Anthropology of Human Rights
Dr. Jennifer Curtis

Description: Human rights are a major research and practice area for all subfields of anthropology. Physical anthropologists and archaeologists work in conflict zones to document evidence of human rights violations, while linguistic anthropologists have advocated language preservation since the early days of the discipline. In the past thirty years, sociocultural anthropologists have become more active in studying and advocating human rights. In the same period, human rights have become a frequent subject of global debate and activism.

This course will introduce human rights as both a legal and political practice, and consider the origins of human rights historically. We will develop an overview of the international human rights system, and study significant human rights issues, abuses, campaigns and debates, historically and in the present. Resistance to human rights campaigns is often framed in terms of cultural differences or values; we will examine such conflicts between global norms and local values from an anthropological perspective on culture, considering their complex political, economic, and cultural contexts.

We will focus especially on how anthropological skills and knowledge can be used to make concrete contributions in human rights struggles. These skills include research and documentation, communication strategies, policy and law development, and campaigning.

Objectives of the Course:
- To understand the historical origins of human rights and the international legal system
- To understand the political conflicts and critiques that surround human rights
- To understand anthropological approaches to human rights issues and debates, and locate contemporary approaches within the discipline’s broader history
- To identify and develop anthropological skills that can make concrete contributions to human rights promotion
- To develop skills for presenting knowledge and recommendations, both in discussion and in writing, to address different audiences and actors within human rights debates

Course Organization: This course is a seminar, which means that everyone is expected to play an active role. I will open discussion with remarks that contextualize the day’s work, but most of the class period will consist of collective analysis and discussion of the assigned readings and the response notes. It is essential that everyone thoughtfully read all assignments beforehand.

Blackboard: All materials for this course will be posted on Blackboard, including a schedule and presentation assignments. You should check the site quite regularly, at least three or four times/week.
REQUIREMENTS AND ASSESSMENT

Grade Breakdown

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Requirement</th>
<th>Points</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Class participation</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presentations</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Response notes</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final action project</td>
<td>500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proposal and outline of tasks/roles</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preliminary report, including outline of your role</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presentation</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Written Project &amp; annotated bibliography</td>
<td>250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>1000</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Reading: All texts will be available in an electronic format on Blackboard. Consult the syllabus below for each week’s readings, and discussion assignments for each class meeting. I strongly recommend completing all of the week’s readings prior to both of the Tuesday and Thursday meetings, although, as the course schedule below explains, each class will focus on specific texts.

Participation: Students will receive 4 points for each class session in which they make one thoughtful and informed contribution to the discussion. If you do not participate, you will not receive points. The maximum available points will be 120. Therefore, you may not participate in up to 2 classes, for whatever reason, without losing points. If you earn more points than the 120 (theoretically, 128 for all class meetings), these will be added to your grade as bonus points.

Presentations: Each student will be assigned to present two ten-minute talks related to the week’s readings. This could be about the readings themselves, about a human rights issue you are familiar with or are interested in that is related to the readings etc. These are graded on a scale of 40 points each (total: 80). You will automatically receive participation points for these class meetings. Please treat this as if you were giving a professional presentation – preparation, familiarity with the subject, manner of dress and attention to time matter in human rights work.

Response notes: Each student will submit 5 typed, three-page (1500 words maximum) response “notes” to the readings. On your assigned weeks, these are due by 6 pm on the Monday of each week. Students must complete these for 5 of the 16 weeks, for a maximum available total of 300 points (60 points each). You will submit the response notes on Blackboard for your fellow students and myself to read prior to class meetings, and these notes will help facilitate our class discussions. We will assign your weeks for response notes during the first class, so that we have some response/position papers to discuss each week.
These are NOT summaries of the readings (I have read them, and your fellow students will have read them too!). Instead, they are a combination of short essay that synthesizes the readings and position paper. So, it should contain a) your analytical reflections on the materials – concerns, questions, observations, ideas about the week’s readings; b) a position or recommendation that applies the reading and develops concrete recommendations for a specific human rights issue or conflict. Presentation is important in human rights work, so please take advantage of spell-check and grammar tools in your word processing software to check your writing!

**Exams:** There are no exams.

**Final Action Project:** In human rights work, it is important to work collectively, so your final projects will be organized in joint working groups of one graduate and one or two undergraduates. You will produce specific assignments and a final presentation together and written work individually.

The assignment for each working group is to analyze the background and the history of human rights issue in their chosen locale or across several localities, to outline the situation itself (who is affected by whom, why and how, etc.), and devise an action plan that will in some way have a positive impact on the people who are suffering. The working group will approach the issue strategically, conducting a literature review on the topic, and then producing an action plan. You will allocate roles and tasks in the group (one person might be the spokesperson, another the press liaison etc.) Your group presentation will reflect these roles, as will the written work you submit individually. I expect the groups to meet regularly to discuss their project. This is part of the assignment and not optional.

