

Sociology 202: An Introduction to Human Rights

Wellesley College, Fall 2008

Professor Thomas Cushman

Monday, Thursday 11:10 AM-12:20PM

Office Hours, Monday, 1:30-3:30; Thursday, 1:30-2:30

The idea of human rights is one of the most powerful ideas in the modern world. This course offers an interdisciplinary examination of human rights as an idea and as a practice, both historically and in modernity. The main emphasis in the course to look at rights as social constructions which embody ideas about human vulnerability and freedom and as practices which form the basis for social movements and social change. We will examine different constructions of rights -- individual, social, economic and cultural rights -- and we will pay special attention to the compatibilities and conflicts among different conceptions of rights. Our class is specifically designed as a critical sociological examination of human rights theories and practices, which will help students to be more effective and realistic about the prospects for human rights in the modern world. Special topics include: the ongoing controversy between human rights claims to universalism in contrast to assertions of cultural difference; critical sociological analysis of global bureaucratic systems which attempt promote human rights; the uses and abuses of the idea of human rights in political life; and the global institutionalized forms for the alleviation of human vulnerability (often referred to as "global civil society").

Required Books:

Lynn Hunt, The Invention of Human Rights, W.W. Norton, 2008.

Lynn Hunt, ed., The French Revolution and Human Rights, Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, 1996

Bret L. Billet, Cultural Universalism in the Face of the West: The Plight of Women and Female Children, Palgrave MacMillan, 2007

Bryan S. Turner, Vulnerability and Human Rights, Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006.

Clifford Bob, The Marketing of Rebellion: Insurgents, Media, and International Activism, Cambridge University Press, 2005.

Patrick West, Conspicuous Compassion: Why Sometimes It Really is Cruel to be Kind (Civitas, 2004)

Additional required articles are available on the electronic course reserve on the general course conference on First Class. These are a very important part of the class reading materials. In some cases I will send you articles and additional readings that I consider relevant to our ongoing class discussions, but I keep these to a reasonable minimum.

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: 25% each.
2. Take-home final examination: 30 percent. You are responsible for all class lectures and readings on the examination.
3. Attendance and participation: 20 percent. Short written assignments, which will be evidence of attendance and the basis for class discussions, will be given approximately once per week. These assignments will be posted on the course conference. These will be assigned a numerical score from 1-3 (1 being average, 2 being good, 3 being excellent).
4. Students should come to class having read all the material for each class period. To facilitate class discussions, I will, from time to time, call on people in class. If you are not present, this will be noted.
5. Late papers are accepted, but on a very simple basis: 1/2 a letter grade penalty for every day late, unless you have a valid medical or family emergency. This policy is strictly enforced.

Statement on Open Discussion of Controversial Issues: This course deals with contemporary issues which can be provocative and controversial. A requirement of the class is a willingness to listen to and debate others' points of view. There is no requirement to accept any view, but toleration is crucial. All students in the class, as well as the instructor, have their own political and ideological views: the classroom is for consideration of a diversity of views even if we might hold this or that one very strongly. If you are not comfortable with lively and vigorous debate, in which your views will be challenged and in which you may freely challenge others' views (including the professor's), you should not take this class, nor any other sociology class, since the basis of sociology is the challenging of conventional wisdom and the willingness to engage in critical examination of what you think you know and what others think they know to be true.

Course Schedule: Topics and Readings (please note, this is a basic organizational guide, which can change depending circumstances, such as the intensity of class discussions, my consideration of whether students are understanding the material, etc.)

September 4: Introductions and Overview of the Class

September 8 -11: The Social Construction of Reality and the Social Construction of Rights

Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman, "The Social Construction of Reality" at:
http://www.sociosite.net/topics/texts/berger_luckman.php

September 15-17 Historical and Philosophical Background of Human Rights

Morton Winston, "Philosophical Conceptions of Human Rights" (ER)

A. Belden Fields, "The Birth of the Human Rights Idea" (ER)

September 22 **Classical Social Contract Theorists**

John Locke, excerpt from "Second Treatise on Government," (ER)

Jean Jacques Rousseau, excerpt from "The Social Contract" PHR pp. 80-87 (ER)

Thomas Hobbes, excerpt from "Leviathan" (ER)

September 25 – October 6 : **The American and French Revolutions Through A Sociological Lens**

(9/25)

Thomas Jefferson, Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom" at:

<http://www.lva.lib.va.us/whatwedo/k12/bor/vsrftext.htm#trans>

The American Declaration of Independence at: <http://www.pavisnet.com/declaration/>

The US Constitution Bill of Rights at:

http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/bill_of_rights_transcript.html

Thomas Paine, "African Slavery in America" at:

<http://www.thomaspaine.org/Archives/afri.html>

(9/29)

Lynn Hunt, Inventing Human Rights, Chapters 1-3

(10/3)

Lynn Hunt, Inventing Human Rights, Chapters 4-5

Read One Essay in Hunt, The French Revolution and Human Rights (entire book is suggested)

Mary Wollstonecraft "A Vindication of the Rights of Women" (ER)

Mary Cady Stanton, "The Seneca Falls Declaration" (ER)

First Paper Due, October 9 in class

October 6 – 9 **Classical Critiques of the Idea of Human Rights:**

Jeremy Bentham, "Anarchical Fallacies" (ER)

Edmund Burke, "Reflections on the Revolution in France" (ER)

Karl Marx, "The Jewish Question" (ER)

No class Monday, October 13 (Fall Break)

October 16 – 20 **Rights as Negative and Positive Freedom**

Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty" (ER)

Will Kymlicka, "The Good, The Bad and the Ugly" (ER)

Cynthia Kaufman (review of Olin), "Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?" (ER)

October 23 – 30 **Human Rights Universalism and Cultural Relativism**

Jack Donnelly, "Cultural Relativism and Universal Human Rights"

Bret Billet, Cultural Relativism in the Face of the West, in entirety

November 3 – 6 **Minimal Moralities and Vulnerability**

Bryan S. Turner, Vulnerability and Human Rights, in entirety

Please note: I am going to be in China from Nov. 7- 14, while I am gone, you will watch a film independently called "Ballad of Narayama," and on Thursday November 13 you will convene in class and organize a discussion of it amongst yourselves, I will have a senior thesis student present to help lead the discussion. I will provide more details on this as the date approaches. Your second paper will be due on Friday, November 14, and you can use this week to work on it as well.

November 17- 24: **The Sociology of Non-Governmental Organizations**

Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, excerpt from Activists Beyond Borders (ER)

Claude E. Welch, Jr. "Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch: A Comparison." (ER)

Sidney Tarrow, "Rooted Cosmopolitans and Transnational Activists" in *The New Transnational Activism* (ER)

Makau Mutua, "Human Rights International NGOs: A Critical Evaluation." (ER)

Kenneth Anderson and Rieff, David. "Global Civil Society": A Sceptical View" in: *Global Civil Society Yearbook 2004/2005* 2005, Sage Publications: pp 26-39.

Makau Mutua, "Human Rights International NGOs: A Critical Evaluation." (ER)

December 1- 4: **Human Rights Activism, Social Movements, and Transnational Elites**

Clifford Bob, The Marketing of Rebellion, in entirety

December 8 **Wrap-Up and Discussion**

Patrick West, Conspicuous Compassion, in entirety (it's a short essay!)