior would face the full collective scrutiny and combined action of free peoples across the globe.

The UDHR, effectively a list of enumerated rights and privileges accorded to all people equally as human beings, does not specify a set of concrete policy steps or political approaches to secure these ideals (see Appendix for all 30 articles in the

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UDHR). The preamble to the document, however, concludes by explicitly endorsing “progressive measures” and education to help secure these political, economic, and social rights:

*Now therefore, the General Assembly, proclaims this Universal Declaration of Human Rights as a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations, to the end that every individual and every organ of society, keeping this Declaration constantly in mind, shall strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these rights and freedoms and by progressive measures, national and international, to secure their universal and effective recognition and observance, both among the peoples of Member States and among the peoples of the territories under their jurisdiction.*

Progressives have taken these challenges to heart in trying to design and implement a political order that meets the highest ideals of America and the global community. As Eleanor Roosevelt stated before the signing of the document, “This Universal Declaration of Human Rights may well become the international Magna Carta of all men everywhere. ... comparable to the proclamation of the Declaration of the Rights of Man by the French people in 1789, the adoption of the Bill of Rights by the people of the United States, and the adoption of comparable declarations at different times in other countries.”<sup>2</sup> Although the work of securing true liberty and equality for all presents numerous diplomatic, humanitarian, and military difficulties, it remains the duty of progressives to defend these ideals and to help turn them into reality for people everywhere.

The rest of this paper will explore the origins of human rights principles in religious, philosophical, and political contexts; examine the ongoing challenges progressives face in turning this inspirational vision into reality; and finally, discuss some of the contemporary debates about human rights from a domestic and international perspective. Our goal is to provide a concise summary of the relationship between human rights and progressivism rather than a comprehensive explication or defense of a particular system of thought, as with other essays in the Progressive Tradition series. We have provided a list of key sources at the end of the paper for those interested in exploring these ideas in more detail.

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