Each group will conduct a review of relevant anthropological, historical, legal, policy and/or advocacy literature. Each member may work on specific areas of review, but all members will individually submit a proposal with an outline of their role, a preliminary report on their work, and a final written piece of work describing the research and their role/tasks in the proposed plan with an annotated bibliography (summarizing the literature review). The teams will present their action project jointly during the final week of classes.

Your proposed actions may include a plan/methodology to conduct primary anthropological field research on the issue, or plans to advocate and implement specific actions. Different team members will perform different tasks; one might develop reports written for policy makers, to human rights organizations, or to the general public. Another might design web posts, short videos, powerpoints or other tools to inform people themselves of their rights and how to realize them. Another might design field research plan—BUT you will not actually conduct field research, due to the sensitive nature of human rights research. A methodology can be rigorously outlined, however. [Furthermore, proposed actions or research plans cannot endanger the people with whom one is working and it cannot threaten the safety of the anthropologist herself. Other problems will be taken on a case-by-case basis.]

As a team, you will present your project to the class during the final week. You
may choose to use posters, PowerPoint displays, short videos, mock press releases and conferences etc. Content is important, but so is creativity, attention to detail, brevity and familiarity with the issue and the audience you seek to convince. The presentation should outline the background research you did, and showcase the actions you have proposed.

Each team member will individually submit a final written report that will describe the background to the issue (incorporating an annotated bibliography about the research they were responsible for), and a discussion of specific actions they were responsible for. It will include a discussion of his/her role/tasks, and examples of the actual reports, presentations, research plan etc. he/she would produce for that role in real-life. (For example, reports designed for different audiences, newspaper editorials, or a presentation you would make to lawmakers, etc.)

**Topic:** The joint working group will depend upon topical interests. The human rights topic might be regional, it might be cases of prisoners of conscience, refugees or stateless people who seek to escape civil or ethnic strife, people who have disappeared, or people whose homelands or other means of livelihood are threatened by invasion or environmental degradation because of "development." It could be imprisonment without trial, land, water or other rights of indigenous people, the rights of political prisoners, the death penalty, apartheid-like situations, the rights of women, or ethnic rights. Other topics are also possible with my prior approval. We cannot address all of the human rights situations that exist in the world in this class. For example, we will say little about hate speech, the rights of children, and much more, not because they are less important, but simply because there is not time to do it all. I encourage you to examine topics that do not appear on the syllabus. I can direct you to resources, books etc.

Your project work will be presented in graded four parts.

1. First, a spokesperson will briefly outline the group project to the class in the FIFTH WEEK of class. This will include a brief problem statement and an indication of who is making which contribution to the group project. EACH student will also provide a written paper of between 2 and 3 typewritten pages in length, which will outline your part. It will also include a preliminary bibliography of at least 5 sources that each student has already or will soon consult (Ideally there will be a mix of already and will).

2. By the TENTH WEEK, I expect a preliminary report of 6-8 typewritten pages from each student about their role and what they have done, along with plans for completing the project.

3. Each group will give an oral presentation of the joint project during the last week of class. You may use visuals, music, slides, and/or read a paper. All members of the group are expected to be full participants in the formulation of the presentation, but you may decide as a group how to present.

4. A written version of your part is due at the end of the semester. This will consist of a maximum 10-15 pp. for undergraduates, 20 for graduates, single-
spaced; the annotated bibliography will be separate, and should not exceed 5 pp. single-spaced. The length of final written reports will, of course, vary depending on what actions you decide upon as a group. Over the course of the semester, I will have consulted with you and know what to expect. These papers will be graded for individual contributions in anthropological and human rights theory, coherence, completeness, originality, etc. as well as overall presentation. I DO take spelling and grammar into account.

Graduate Students: In addition to the above requirements, you will also read an ethnography on human rights, from a list to be provided, and write a five-page review of it and the issues it raises for your own research, with reference to your own graduate work and other literature. The written report is worth 50 points.

Your Final Grade: will be determined by adding the points you have earned. The maximum possible for undergrads is 800 and for grads 850. Letter grades will employ plus-minus grading according to the following scale: 60-66 = D, 67-69 = D+, 70-72 = C-, 73-76 = C, 77-79 = C+, 80-82 = B-, 83-86 = B, 87-89 = B+, 90-92 = A-, and 93-100 = A.

