The Anthropology of Human Rights

Sally Engle Merry
Department of Anthropology
Spring 2007
Sally.merry@nyu.edu
G14.2600.001
G62.1013
L06.3638

Office hours: Wed. 10-12 Vanderbilt Hall 409B or by appointment.

This course examines the origins of human rights thinking in Europe and the US and its contemporary elaboration and dissemination in the post-World War II period. This includes an analysis of its institutional grounding in United Nations institutions and non-governmental organizations. The course covers the historical opposition of the American Anthropological Association to human rights and its recent statement of support. It examines the opposition between culture and rights along with current theoretical efforts to negotiate an intermediate space. It also considers contemporary conflicts between rights and security. Current anthropological work focuses on the way human rights concepts and institutions are mobilized in particular political struggles in various parts of the world. The course discusses the way particular concepts of culture and rights are deployed in the global production and localization of human rights ideas and examines human rights as a practice, a discourse, and a form of global law. Specific areas of focus include indigenous rights and women's rights. The course discusses approaches to transnational, deterritorialized, and multi-sited ethnography.

There will be a mid-semester paper of 10 pages and a final research paper of 20 pages. Each student is responsible for raising questions about the readings in two classes. Students are expected to write a one-page reaction to the readings for each class to be posted on Blackboard by midnight the night before the class, with two classes excused. The workload will be tailored for law students receiving fewer credits than FAS students.

Readings:


---

**January 17: The Emergence of Human Rights**


---

**January 24: The Development of the Human Rights System: Contemporary Issues (to be rescheduled)**


---

**January 31: The three “generations” of rights**


*Universal Declaration of Human Rights*

*International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)*

*International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)*

   *These documents are available on the Internet.*

Steiner, Henry and Philip Alston, 2002. *A Casebook on Human Rights*. chs. 3 and 4, These readings are not on Blackboard but the book is widely available.
February 7: Human Rights in Practice


February 14: The Role of NGOs

Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, Activists beyond Borders (1998), chapters 1, 2 and 5.


Finish Merry, 2006, especially discussion of NGOs.


February 21: Human Rights and Grassroots Social Movements


February 28: The Creation of the International System


Paper due February 28, 10 pages.

How does framing a problem as a human rights violation affect the way the problem is understood and the kinds of solutions that are imagined? Consider which problems are considered human rights violations and how they came to be violations and the history of how human rights ideas were developed. Do you agree with Ignatieff’s minimalist position or a more expansive one, and why?
March 7: Anthropologists Debate Human Rights


AAA statement on human rights on [www.aaanet.org](http://www.aaanet.org)


March 21: Universalism vs. relativism


Samuel Huntington. 1993. “The Clash of Civilizations?” *Foreign Affairs.* (available electronically for a small price online or in library resources). You can also read the whole book,*The Clash of Civilizations.*


**March 28: Culture and Rights**


**April 4: Issues in the Practice of Human Rights Beyond the Local/Global Divide**

Goodale, Mark and Sally Engle Merry, eds. Forthcoming. *The Practice of Human Rights*. I will email the manuscript to each of you.


**April 11: Collective Rights: Women’s Rights and Indigenous Rights**


*Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).* (available on the web)


April 18: Human rights and security


April 25: Transitional Justice

