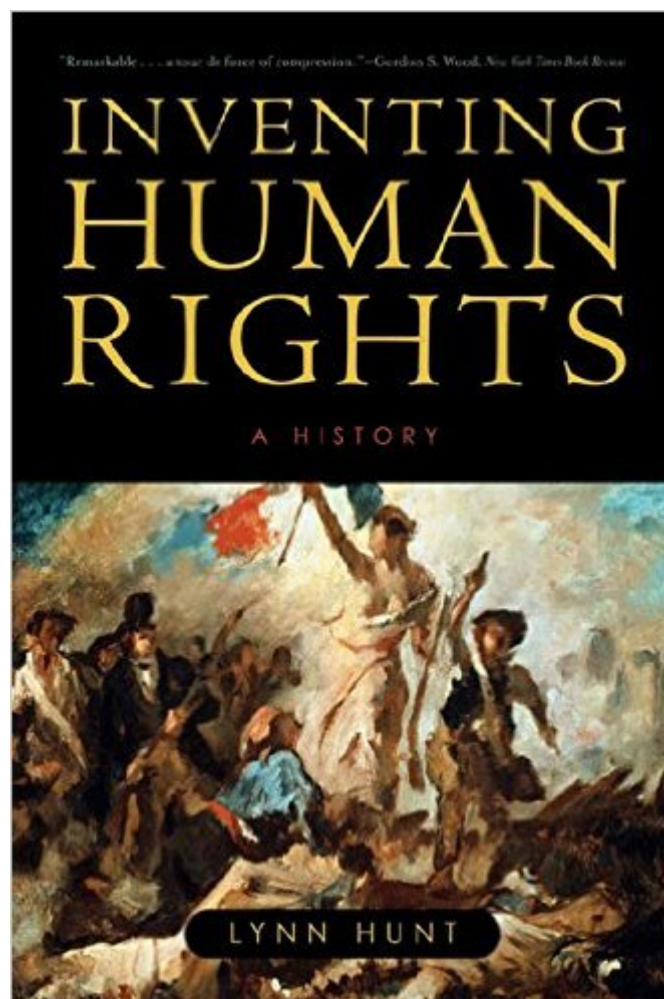


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# Inventing Human Rights: A History



## Synopsis

• Gordon S. Wood, New York Times Book Review How were human rights invented, and how does their tumultuous history influence their perception and our ability to protect them today? From Professor Lynn Hunt comes this extraordinary cultural and intellectual history, which traces the roots of human rights to the rejection of torture as a means for finding the truth. She demonstrates how ideas of human relationships portrayed in novels and art helped spread these new ideals and how human rights continue to be contested today.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"Inventing Human Rights" is a short, jargon-free book that would be appropriate for an undergraduate class or general readership. The introduction and first chapter is an examination of the cultural origins of the human rights ideology. The second chapter is a history of torture. Chapters 3-5 are a "conventional" history of human rights as traced through laws, constitutions, political philosophy, etc. from roughly 1750 to the present. There is a refreshing emphasis on the French Enlightenment (which is too often neglected in works in English). Regarding research methods, Professor Hunt is good at tracing the circulation of ideas via the circulation of books. Careful attention is paid to when certain phrases (e.g. "rights of man", "human rights") were first used, how many times important books were reprinted, what percentage of 18th century homes and libraries they could be found in, and literacy rates. The introduction poses the question "How is it that rights

came to seem self-evident in the late 18th century?" Prof. Hunt proposes an explanation in terms of the diffusion of the cultural practices of "autonomy" and "empathy", where autonomy supplies the substance of the new ethic and empathy, the motive (pp. 29-30). When Hunt writes of autonomy as a "cultural practice" she is referring primarily to the increasing sense of delicacy regarding the human body described in the work of Norbert Elias. She thinks, for instance, that here one can find the origin of the new repugnance at judicial torture (pp 82-83).

Three hundred years ago, the idea that people in the world should regard themselves as equals or that all had important rights just because they were humans would have largely been regarded as laughable. Now human rights are taken for granted, and even are regarded as more important than that old standard, property rights. How did such a change happen? Lynn Hunt, a professor of modern European history, has some ideas, and has related them in *Inventing Human Rights: A History* (Norton). There was a Bill of Rights in England in 1689, but it merely referred to "ancient rights and liberties" that derived from the tradition of English law. It did not have what Hunt describes as three interlocking qualities that are essential to human rights: "... rights must be natural (inherent in human beings), equal (the same for everyone) and universal (applicable everywhere)." The acceptance of such rights was a revolution in human thought and in the understanding of how governments were to prioritize their functions. It is a great story, one we can be proud of, and though progress toward acknowledgement of human rights has stumbled and halted at times, it has proved unstoppable. The boom in concepts of human rights during the eighteenth century can never be fully explained, but Hunt thinks she has a clue. People began to read novels, especially epistolary ones in which characters themselves wrote out their feelings onto the page. Reading such a novel made people view the characters on the pages with empathy because the "narrative form facilitated the development of a 'character,' that is, a person with an inner self." The more lurid of the novels included scenes of torture, producing a revulsion in readers that would eventually help end the long tradition of judicial torture.

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