

Human Rights, SIS 622-001
American University, Fall 2011
Tues. 2:35pm- 5:00pm
Professor Julie Mertus
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Syllabus

Course Description:

This course has been specifically designed to address the needs and interests of students of international studies and, in particular, those engaged in the study of peace and conflict resolution, international ethics, international politics and international development.

The course is divided into four parts. It begins by examining the philosophical and political bases for the international human rights movements, probing the ongoing debate over universality, culture and human rights. Second, the course introduces the main United Nations and regional systems for human rights protection and promotion. Third, students become acquainted with the methodology of human rights fact-finding, with attention given to learning and practicing interview techniques and planning investigations. Finally, the course challenges students to think as human rights advocates in their examination of specific strategies for protection and promotion.

The class will be highly participatory and will encourage diversity of opinion and respect for differing views. *NO LAPTOPS ARE PERMITTED IN CLASS.*

This class is in compliance with the university's policies on reasonable accommodations for people with documented disabilities. Students with disabilities should see the professor early in the semester.

Course Goals:

This course seeks to help students to:

- develop analytical skills to question and appraise human rights policies and practices at the international and national levels;
- enhance understanding of fact-finding methodology and develop interview skills;

- gain substantive knowledge of the international law and policy of human rights and consider prevailing trends in the human rights field, its challenges and contributions of critics;
- perceive improvements, discern ambiguities and identify contradictions in the human rights movement;
- draw useful conclusions about the roles of various state and nonstate actors in the identification of rights and in their promotion and enforcement; and
- identify potential roles for oneself in the promotion of human rights.

Assigned Readings:

- Hertel, Shareen and Kathryn Libal, *Human Rights in the United States: Beyond Exceptionalism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011)(“Beyond”).
- Mertus, Julie, *The United Nations and Human Rights* (New York: Routledge and Taylor & Francis, 2005) (“UN”) (be sure to purchase 2nd edition).
- Mertus, Julie, *Human Rights Matters* (Stanford Univ. Press, 2009).
- Moeckli, Daniel, Sangeeta Shah, Sandesh Sivakumaran, and David Harris eds., *International Human Rights Law* (London and New York: Oxford Univ. Press 2010)(“Main Text”).

Requirements and Grading:

Exams collectively count for 50% of the grade. The **in-class exam** (20%) tests your understanding of the central philosophical debates on human rights and the main elements of human rights systems and mechanisms. **The final exam** (30%) requires you to apply your knowledge of human rights to a specific hypothetical country.

The remaining 50% of your grade is from the **interview simulation** (20%) **book review** (20%), and **attendance** at human rights week events (10%). The simulation, held mid-way throughout the semester, requires you to work in a small group to prepare a list of interview questions for a mock interview with a torture victim and to conduct the mock interview. A group paper setting forth your strategy for the interview and the interview questions to be asked is due at the beginning of the class when you conduct the mock interview. An individual reflection paper that utilizes the assigned readings for the class is due at the beginning of the class after you conduct the mock interview.

The **book reviews** are scattered throughout the semester. You can choose two books to review together (you write one “review essay”). A list of books to review and a guide for writing book reviews will be available on blackboard.

The **attendance at human rights week events** refers to an event held each fall by the Ethics, Peace and Human Rights (EPGA) program.

Class attendance and consistent class preparation and participation are required. If your grade is borderline, grades may be raised one-half grade for excellent participation (defined by quality and not just quantity) and attendance (defined as missing no more than one class). On the other hand, grades may be lowered by one-half grade for students who miss three classes. Students who miss more than three classes will need to meet with me to explore whether they should receive any credit for the course and, if so, what additional work will be required to receive credit. This provides a good opportunity to increase your credit for participation.

SYLLABUS: *Human Rights*, American University

Aug. 30: Introduction to Class

Sept. 6: Foundations: History/Philosophy/Critiques

Book reviews

READINGS:

- *MAIN TEXT:* 17-86
- *BEYOND:*
Chapter 6, “The Curious Resistance to Seeing Domestic Violence as a Human Rights Violation in the United States,” by Sally Engle Merry and Jessica Shimmin, 113-131.

Chapter 7, “At the Crossroads: Children’s Rights and the U.S. Government,” by Jonathan Todres, 132-152.

Debate 1: Are children’s rights subject to interpretation of the specific culture in question? In other words, to what extent are children’s human rights culturally relative?

Sept. 13: Foundations: Politics

Book reviews

READINGS:

- *MAIN TEXT:* 3-14; 87-100
- *BEYOND:*
Chapter 14: “LGBT Rights as Human Rights in the US,” by Julie Mertus, 274-290.

Chapter 15; “Disaster Politics in Louisiana and the Struggle for Human Rights, by Davida Finger and Rachel Luft, 291-312.

- The Universal Declaration of Human Rights:
<http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/>

Debate 2: Is the U.S. foreign policy on human rights in the Middle East based on politics or principle? How can the US human rights foreign policy in the Middle East be compared to Africa or South America?

Sept. 20: The UN System – Office of the High Commissioner/Human Rights Council; Human Rights Council; Treaty-Based Bodies

READINGS:

- *MAIN TEXT*: 391-406
- *UN*: 8-97

Sept 27: The UN System (The Security Council and other UN bodies) and Regional Systems.

READINGS:

- *MAIN TEXT*: 426-432
- *UN*: 98-147

Oct. 4: National Human Rights Institutions

READINGS:

- *Human Rights Matters*

Oct. 11: Mid Term

In-Class Examination

Oct. 18: Intro to Field Research

In-Class Interview Prep

Oct. 25: Simulation

Simulation paper due

Nov. 1: Economic Rights

Book reviews

READINGS:

- **BEYOND:**

Chapter 2, “The Yellow Sweatshirt: Human Dignity and Economic Human Rights in Advanced Industrial Democracies,” by Rhoda E. Howard-Hassmann, 25-45.

Chapter 3, “The U.S. Welfare State: A Battleground for Human Rights,” by Mimi Abramovitz, 46-67.

Chapter 4, “Drawing Lines in the Sand: Building Economic and Social Rights Norms in the United States,” by Cathy Albisa, 68-88.

Chapter 8, “Entrenched Inequity: Health Care in the United States,” by Jean Connolly Carmalt, Sarah Zaidi, and Alicia Ely Yamin, 153-174.

Chapter 9, “Business and Human Rights: A New Approach to Advancing Environmental Justice,” by Joanne Bauer, 175-196.

Debate 3: Are “economic rights” “human rights”? What’s so hard about human rights in the economic sphere?

Nov. 8: Substantive Issues: Equality, Non-discrimination, Rights of Peoples and Minorities

Book reviews

READINGS:

- **MAIN TEXT:** 189-208; 365-390

- **BEYOND:**

Chapter 10, “The Law and Politics of the US Participation in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities,” by Michael Stein and Janet Lord, 199-216.

Chapter 11, “The Anomaly of Citizenship for Indigenous Rights,” by Bethany Berger, 213-233.

Debate 4: Do human rights support reparations for race discrimination?

Nov. 15: Substantive Issues: Integrity of the Person, Thought and Expression, Education and Work, Administration of Justice

Book reviews

READINGS:

- *MAIN TEXT*: 209-330

Debate 5-These rights can be prioritized in the following manner...

Nov. 29: Review/Reviews

Dec. 6: Final Class Meeting/Wrap-up