

HR 101 Introduction to Human Rights

Fall 2008

Thomas Keenan

T Th 1:00 - 2:20 Olin 205

An intensive introduction to contemporary discussions of human rights in a broad context. The course mixes a basic historical and theoretical investigation of these contested categories, 'human' and 'right,' with some difficult examples of the political, social, cultural, and aesthetic dimensions of claims made in these terms. What are humans and what count as rights, if any? We will ask about the foundations of rights claims; about legal, political, non-violent and violent ways of advancing, defending and enforcing them; about the documents and institutions of the human rights movement; and about the questionable 'reality' of human rights in our world. Is there such a thing as 'our' world? The answers are not obvious. They are most complicated when we are talking, as we will for most of the semester, about torture, humanitarianism and "humanitarian intervention," genocide and the failure to prevent it, truth commissions and war crimes tribunals, testimony and information, and the challenges to human rights orthodoxy posed by terrorism and the wars against it. Using texts from philosophers, journalists, lawyers, historians, activists, and poets, along with the contemporary news flow, we will examine some tricky cases and troubled places, among them our own.

Requirements

1. Complete all reading in advance of seminar discussions.
2. Attend all class meetings, required film screenings, and participate vigorously in seminar discussions.
3. Write one shorter and one longer paper and take two exams.

Readings

Lynn Hunt, Inventing Human Rights (W. W. Norton 2007)

Michael Ignatieff, Human Rights as Politics and Idolatry (Princeton UP 2003)

Walter Kälin, ed., The Face of Human Rights (Lars Muller Publishers 2004)

Adam Hochschild, Bury The Chains (Mariner Books 2006)

David Rieff, Slaughterhouse (Touchstone 1996)

Antjie Krog, Country of My Skull (Three Rivers Press 2000)

Other reading materials will be available on ReserveWeb, on the Internet, and in photocopy (depending on the schedule).

1. Some basic concepts

T 2 Sep Introduction
Th 4 Sep Face of Human Rights, pp. 1-37

T 9 Sep Face, 566-714
Th 11 Sep no class

2. Some big questions

Who or what exactly counts as human?

T 16 Sep Lynn Hunt, Inventing Human Rights
Th 18 Sep

Between negotiation and violence

T 23 Sep Michael Ignatieff, Human Rights as Politics and Idolatry
Th 25 Sep

Civil rights or human rights?

T 30 Sep Hannah Arendt, "The End of Human Rights and the Decline of the Nation State"
(from The Origins of Totalitarianism)
Th 2 Oct

What sort of politics, if any?

T 7 Oct Claude Lefort "The Question of Democracy," "Human Rights and the Welfare
State" (from Democracy and Political Theory)
Th 9 Oct

T 14 Oct no class (fall break)
Th 16 Oct midterm exam and first paper due

3. Some examples

The campaign to end slavery

T 21 Oct Adam Hochschild, Bury the Chains
Th 23 Oct

> screenings of Claude Lanzmann, dir., Shoah (1985, 550 min.) <

Genocide and testimony (Shoah)

- T 28 Oct Primo Levi, Survival in Auschwitz [If This is a Man], pp. 24-25
Claude Lanzmann, "There is no why" (1988)
Th 30 Oct Shoshana Felman, Testimony, pp. 204-283
Giorgio Agamben, Remnants of Auschwitz, pp. 15-39, 137-169

The civil rights movement

- T 4 Nov Malcolm X, "The Ballot or the Bullet"
Martin Luther King, "Give Us the Ballot"

Th 6 Nov

Apartheid, truth, and reconciliation (South Africa)

- T 11 Nov Antjie Krog, Country of my Skull
Th 13 Nov

Genocide and humanitarianism (Bosnia)

- T 18 Nov David Rieff, Slaughterhouse, ch. 1
Zlatko Dizdarevic, from Sarajevo: A War Diary
Miljenko Jergovic, from Sarajevo Marlboro
Th 20 Nov
T 25 Nov no class (Thanksgiving)
Th 27 Nov

Torture today

- T 2 Dec Jane Mayer, from The Dark Side
Trevor Paglen, from Torture Taxi
Th 4 Dec

New activist strategies

- T 9 Dec Women on waves
Lara Agnew, dir., Abortion Ship (BBC)
Sara Corbett, "The Pro-Choice Extremist," NY Times Magazine (8/26/01)
Th 11 Dec Shooting Back
video from Witness and B'tselem's Shooting Back Project
T 16 Dec 'completion days'
Th 18 Dec final exam and final paper due