Course Description

What is the relationship between human rights and social justice? Do both always operate in conjunction? Are they ever mutually exclusive – one sacrificed at the expense of the other? This course will explore key questions around the theory and practice of human rights promotion, surveying specialized literatures to consider the promise and challenges of existing human rights frameworks as they work for, but sometimes clash with, the promotion of social justice. We will ask, are there universal rights? If so, how are these defined, and by whom? What is the relationship between political and human rights, between individual and collective rights? Can human rights conflict, and if so, how are such conflicts to be resolved? In regions rife with inequality – political, social, and economic – is promoting a global human rights agenda unrealistic, or more necessary than ever? After approaching these questions generally, we then focus on the case of Latin America, and in particular, Cuba, Chile, Ecuador, Venezuela and Colombia. What are the characteristics of human rights struggles in these countries, and how do they conflict with existing international human rights frameworks? How do legacies of colonialism in these countries affect both the protection and violation of human rights in the present? How do the politics of pursuing social justice conflict with the protection of human rights?

Requirements/Grading

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Attendance/Participation

Regular attendance, punctuality, and engagement with the readings are keys to being an active participant. As such I will expect you to be present and on time at each of our class sessions. For your benefit and mine, I will distribute attendance sheets at the beginning of each class. Should you need to miss a session, let me know ahead of class as I will not consider retroactive explanations and each unexcused absence will incur a five point reduction from your final grade (with a maximum of three). After three unexcused absences, you will receive an “F” for participation/attendance. More importantly, I will expect you to come to class prepared, which
of course means that you have read/seen/heard the work assigned in advance of each class, and are ready to participate in discussions about the materials. Please don’t take this course if you think you will be unable to handle a reading load of about 100-120 pages per week.

**Weekly Responses (due at noon on Tuesdays)**

To help you keep up with our readings, and to help me gauge where your areas of interest or concern lay, over the course of the semester, students will post at least seven weekly responses on the course website by 2PM on Tuesday. These comments should be around 150 words each (slightly shorter than this paragraph) and may address specific readings – either in general terms or focus on a particular section – or issues raised in the context of class discussion, issues that perhaps were left unexamined or that you want to explore further. Comments can be as specific or broad as you wish, but in all instances they should reflect your own process of coming to terms with the overarching theme of the course: what is the balance between social justice and human rights? Was something in the readings, lectures, or class discussion especially interesting? You should also feel free to use these responses to ask questions about the materials, if anything seemed unclear. Remember: if you have a question about something, chances are that one of your peers does too!

**Discussion Sections**

Each student will have an opportunity to lead discussion for part of the class on one of the dates marked by an asterisk in the syllabus (please let me know by 6 October if you have a preference, otherwise I will assign you). For each section there will be four student discussants, and each student in turn will lead four students in discussion. These sections will be about 30-45 minutes in duration. Students will be responsible for closely reading all materials for that week, and for developing discussion questions based on your interpretation of that material. So that we can keep a record of your questions and for others to refer to them, you should post your questions on the course website.

Questions may concern whole texts, or focus on a particular section. In the event that they are detailed (for instance, if there was a particular passage that caught your attention and that you think might help draw out larger issues relevant to that section’s readings), make sure that your questions can be connected to larger themes in the text. For a thirty minute discussion, you should expect to prepare no fewer than five questions. In all cases, your questions should have a goal in mind. What is the big idea that the various materials point to? What should we get out of the readings? How do they relate to the larger issues of the course? How is the relationship between social justice and human rights dealt with by the source? In order to get your bearings, students will meet with me on the Monday before your discussion section to go over these questions.

In the course of actually leading discussion, you should not limit your interventions to just the prepared questions; dare venture answers to those questions, or other questions raised in the context of the discussion. Use your familiarity with the materials to provide plausible answers to the questions both you and your colleagues raise in the context of the discussion. Keep track in your mind of what your peers have said, so that you can draw connections. My evaluation of the
thoughtfulness and work that went into creating your discussion questions will determine your grade for this assignment. Finally, while it will be the discussants’ responsibility to come up with engaging questions, it is in every student’s best interest to assist each other by coming prepared for class and participating actively in the discussion. After all, every student will have a turn at leading a section.

