What counts as a human right? Do universally agreed-upon rights exist? Is there such a thing as ‘natural law’? What is the relationship between universal rights claims and culturally embedded value systems? Do cultural rights exist, and if so, can individual be reconciled with such collective claims? This course addresses these questions by examining the underlying assumptions and values of the human rights movement from an anthropological perspective.

This is not a prescriptive course, aimed at defining who lacks rights, or on methods to provide these. Rather than beginning with a rulebook of rights and then using this to give nation-states a scorecard, the purpose of this course is to analyze the theoretical basis of human rights as well as criticisms of and challenges to universal rights claims.

Learning Outcomes: At the end of this course you should be able to:

1. Discuss how anthropology approaches and analyzes the concept of human rights, and how this approach contrasts with the approaches of disciplines such as political science, law, and philosophy.
2. Evaluate and be conversant with key debates within the field of human rights, including debates about women’s rights, health rights, indigenous rights, and alternative rights approaches, such as 'Asian Values'.
3. Understand key rights concepts including property-based rights, political rights, cultural rights, negative & positive rights, and the relationship between rights and responsibilities.

Required Texts:


**E-Books (available via Gelman portal):**


**The following readings are available on Blackboard:**


**Evaluation:**

You will write two essays of between five and seven pages responding to specific questions arising from the course readings. The first two papers will focus on one of the three course sections. Your purpose in each of these papers will not be to summarize what each author claims or to repeat what I have said, but to demonstrate your understanding of the theoretical and practical implications of competing perspectives. Your final assignment will require you to research a specific rights question in a specific cultural context (see below).

**Paper due dates:** February 12th, April 2nd

**Final Paper due date:** Official examination date.

**Paper Weight:** Paper #1: 25%; Paper #2: 30%; Paper #3: 35%; Attendance: 10%
Final Paper

You will write a 7-10 page final paper on a rights question of your choice. This paper will draw on at least five anthropological or sociological sources beyond class readings and follow the following guidelines:

A. First choose a specific rights question, using as a source the 1948 UN Declaration on Human Rights, the 1979 “Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women” (CEDAW), the 1993 Bangkok Declaration on Human Rights, the 1972 “Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage”, or any other international convention on rights.

B. Once you have chosen a rights question, you need to choose a specific nation-state or community within a nation-state in which you will analyze this rights question.

C. In analyzing this issue or question, you need to take an anthropological approach, which means you should examine this issue through the lens of gender, socio-economic class, ethnicity, religion, and other socio-cultural factors.

D. Your goal is to show your readers what form this specific right takes in a local context and what questions are relevant to this specific situation. The theoretical approach you take should be cognizant of Sally Merry's description of rights in practice, what she has called, 'rights in the vernacular'.

CLASS POLICIES

Paper extensions: in order to accommodate your needs, I make sure you have a full week to write these essays. Short of a documented medical emergency, no paper extensions are possible. Papers turned in a day after the deadline lose ½ grade; papers turned in two days late lose one full grade; papers turned in three days late lose two full grades. No paper will be accepted beyond three days late.

Computer Use: You are welcomed to use a laptop during class for note taking and for perusing electronic course sources. Please do not surf the Net, check your email, or electronically multi-task during this class.

Religious Holidays: University policies recognize the observance of religious holidays. Please notify me during the first week of class of your intention to be absent on specific religious holidays.

Participation: Please do not miss class; attending class impacts your grade [see above].

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY: The GW Code of Academic Integrity states: “Academic dishonesty is defined as cheating of any kind, including misrepresenting one's own work, taking credit for the work of others without crediting them and without
appropriate authorization, and the fabrication of information.” For the remainder of the code, see: http://www.gwu.edu/~ntegrity/code.html

SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM: Any student who may need an accommodation based on the potential impact of a disability should contact the Disability Support Services office at 202-994-8250 in the Marvin Center, Suite 242, to establish eligibility and to coordinate reasonable accommodations. For additional information please refer to: http://gwired.gwu.edu/dss/

UNIVERSITY COUNSELING CENTER (UCC) 202-994-5300: The University Counseling Center (UCC) offers 24/7 assistance for personal, social, career, and study skills problems. Services for students include crisis and emergency mental health consultations, confidential assessment, counseling services (individual and small group), and referrals:

http://gwired.gwu.edu/counsel/CounselingServices/AcademicSupportServices

SECURITY: In case of an emergency, if at all possible, remain in our classroom. If our building is in eminent danger (say, burning down), follow the evacuation procedures posted on the wall.

Class Schedule

PART I: THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

Week I: What Counts as a ‘Right’?


Week II: Historical Foundations

1/20: Holiday


Week III: Anthropological Perspectives on Rights


**Week IV: The Universal and the Particular**

2/3: Sally Merry, “Changing Rights, Changing Culture” in *Culture & Rights* (31-55) & Marie-Bénédicte Dembour, “Following the Movement of a Pendulum: between Universalism and Relativism” (56-79) in *Culture & Rights*.

2/5: Goodale, *Surrendering to Utopia*, Chapter 3 (pp. 40-64).

**Week V: NGOs and the Return of Culture**


2/12: Sally Merry, “Human Rights Law and the Demonization of Culture (And Anthropology along the Way)” [Blackboard].

*Paper I due in class on February 12th*

**Week VI: Values vs. Rights: The Asian Values Debate**

2/17: Holiday


**Week VII: A Clash of Universals?**


PART II: RIGHTS IN CONTEXT

Week VIII: ‘The Right to Work’ or Worker Rights?


3/5: Lee, Chapter 3 (pp. 69-122).

**March 10-16: SPRING BREAK**

Week IX: From Maoism to the Market

3/17: Lee, Chapter 4 (pp. 124-156)

3/19: Lee, Chapter 5 (pp. 157-203)

Week X: Human Rights as Women’s Rights and Children’s Rights


Week XI: Health Care as a Human Right


4/2: Pathologies of Power, Chapters 5 & 6 (pp. 135-178).

*Paper II due in class on April 2nd*

Week XII: Indigenous Rights


Week XIII: Heritage and Culture as Human Rights

4/14: Michael Brown, “Can Culture be Copyrighted?” [Blackboard]

Week XIV: Nature, Culture, and Society: Whose Rights are Paramount?


Week XV: Concluding Thoughts

4/28: Jane Cowan, “Culture and Rights after *Culture and Rights*” [Blackboard].