An "A" is clearly superior work; more than "exactly what I asked for." A grade between 89-80 = some kind of a B. A "B" is very good work, covers all the bases, is pretty much just what I asked for (but nothing more). There may be some small errors of fact or interpretation. A "C" assignment is average. It is correct on many points but not all. There may be some serious omissions or confusion or errors on significant points. A "D" means that there are many serious errors or misunderstandings or omissions. It is borderline pass and suggests that the student needs to do things rather differently. An "F" is an F - basically, wide of the mark in all areas.

Week 1

1-14 Introduction to the course

1-16 So, what are human rights?


Prepare for discussion: What do these rights look in practice in the contemporary world? What kinds of laws, organizations, or social movements do you think help people realize these rights today? Which of these rights do you see being exercised, denied, or violated in the present?

Week 2: What are human rights and how do they work? How can anthropologists promote and study them?

1-21 Issue: The US Civil Rights Movement

Read: a) Amendments to the US Constitution.


Prepare for discussion: What are your own experiences of rights in the US? How do you exercise your basic rights on a daily basis? How do you see the laws of land work in real life? How have you been affected by the legacies of historical rights movements (women’s, civil, etc.)?

1-23 Human rights in law and politics
Prepare for discussion: How can anthropologists promote human rights in practice? How can anthropological research support human rights?

Week 3: Where do human rights come from, historically and philosophically?

1-28 Locating human rights in the past
Prepare for discussion: How did you learn about rights? What were the ideas that had the most impact for you? Were you taught that they came from a particular source – law, the nation, divinity? How do you think about what you were taught in relation to this class? Have your thoughts changed? How or why?

1-30 Anthropology and human rights, a troubled history
Read: a) Goodale, Mark, Introduction to Goodale and Merry, The Practice of Human Rights.
Prepare for discussion: Were anthropologists’ concerns about human rights justified in the 1940s? How can human rights accommodate cultural differences?
Week 4: Who has human rights? How do human rights recognize or diminish different aspects of being “human”?

2-4  Issue: Indigenous Rights, part 1
Read:  

Prepare for discussion: Can the rights of indigenous people be secured by international treaties, even within resistant national states? How can NGOs support this? What can anthropologists do to aid these efforts?

2-6  Issue: Indigenous Rights, part 2
Read:  

Prepare for discussion: Are international human rights even meaningful for people who don’t share a western cultural and historical worldview? If so, how can rights be made meaningful? What is the role of anthropologist? What sorts of anthropological work – everyday or in written formats – can support this project. What does this work tell us about humanity? How the categories of human-ness are constructed and excluded in different historical and cultural settings?

Week 5: Theory and human rights

ACTION REPORT PROPOSALS DUE

2-11 Universal human rights and anthropological perspectives
Read:  

Prepare for discussion: Are human rights are a universal and natural, in your opinion? Are claims for universality useful?

2-13 Schools of thought regarding human rights
Read:  
Prepare for discussion:  How do theories about the universality of human rights steer actual human rights work? Can you think of specific examples when a relativist approach would be more effective?

Week 6: The laws that we have…

2-18 The Human Rights Conventions and Treaty Body System
Read: All readings at:
http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CoreInstruments.aspx
a) The two core human rights conventions that, together with the UDHR, make up the International Bill of Human Rights: International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, (ICESCR).

b) Three of the other major human rights conventions: Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC); Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW); International Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (ICERD); Convention against Torture (CAT); Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CPRD); International Convention on Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers (ICRMW); Convention on Enforced Disappearances (CED)

Prepare for discussion: Prepare to discuss in detail the first two conventions and at least one of the others. I will circulate a list on February 6 and you will sign up for one of these additional treaties. After a short discussion with your group in class, each will present the key features of the treaty it has discussed and what you consider its most important contributions and most difficult guarantees. Are some of these provisions valued more than others internationally? What provisions do you think are enforced more often? Why?

2-20 Critiques of the international human rights system


Prepare for discussion: Can you see a difference between law and practice in the actions of international bodies, national or local governments? What are some examples? Have you read about or experienced any failures of human rights activism or law?

Week 7: How can activists make human rights real in everyday life?

2-25 Culture and human rights
Read: Sally Engle Merry. 2006. Human Rights and Gender Violence: Translating International Law into Local Justice. Chicago: University of
Prepare for discussion: How do different rights become recognized? How do they become real in different cultural settings? Here, Merry discusses gender and violence. What are some other campaigns or acts of cultural translation can you imagine for other rights?

How can anthropology help?

Prepare for discussion: What kinds of specific activities can organizations, social movements, anthropologists engage in to support change? Research, protest, policy, press releases etc. Search for news etc. online to give us an example of an issue and specific tactics organizations (such as Amnesty International) have taken to promote change. How could anthropological skills or ideas help?

