Course Description

Human rights is a global conception that has produced many and varied impacts, has been adapted and reworked in local contexts worldwide, and has become the object of as well as a resource for popular struggle, state policymaking, and transnational movements. All of which makes it a perfect subject for anthropological analysis. But anthropology has a long and complicated relationship with human rights, as this course explores. We will examine the origins and expansion of human rights thinking, and the impacts this has had on national formations and local contexts. We will go on to consider the conflicts between culture and rights that have emerged in this process, and the question of universality in the application of human rights around the world. The course will also consider the ways in which rights conceptions have been mobilized in local struggles, with a particular geographical focus on Latin America. We will look at particular manifestations of rights, including indigenous rights, women’s rights, and the relationship between security and rights in the ongoing “global war on terror.” Students will be encouraged to develop one particular theme from among those studied in their final research paper for the course.

Books


Course Requirements and Grading

1. Weekly reading and active participation – Students who attend without participating actively each week will not receive A grades for the course.
2. Weekly critical memos – 2 pages in length, double-spaced. These should be posted to the course Sakai site by noon every Tuesday. Everyone in class should read each other’s memos prior to class, and come prepared to debate, critique, and query.
3. Discussion leadership – Each student will have at least one opportunity to assist me in facilitating the seminar, preparing questions and activities to help explore the readings for that week’s class.
4. Critical essay – All seminar participants must write a critical essay of NO MORE THAN 25 double-spaced pages of text (not including endnotes and bibliography). The essay should develop a particular theme related to seminar readings and discussion through critical analysis and/or comparisons of materials read for class, using
additional materials where desired. Seminar participants will make short oral presentations based on work in progress, during one of the last two class sessions. Due dates are as follows:

a. conference with me to discuss paper topics/ideas: by Wed 16 Sep
b. paper abstract due: Wed 23 Sep
c. rough draft due: Wed 28 Oct
d. in-class presentation: Wed 2 Dec or Wed 9 Dec
e. final draft due (hard copies only; no late papers accepted): Wed 16 Dec

Grades will be based on your preparation for and participation in the seminar, as well as on timely completion of written course requirements. The essay will count for 60% of your grade, with the remaining 40% determined by regular submission of your critical memos and your contribution to seminar discussion, as facilitator and participant.

Course Schedule

2 Sep – Introduction to the course

9 Sep – The politics and philosophy of human rights

Ignatieff, Human Rights as Politics and Idolatry

16 Sep – Liberal, universalist approaches

Donnelly, Universal Human Rights in Theory and Practice, Intro, chapters 1-5, 8-12

23 Sep – Universalism v. relativism

Donnelly, chapters 6 and 7.

30 Sep – Anthropology and the human rights debate

7 Oct – Anthro and human rights – Special guest star: Mark Goodale

Goodale, Surrendering to Utopia

14 Oct – Women’s rights as human rights


21 Oct – Human rights in practice

Merry, Human Rights and Gender Violence

28 Oct – Indigenous rights as human rights


4 Nov – New perspectives on indigenous rights

Niezen, The Rediscovered Self

11 Nov – Case study: Indigenous rights in Chiapas

Speed, Rights in Rebellion

18 Nov – Human rights and security: Contradictory or complimentary?

Wilson, Human Rights in the “War on Terror,” chapters tba
2 Dec – Human rights, mass killing, reconciliation


9 Dec – Case study 2: After genocide in Guatemala

Sanford, Buried Truths