The idea of human rights is one of the most powerful ideas in the modern world. This course offers a sociological 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. This critical approach aims to 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 to promote human rights; the uses and abuses of the idea of human rights in political life; the material and symbolic strategies which organizations mobilize to promote human rights causes; and the global institutionalized forms for the alleviation of human vulnerability (often referred to as “global civil society”).

**Required Books:**


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 six to eight pages: 25 percent 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). Note: while the percentage of the grade for attendance and participation is relatively low, active attendance is necessary to do well on the papers.
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 and critical re-thinking 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 general guide, which can change depending circumstances, such as the intensity of class discussions, my consideration of whether students are understanding the material, etc.)

September 9: Introductions and Overview of the Class

September 13, 16, 20: The Social Construction of Reality and the Social Construction of Rights

Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, “The Social Construction of Reality” at: http://www.sociosite.net/topics/texts/berger_luckman.php
Isaiah Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty” (ER)

September 23: **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 27: **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 30, October 4, 7: **The American and French Revolutions Through A Sociological Lens, or Why these Events are Models for Human Rights Processes in the Present.**

(9/30)


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


(10/4)

Lynn Hunt, Inventing Human Rights, Chapters 1-3

(10/7)

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 18 in class**

Fall Break, no Class on October 11. We are scheduled to have two classes on Wednesday and Thursday, 14 and 15 October. I have been invited by the Deputy Prime Minister of Russia, a major liberal human rights reformer in the country, to give a keynote address on “The University and Civil Society” in St. Petersburg on those dates. This means we will have to have a make up class. That make-up class is scheduled for Monday, October 18 from 6-8, place to be announced. We will also have our normal class meeting that Monday at 11:10, so it will be a marathon day.
October 18 (note make-up class in evening, 6-8)

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

October 21  Individual Rights Versus Group Rights

Will Kymlicka, “The Good, The Bad and the Ugly” (ER)
Cynthia Kaufman (review of Olin), “Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?” (ER)

October 25, 28  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 1, 4, 8  Human Vulnerability and Human Rights

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

Second Paper Due on Monday, November 8

November 11-15, 18: The Sociology of Non-Governmental Organizations

Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, excerpt from Activists Beyond Borders (ER)
Sidney Tarrow, “Rooted Cosmopolitans and Transnational Activists” in The New Transnational Activism (ER)
November 22- 29, December 2,6 Human Rights Activism, Social Movements, and Transnational Elites

Clifford Bob, The Marketing of Rebellion, in entirety
In this section of the class, students will do oral presentations on how they might organize a human rights movement. More information on how this will proceed will be given to you.

December 9 Wrap-Up and Discussion

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