**Week 8: Brainstorming Action Projects**

3-4 & 3-6 This is a chance to discuss your projects in class with me and fellow students; we will also either go to the library for a training session on how to compile and write an annotated bibliography on your subject, or I will conduct this session in the seminar room. This will be an opportunity to brainstorm, and brush up on any skills you will need to develop the best action project you can.

*Spring Break*

**Part II**
**Contemporary Issues and Studies**

**Week 9: Documenting human rights violations**

3-18 *Ethnographic Documentation*


Prepare for discussion: What do these ethnographic accounts bring to our understanding of human rights violations? What are practical contributions an ethnographic approach can bring to human rights work?

3-20 *Forensic documentation*

Prepare for discussion: What skills from archaeology and physical anthropology are useful in documenting human rights violations? What are the
best ways to communicate these scientific and technical findings? To other audiences – legal, political, public? What needs to be translated and how?

Week 10: Transitional Justice

ACTION REPORT PRELIMINARY REPORTS DUE

3-27 Can culture provide alternatives to trials?

Prepare for discussion: What aspects of western legal culture are most problematic for transitional justice in other societies? How can these problems be addressed, and what can anthropologists do in practice? What are the ethical dilemmas an anthropologist faces when trying to intervene? When trying to represent these processes?

3-25 Truth or Justice?

Prepare for discussion: What are the debates between those who advocate restorative, conciliatory approaches and those advocating criminal models and punishment? How can states combine punishment, healing, and amnesty in effective ways? Is it necessary to trade justice for truth?

Week 11: Economic Rights and Development

4-1 What are economic rights?

Prepare for discussion: What would economic rights look like for you? Consider social welfare systems in other countries with market economies – such as Sweden. Why are ordinary US citizens, as opposed to politicians and corporations, so ambivalent about economic rights?

4-3 What happens when people demand economic rights?

Prepare for discussion: How can people best mobilize for economic rights?
What kind of anthropological knowledge about economy, cultural traditions, etc. can support these efforts?

**Week 12: Health**

4-8 *What is a right to health?*

**Read:**

**Prepare for discussion:**
Can we say a right exists if it can’t be exercised? Do people have a right to medical treatment? What does a right to medical treatment mean in the US? What does it mean in developing countries? What tactics can activists and advocates use to secure a real right to “health?”

4-10 *What does a right to health say about being human?*

**Read:**

**Prepare for discussion:**
Human rights implicitly belong to every person and all people. But rights are actually extended to humans in a differential, rather than universal way, no matter where we think they come from. What does a right to health say about our definitions of persons, and who is entitled to rights? What does a right to health look like for you?

**Week 13: LGBT Rights**

4-15 *Globalizing LGBT Rights*


**Prepare for discussion:** How can we navigate conflicts between “cultural values” and basic human rights? Do rights always involve a negotiation of sorts? Between principles and contexts? Between individuals? Citizens and states? We will discuss other examples that you bring to class, from other places and times, where culture has been used as a defense against extending basic rights: Gender? Race?

4-17 *Localizing LGBT Rights*


**Prepare for discussion:** How do people justify inequality or equality in different times and places? What are some contemporary struggles you know about in which different sources of “right” are in conflict – church, state,
morality, etc. We will discuss these examples, from the present in this city to the past and justifications for other inequalities we now believe were wrong.

**Week 14: Humanitarianism and international intervention**

*4-22 Humanitarianism: Genocide, human rights and the law of war*

**Read:**


**Prepare for discussion:** Since World War II, the UN has promoted an international consensus against genocide. But in practice, all people have not been protected. What do the differences between human rights and humanitarianism tell us about the values of the current international system? Do humanitarian interventions demand a voiceless, passive victim? How are human rights and humanitarianism increasingly interconnected?

*4-24 What do interventions mean for human rights?*

**Read:**


**Prepare for discussion:** Why are human rights increasingly seen as opposed to security, particularly in Latin America and the USA? What kinds of violence does human rights consider and what kinds does it ignore? How do publics, as opposed to governmental leaders, decide what interventions to support or resist? What can human rights advocates do to promote respect for human rights in periods of sustained conflict?

**Week 15: Human rights brought home**

*4-27 The view from here…*

**Read:**


**Prepare for discussion:** The US constitution was part of the 18th century movement towards rights as the foundation of political systems. Over the centuries, there have been many struggles to extend rights to all US
citizens. After this class, what do you think of this history? Where have rights come from in the US? How have they best been protected? What tactics worked, and didn't?

4-29 Final thoughts and summing up

Week 16 Project presentations