Response Essay (20 October)

Your responses should analyze course materials relating to one of the major questions that comprise our class foci: 1) Is justice social or individual? 2) Are rights relative or universal? 3) Are there economic rights? 4) Can justice be imposed? I will provide you with hypotheticals, and your task will be to engage closely and critically with the readings, films, and other material we examined in that particular section, and the discussions that followed, to respond to the hypothetical, anticipating critiques and responding to them in kind. Ultimately, you will want to state an argument derived from the major question, supported by the documents we read (e.g. “Though Kant believes rights are universal, my analysis of additional documents will suggest that in fact rights are individual”). This response should be roughly 5-7 pages in length (double spaced, 1 inch margins, 12 point font, Times New Roman or comparable font) and should use proper citation technique (MLA, APA, or Chicago are fine; just be consistent). After receiving my comments, you will have one week to resubmit your response to reflect my feedback and opt for a higher grade. While the deadline to submit these essays is 20 October, you may want to submit your papers sooner if the question you want to tackle is one that we discussed earlier in the course (e.g. If you want to respond to the question “Are rights relative or universal?” you might want to submit your work that week). Please submit all responses to me by email and as Word or other word processing documents (not PDF). I will not grade hard copies.

Final Project (Due 7 or 11 May)

In your final project, you can either revisit one of the following cases we examined over the course of the semester – Cuba, Chile, Ecuador, Venezuela, or Colombia – or bring a case of your own not necessarily particular to Latin America (if so, let me know). The purpose of this project is to answer, against the backdrop of a specific case, and on the basis of our readings, discussions, and your own research, the overarching question of the course: what is the balance between social justice and human rights in your selected country today?

You will want to structure your essay as a position paper, that is, as document that doesn’t just explain current problems but advances a position on what should be done, based on your analysis of the issues at stake, and your reflection on how best to move forward, drawing upon the more complex, contradictory understanding of rights and justice advanced in the course. Indeed each country is facing a major crossroads in its history, raising questions about their respective futures vis-à-vis human rights and social justice: Cuba is emerging from a decades-long US imposed embargo; Chile is undertaking contentious reforms to its dictatorship era constitution; Ecuador’s government is facing massive protests between indigenous sectors supporting autonomy and state-led efforts to increase natural resource extraction; Venezuela’s economy is in free fall while its once socialist government faces off with its long time opponents (and new ones) in the streets and in the institutions; and Colombia is on the brink of a ending a 50 year civil war that has
ravaged its countryside. What do you think is the best approach each country should take in facing these multiple crises, considering the balance between human rights and social justice such as we’ll examine it in the course?

Though you have free range to consider the format in which you wish to present your project (film, presentation, creative writing, art, etc), in finished form it should be the equivalent of a 10-12 page paper, double spaced, 12 point font, one inch margins, Times New Roman or a comparable font, using appropriate and consistent citation techniques.

On the week of 20 October you and I will meet to consider the case you’ve selected, and to discuss research materials that will complement the ones we will be reading/discussing in class. You might also want to compile a small dossier of primary sources on your case by conducting searches in the following periodicals: New York Times, NACLA Report on the Americas, and The Economist (available online or through the Bobst Library website). Let me suggest that an effective and stress-free way of conducting this type of research is to set aside a couple of hours per week, the first hour to actually conduct the research online, and the second to read over your sources, taking rough notes (that is, do not take notes on every single point advanced in a source; instead, read the source fully, then jot down your rough impressions for easy reference later).

If you should choose to write a paper for your project, you should be sure it has a clearly defined (and limited) scope, that it advances an argument, and that it is supported by primary sources. As such, early in your paper you should telegraph (i.e. clearly indicate to the reader) what your overarching argument is, how you will develop it (i.e. what subsections will help you make the argument), and what sources you will be relying on (if pertinent, you should also comment on any shortcomings of your sources; for instance, if your sources are primarily one-sided, you should indicate why, and how it affects the overall argument). Devote the bulk of your paper to exploring the actual case. Here is where you will deploy a close reading of the primary sources you have collected, and your own analysis based on the bulk of readings from the entire semester.

