The discourse of human rights is increasingly becoming one of the most globalized values of our times, yet by no means does this resolve numerous tensions and contradictions embodied in various political contexts where rights talk is central. This course will attempt to examine recent poststructuralist and feminist theoretical works on the politics of rights in a manner which moves beyond traditional liberal interpretations of rights. Until recently much of the discussion of the ‘universality’ of rights was influenced by natural law theorists or legal positivism with little engagement with recent writing on ‘culture’ from anthropology or cultural studies which have moved beyond reified notions of ‘culture’ and have been heavily influenced by Foucaultian conceptualizations of power. Liberal discussions of rights have tended to view rights as trumps to political argument as one theorist has described it. Through an engagement with recent theoretical works in anthropology, critical theory, and feminist theory this course will attempt to come to a more nuanced understanding of the politics of human rights and a discussion of the limits of rights within various political struggles where rights have become central to political discourse. The course will ask questions such as the following: How does rights talk become constitutive of identities? How is ‘culture’ invoked in specific political contexts where rights struggles are central and what are the effects of these discourses? What are the effects of particular constructions or understandings of the ‘state’ and ‘civil society’? As social scientists, what are other ways to think theoretically about the state in relation to particular human rights movements? Bringing the critiques of liberalism to human rights debates how does one re-examine the experience of truth and reconciliation commissions and war crimes tribunals which are increasingly playing a major role in post-conflict situations? ‘Civil Society’ has become a central keyword in human rights discourses yet rarely is the concept problematized—therefore we will examine recent work by philosophers and social scientists on the politics of the usage of the term to better understand the discursive effects of its evocation. How have policy-makers, human rights activists and diplomats understood or constructed ethnic conflicts and ‘solutions’ and what are the contradictions in these policies which often reinscribe nationalist agendas? Can Foucault's writings on liberalism which contain an indirect criticism of rights discourses inform human rights debates of the present as well as activist politics? These are just some of the debates we will address in this seminar.

Course Requirements:

A 20 page term paper and weekly participation in discussions are the core requirements. Each week will also be facilitated by 1-2 students.

Reader Available at Metro Publishing 2440 Bancroft Way
Week 1: January 19

Introduction and Overview of Seminar

Week 2: January 26

Beyond Universalism vs. Relativism


Week 3: February 2

Identities, Politics and Rights

  Following chapters:
  - Cornell, Drucilla - "Bodily Integrity and the Right to Abortion." p. 21-84.

Week 4: February 9

Identities, Politics and Rights (cont.)


Week 5: February 16

Democracy, Rights and Capitalism

  Following Chapters:
  - The Question of Democracy (p.9-20),
  - Human Rights and the Welfare State (p. 21-44).
Week 6: February 23

State and Civil Society (Theory and History)

- Chatterjee, Partha (response to Taylor)

Week 7: March 2

State and Civil Society (cont.)


Week 8: March 9

Critical Legal Theory and Race


Week 9: March 16

Violence, Identity and Rights


Week 10: March 23

Memory and Justice


Week 11: April 5

Suggested Topic: Gender, Nationalism and Human Rights
suggested text:


**Week 12: April 12**

Open

**Week 13: April 19**

Open

**Week 14: April 26**

Open

**Week 15: May 2**

Summary and Conclusion