Cultural Difference and Values: Human Rights and the Challenge of Relativism

June 21-July 30, 1999

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NEH Summer Seminar for College Teachers

The seminar meets Tuesdays and Thursdays, 1-4, in Room 901, International Affairs Building. We will schedule additional meetings on Wednesdays and/or Fridays for discussion of individual projects and the possible book project.

Readings are on reserve in Lehman Library and books have been ordered at Labyrinth Books.

Schedule and Reading

**June 22. Introductory and organizational session.**

Introduction to the Asian Values Debate and to the larger debate over the universality of human rights and its relation to cultural difference. The political and intellectual contexts in which these issues have arisen and how the issues have been framed. Discussion of overall plans for the seminar, independent projects, possible book project.

**June 24. The Asian Values Debate.**


Reading


Also recommended:

- "Final Declaration of the Regional Meeting for Asia of the World Conference on Human Rights" (Bangkok Declaration), 1993, on reserve.
June 29 and July 1. Do Cultures Really Differ, How, and So What?

How conceptualizations of culture affect our ability to say how they differ. Are cultural differences in some sense real, or are they constructed, or both, and why does it matter? What is it that is conceived to differ when cultures differ: social scientific, humanistic, and ideological approaches. Does cultural difference matter, and for what?

Module 1. The approach via comparative philosophy. Discussion led by Chenyang Li.

Reading:


Module 2. The approach via survey research: the World Values Survey. Discussion led by Neil Englehart and Hong Xiao.

Reading

- Additional handouts.


Reading:


Reading:


Also recommended:


Is international law law and is international human rights law international law? How has the issue been treated as a matter of international diplomatic practice? How does the international law on this subject develop; who influences its development and how? How political and how tied to national interests is the development of international human rights law? Where do such radical documents as the CEDAW come from, politically? Where does the priority lie when international human rights law contradicts national interest or cultural values? What is portended by the recent trend to expand the uses of international law to deal with human rights issues, as in the examples of the ICC, Pinochet prosecution, and international tribunals for Yugoslavia and Rwanda? How have various countries used the UN mechanisms to promote their interests?

Guest: Louis Henkin, University Professor Emeritus, Columbia University

Reading:


Reading from recent and forthcoming works that discuss the ways in which different cultures view human rights and the degree to which cultural differences in the conception of human rights affect the universality of those rights as philosophical values or legal obligations.

Discussion leaders:

- John Downey: Is there common ground among the religions?
- Suzanna Nuccetelli: Ethical implications of cultural differences.
- Caren Irr: What is the historical, cultural, and material location of the discourse represented by these three books?

Also: Discussion of possible book project.

Reading:

- Lynda Bell, Andrew J. Nathan, and Ilan Peleg, eds., Cultural Difference and Values: Human Rights and the Challenge of Relativism, manuscript, Part II.

Also recommended:


**July 15 and 20. Women's Rights and Religious Rights.**

Women's rights and religious rights as "hard cases" for universalists, since they are sets of values on which cultures often disagree fundamentally and on which rights conceptions are least culturally neutral. (And the two are related; why is this?)

**Discussion topics:**

- Mahmood Monshipouri: Does/should religious freedom include the freedom to violate (or perhaps, interpret differently) some of the rights specified in the international HR documents? Does a full rights regime have to homogenize or undermine some religions?
- Andy Nathan: Why does the issue of cultural difference in regard to rights tend to focus so much on women's rights (or doesn't it)? Put otherwise, why should rights raise different issues in the private sphere from those they raise in the public sphere? Is the rationale for women's rights different from the rationale for human rights, and are there as well differences in the content or substance of such rights?

**Reading:**

- Relevant chapters in Bauer and Bell; Bell, Nathan, and Peleg; Van Ness.


**Also recommended:**


**July 21, 1-4.**
Informal discussion of human rights, democracy, nationalism, political reform, etc., in China, with Chen Yizi, former director, Economic System Reform Institute of China, and president, Center for Contemporary China.


July 22. NGO Strategies in the Struggle for Human Rights: Law or Power?

How do human rights NGO's do their job? What are their strategies? Do they rely on law or power? To what extent are their concerns and activities influenced by local NGO's? When the concerns of the international NGO's are at odds with some of the values of some people in local cultures (as in the three cases below), who is right?

Guest: Joseph Saunders, Associate Counsel and Academic Freedom Researcher, Human Rights Watch. Meeting at the offices of Human Rights Watch, 350 Fifth Avenue (Empire State Building), 34th Floor.

Reading:


Is globalization real and what does it consist of? How it has affected our conceptions of culture, identity, and universalism and embedded these issues in new political and sociological realities. How issues of identity and nationalism affect our thinking about culture and human rights. Also, how does the interpenetration of cross-cultural studies and value issues affect our understanding of what we as students of foreign cultures do and how we do it? How do cultural studies, area studies, and the disciplines relate? How do the complexities of this issue affect our ethical commitments as scholars as well as our rights and obligations as political beings?

Module 1. Globalization's impact on human rights via political economy

Readings:
- David Harvey, The Condition of Postmodernity (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1990), Ch. 11.

Module 2. Globalization's impact on human rights via culture and identity
Readings:


Module 3. A final look at globalization, rights, and culture (led by Mahmood Monshipouri)

Reading:


Module 4. Self-reflection: Implications for practical politics, for our teaching, and for our work as scholars.

Reading: look again at the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Does it look any different at the end of the seminar?

Also recommended:

- Rabinow and Sullivan, *Interpretive Social Science*, Introduction, Chs. 1 (Taylor), 5 (Hirschman), 8 (Rosaldo).