Anthropology and Human Rights

Sally Engle Merry
Silver Professor
Department of Anthropology
Fall 2015
Tues 2-4:45

Anthropology Department First Floor Conference Room

Office: 603 in Anthropology Department, 25 Waverly Place

Office Hours, 10-12 Wednesday

ANTH GA 2600/LAW LW.11455.001

This course examines the contemporary elaboration and dissemination of human rights in the post-World War II period as law, discourse, and practice. This includes an analysis of its institutional grounding in the United Nations and non-governmental organizations and its changes over time. The course covers the historical opposition of the American Anthropological Association to human rights and its more recent statement of support. It examines the opposition between culture and rights along with current theoretical efforts to negotiate an intermediate space. Current anthropological work focuses on the way human rights concepts and institutions are mobilized in particular political struggles in various parts of the world and how concepts of culture and rights are deployed in the global production and localization of human rights ideas. Specific areas of focus include indigenous rights, women's rights, transitional justice, and human rights monitoring by NGOs and treaty committees, including technologies of knowledge production and the use of indicators and benchmarks. The course discusses approaches to transnational, deterritorialized, and multi-sited ethnography as well as the gaps between human rights law and implementation.

There will be a mid-semester paper of 10 pages and a final research paper of 25 pages. Students are expected to write a one-page reaction to the readings and one or two questions for further discussion for each class to be posted on NYU Classes by midnight the night before the class, with two classes excused. Students are expected to complete the readings and be prepared to discuss them. Two or three students will be responsible for raising questions in each class, with each student responsible for two classes. Grades are based on papers (30% mid-semester and 60% final) and class presentations and posts (10%).
Required Books:


September 8: Introduction: Concepts of Human Rights and the Contemporary Human Rights System


September 15: Human Rights and Culture: Anthropological Perspectives


September 22: Human Rights in Practice: A Case Study of a Trial

September 29: The Human Rights Treaties


Read the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*  
*International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights* (ICCPR)  
*International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights* (ICESCR),  
and several of the other treaties. Each has general comments and reporting guidelines. There are country reports for each treaty. Read as much of these materials as you can to get a sense of what the treaties cover and what the reports are like. There is a description of the process in my 2006 book, below, chapters 2 and 3.


October 6: Critiques of Human Rights


October 20: Human Rights in Local Contexts

October 27: Universalism and Relativism: The Question of Cultural Difference


November 3: Anthropologists Debate Human Rights and Culture


AAA statement on human rights on www.aaanet.org


November 10: Human Rights in Practice

Mark Goodale and Sally Engle Merry, eds. 2007. The Practice of Human Rights. Cambridge Univ. Press.

Paper due November 12: Is there a way to reconcile a universal value system and respect for cultural difference? In light of the many case studies we have read, what do you think are the advantages and the drawbacks of asserting a universal legal system for local social movements? When and why is universality resisted?

Paper to be delivered to my mailbox in the Anthropology Department, first floor, by 5 PM (office closes at 5 PM).

November 17: No Class. American Anthropological Association Annual Meeting

November 24: Vernacularization of Human Rights


Recommended: the four case studies in the Global Networks special issue, 2009 (9:4).


December 1: Measuring Human Rights


December 8: Transitional Justice and the International Criminal Court


December 15: Trafficking and Human Rights: Project presentations

Read overview, rankings, and some country narratives in US State Department Trafficking in Persons Report, 2015. www.state.gov/g/tip/rls/tprpt/2015/


Final Papers due December 23, emailed to sally.merry@nyu.edu