From corporate abuses to domestic violence, from global international policy to disciplinary micro-techniques of power, from "ethnic cleansing" to genetic engineering, from hunger to development, from nuclear war to psychological torture, from institutionalized racism to popular justice, from artificial conception to medicalized dying, from mutilation to rape, from private property to economic pillage, from language to law, from sexual discrimination to the punishment and institutionalization of "deviance," human rights considerations are deeply embedded in every area of human action. Offsprings of a liberal western ideology (at least in their hegemonic form), human rights are the stuff of conflict. One possible way of assessing these controversies is through the careful exploration of the deep divide between universalist and cultural relativist perspectives. If heated debates surrounding the nature and of human rights have always been present since their inception, the current critique of western ideologies as depositaries of universal and positive truths has truly opened up multitude of spaces for the articulation of alternative discourses and practices from a wide range of locations. Still, these controversies shouldn't be oversimplified as a clear cut political and ideological struggle between first, second and third world nation-states. Both universalism and cultural relativism have been recklessly abused for political and economic reasons on all sides of the isle. Feminists, sexual and ethnic minorities, refugee "communities" and subaltern groups of every nature struggling for survival in civil societies around the world frequently challenge the validity of policies originated in institutions of power either in the West or in the East. In turn, consensus among these subaltern social agents in terms of the definition and implementation of human rights in both local and global contexts are not always forthcoming.

Within this framework, this course is an attempt to map out the limits of both universalistic and relativistic standpoints in the light of recent debates in the social sciences. In order to create a common language for the discussion, the first two weeks of the course analyze both the philosophical foundations of human rights and some modern controversies that are taking place within the field. The next two weeks deal with developments within the discipline of anthropology, where the notion of cultural relativism has found one of its most characteristic niches. While sometimes bitter debates on the pertinence of notions like "psychic unity of mankind" or cultural relativism and determinism are a trademark of the discipline, anthropologist have been, for many years, hardly present in both the theoretical debates on rights and the actual implementation of human right policies. In the third week we will explore the highlights of debates on human rights and ethics in the discipline, from Herskovit's famous rejection of the possibility of universal human rights (the official position of the AAA in 1947, which inaugurated a tradition of disengagement of anthropology from human rights debates), to the institutional controversies of the 70s, where the AAA raged over the collaboration of certain anthropologists in US counterinsurgency operations in
Thailand. In week four, the discussion will shift to recent developments in anthropology regarding the concept of culture and the uses by anthropologists and non-anthropologists of “anthropologizing” discourses to either erase or de-politicize human rights issues. This session also includes samples of new voices from within anthropology reclaiming a space in debates on ethics and human rights, as the discipline engages in self-criticism and shifts its priorities.

The course then engages a series of issues where the ambiguities or “gray areas” contained in the controversies on the universalism cultural relativism of human rights can be spelled out. From the level of international relations to the phenomenological experience of human right abuses, this itinerary will lead the class through the following issues: the “orientalism” of human rights and the political implications of recent debates between universalist positions and challenges articulated from Muslim fundamentalist and Asian perspectives; the contribution of feminist perspectives to a critique of human rights (including demands for the recognition of feminine spaces of rights), as well as the debates between first and third world feminist scholars; the importance of rethinking the body as the fundamental locus of disciplinary techniques and human right abuses; how the structural entanglements characteristic of some forms of lack of human rights, like in cases of everyday violence, might challenge the categories “victim” and “perpetrator” as absolute, universal modes of human action; the nightmares, oblique traces and silences left by human rights abuses in the memories of individuals and groups, and the nature and textures of what Culberston calls "survivor's knowledge,” the crucial issue of the aftermath of human right abuses, particularly regarding the recovery and healing of trauma, rooted in local meanings and therapies; the articulation of alternative legal spaces, in situations of legal pluralism, as a step forward in the democratization of societies; the importance of rethinking civil society and concepts of citizenship to catch up with the growing flow of peoples across the globe, with a particular emphasis on the controversies around refugee issues; and the debates on the impact of multinational corporations in the improvement or infringement of human rights, and the nature of “corporate cultures” and the idea of corporations as “moral persons.”

There is a crucial question running throughout the course: the articulation of relevant role for humanists interested in the definition and negotiation of human rights not just in theory but also on the ground. From the unspeakable phenomenological trauma of genocidal violence to the international legalist languages of “condemnation,” “truth” and “reconciliation,” in this long and complex chain of political and existential predicaments, is there a space in which a new critical humanism can be significant? Is it condemned to irrelevance?

Course Assignment: Students will be responsible for introducing and facilitating discussions on the readings each week. A sign-up sheet will be circulated for students to choose which weeks they would like to lead the discussion. A final paper at least 20 pages long will be the main assignment for the course. For this course we will permit group papers provided that a maximum of 2-3 authors participate. A paper proposal will be required after approximately the first month of class, date to be announced.

In addition to the lectures we will be having several guest speakers throughout the course. Some of these lectures may be outside of the scheduled time, but students should make every effort to attend. We will also be periodically viewing selected videos and documentaries related to the course content. If possible, we will arrange a time when all class participants can attend.

Syllabus

Week 1
Introduction to the Universalism vs. Relativism Debate and Foundations of Human Rights

- Kant, Immanuel (1792). "On the Relationship of Theory to Practice in Political Right."
- "The French Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen" (1789).

Recommended:


Week 2

Ethical & Cultural Relativism and Contemporary Challenges to the Foundations of Human Rights


Recommended:

**Week 3**

**History of the Debate in Anthropology**


**Recommended:**


**Speaker(s):** Berreman

**Week 4**

**Cultural Theory and Case Studies of Anthropologists on Human Rights**


**Recommended:**


**Week 5**

**International Relations, Culture, and Human Rights**


Recommended:


Week 6

Islam and Asia


Week 6

Feminist Theory/Gender

Speaker: Aihwa Ong


Recommended:


Film:

"Calling the Ghosts/Warrior Marks"

Week 8

Violence and the Body


Week 9

Victims and Perpetrators


Week 10

Memory and Violence

Week 11

Trauma and 'Recovery'


Week 12

The Law and Human Rights


Week 13

Citizenship, Civil Society, and Refugees
Week 14

Multinationals and Transnationalism


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