Human rights represent one of the most powerful approaches to social justice in the contemporary world, yet they are rapidly developing and changing. This course offers an overview of the human rights system and the way it is changing. It provides a critical sociological analysis of human rights as a social, cultural, and legal system embedded within the structure of global inequality. It explores the history of the contemporary human rights system, its underlying philosophy, and its growth and development over the last few decades. This includes the diversification of rights to include social, economic and cultural rights and the collective rights of indigenous peoples as well as a growing role for non-governmental organizations. The course examines the ongoing controversy between human rights’ claims to universalism in contrast to assertions of cultural difference. Special topics include humanitarianism as an ideology, the desirability of military humanitarian interventions, the emergence of violence against women as a human rights violation, and the possibilities and challenges of post-conflict justice mechanisms.

Required Books:


Joseph Conrad. Heart of Darkness (any edition)

Additional required articles will be available on the electronic course reserve on the general course conference on First Class
Grading Policies: Attendance and participation is required for all classes. The course grade is based on the following:

1. Two papers of five to seven pages: 20 percent each. Topics and deadlines will be announced in class.
2. Mid-term take home examination due on November 17 by 4:30 in the main office of the Sociology and Anthropology Departments: 20 percent.
3. In-class final examination: 30 percent. You are responsible for all class lectures and readings on the examination and we will provide a set of review questions.
4. Attendance and participation: 10 percent. Short written assignments, which will be the basis of class discussions will be given once every two weeks.
5. Students should come to class having read all the material for each class period. To facilitate class discussions, the professors will, from time to time, call on people in class. If you are not present, this will be noted.

Part I: The History and Philosophy of Human Rights

September 9-16: Definitions, Concepts, and Ideas of Human Rights

Orend, Chapters 1-4

September 20-27: Classical Perspectives on Human Rights

Orend, Chapters 7 and 8
Morton Winston, “Philosophical Conceptions of Human Rights” (ER)
A. Belden Fields, “The Birth of the Human Rights Idea” (ER)
Thomas Hobbes, “The Leviathan” (ER)
John Locke, “Second Treatise on Government,” (ER)
Jean Jacques Rousseau “The Social Contract” PHR pp. 80-87 (ER)

Thomas Paine, “African Slavery in America” (ER) and at: http://www.libertystory.net/LSDOCPAINESLAVERY.htm
The American Declaration of Independence (ER)
The US Constitution Bill of Rights (ER)
Hunt, The French Revolution and Human Rights, in entirety
Mary Wollstonecraft “A Vindication of the Rights of Women” (ER)
Mary Cady Stanton, “The Seneca Falls Declaration” (ER)

September 30-October 4: Classical Critiques of the Idea of Human Rights:

Orend, Chapter 6
Jeremy Bentham, “Anarchical Fallacies” (ER)
Edmund Burke, “Reflections on the Revolution in France” (ER)
Karl Marx, “The Jewish Question” (ER)

First paper due October 7.

Part II. Culture and Rights: Universalism and Cultural Difference

October 7 – 13: The Universalism/Relativism Debate

Cowan, et.al., Culture and Rights, Introduction and chs. 1-5.

October 14 - 18: Cultural Rights and Indigenous Rights in Practice.

Cowan, et. al. Part II.

October 21–25: Negotiating Cultural Differences in Human Rights Practice


October 28: Localizing Human Rights

An Na'im, A. Cultural Transformation and Human Rights in Africa., Chs. 5 and 6.

Second paper due November 1.

Part III: Human Rights as a Social Institution

November 1: The Structure of the Modern Human Rights System: UN Conventions and Treaty Bodies

Sally Engle Merry, “Constructing a Global Law - Violence Against Women and the Human Rights System.” (ER)

November 4: The Role of NGOs and the North/South Divide

November 8: The United Nations Commission on Human Rights


“Libya to chair U.N. Human Rights Commission.”
(both above articles can be found at Lexis-Nexis on the Wellesley College Library page)

November 11-15 Critical Perspectives on Human Rights Culture

Michael Ignatieff. Human Rights as Politics and Idolatry, all

November 18: No class. Mid-term due Nov. 17.

November 22: Human Rights Activism and Transnational Elites

Kenneth Anderson, “Secular Eschatologies and Class Interests of the Internationalized New Class” (ER)
Alex de Waal,’ The Moral Solipsism of Global Ethics, Inc. (ER)

Part IV: Humanitarianism and Humanitarian Intervention

November 29-December 2: Historical Perspectives: Humanitarian Intervention in an Age of Imperialism

Joseph Conrad, Heart of Darkness, in entirety

Michael Taussig, "Culture of Terror - Space of Death: Roger Casement’s Putumayo Report and the Explanation of Torture" in Colonialism and Culture (ER)

December 6-9: Humanitarian Intervention in Contemporary international Society

Thomas Weiss, “Principles, Politics, and Humanitarian Action.” (ER)

259-336. (available through library e-resources: look up Lexis/Nexis, legal research, law reviews, and enter key words The Human Rights Dilemma and Weissman.)

Case Study of Darfur, Sudan: Materials for Analysis to be Distributed