

Philosophy 721 001 (72066)
Advanced Seminar: Human Rights
Fall 2008
Wed: 7:10-10:00 pm
Prof. Debra Bergoffen

Course Description

This course will analyze and critique the epistemological, moral, and political concepts which ground human rights discourses. It will examine the historical development and the legal deployment of human rights documents and institution by examining such founding human rights documents as the American Declaration of Independence, the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, and the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It will analyze the transformation of a western political concept grounded in the notion of an autonomous individual into an international one which challenges the notion of individual autonomy and argues for the rights of communities.

The course will examine the ways in which the language and rhetoric of rights claims have been used by social movements, e.g. the anti slavery movement, the labor movement, the anti-colonial movement, the women's movement, the gay liberation movement. It will ask whether human rights claims can be sustained in a post modern world increasingly skeptical of the epistemological, metaphysical and moral anchors of the very ideas of an essential human nature, inherent human rights and established moral law. Given that human rights claims are pursued through legal mechanisms, it will ask whether such mechanisms are either adequate or suitable to redress the evils of exploitation, torture, genocide or rape and examine whether such mechanisms can address the needs of transitional democracies. Finally it will consider alternative justice mechanisms, e.g. truth commissions, and their ability to deliver on their promise of securing both truth and justice.

Course readings under consideration:

Julia Kristeva, *Revolt She Said*
Carlos Santiago Nino, *Radical Evil On Trial*
Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights*
Martin Shaw, *War and Genocide*
Hannah Arendt *The Origins of Totalitarianism*
Costas Douzinas *The End of Human Rights*
Charles Villa-Vicencio ed. *The Provocations of Amnesty*
Catherine A. Mac Kinnon *Are Women Human?*
Mark Philop Bradley ed. *Truth Claims: Representation and Human Rights*
Micheline R. Ishay *The History of Human Rights*
Simone de Beauvoir, "An Eye for an Eye"