You can meet with me at any time for any reason, and I encourage you to do so. But to help keep you on track please keep the following timeline in mind:

21, 22, 23 October: Meet with me during office hours to go over the case study you have selected. During this meeting we will also discuss potential places where you may locate primary sources on your documents, beyond those noted above.

18, 19, 20 November: Meet with me during office hours to go over your progress. During this meeting we will also begin to think about the argument you will be making and the potential format of your project.

11 December: Optional rough draft of project due.

18 December: If you DID NOT submit a rough draft, then your final draft is due on this date.

21 December: If you DID submit a rough draft, then your final draft is due on this date.
Readings

The following books are required. All are available for purchase online. Please try to purchase the edition indicated, so that you can follow along in class discussion. Also, if you purchase an e-version, please note that they do not include page numbers, which will make referencing in class difficult.


The following books are optional as we will be reading selected chapters from each. You may want to consider purchasing copies online.


Additional required readings will be made available by the instructor, or will be hyperlinked on the class schedule below.

Academic Integrity

As a Gallatin student you belong to an interdisciplinary community of artists and scholars who value honest and open intellectual inquiry. This relationship depends on mutual respect, responsibility, and integrity. Failure to uphold these values will be subject to severe sanction, which may include dismissal from the University. Examples of behaviors that compromise the academic integrity of the Gallatin School include plagiarism, illicit collaboration, doubling or recycling coursework, and cheating. Please consult the Gallatin Bulletin or Gallatin website (www.gallatin.nyu.edu/academics/policies/policy/integrity.html) for a full description of the academic integrity policy.

Late Submissions/Incompletes

Students can ask for extensions and will receive them at the instructor’s discretion, though any late submission will incur a half grade drop unless the delay results from documented medical reasons or family emergencies. **Only requests made in advance of the deadline will be considered.** Assignments submitted late without previously alerting the instructor will not be graded. The last day to submit any pending work granted an extension is **21 December**. If you anticipate being unable to meet this deadline, you should contact the instructor immediately and request to receive an Incomplete, which will be granted at the instructor’s discretion and only with a previously approved plan to complete outstanding work.
Class Schedule (subject to change)

8 September: Course Intro


b. Universal Declaration of Human Rights (9 pp)

15 September: Human Rights in Crisis? Promise, Pitfalls, and Contradictions

a. International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)

b. International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)


22 September: The Social Origins of Justice (and why it matters)


29 September: Latin America and the Early (and ongoing) Origins of “Human Rights”


c. In Class Film: *Even the Rain*. Dir. Icíar Bollaín. Culver City: AXN, 2010 (104 mins)

**6 October: The Turn to Self and Property (and why it matters)**


**13 October: NO CLASS (Legislative Day)**

**WED 21 OCTOBER: Political Equality, Economic Inequality: The Paradox of Modern Democracy**


**27 October: Economic Equality and its Limits: Cuba Considered**


**3 November: Political Order and its Limits: Chile Considered**


f. Lily Loofbourow, “‘No to Profit’: Fighting Privatization in Chile,” Boston Review, 16 May 2013.

g. Zoltán Glück, “‘Indignation is Only the First Step’: A discussion w Camila Vallejo and Noam Titleman,” The GC Advocate, 14 January 2013.

**10 November: Development and its Limits: Indigenous Rights Considered**


17 November: Democracy and its Limits (Class held at John Jay College)


**24 November: Focus Venezuela – Hybrid Regimes and Human Rights**


I December: Institutions and their Limits: The Aftermath of Conflict


c. Njonjo Nue, “Mamdani is Wrong, it’s not Impunity that heals but Justice,” *The East African*, 1 March 2014


**8 December: The Law and its Limits: “Street” Justice Considered**


**15 December: Focus Colombia: Striking a Balance between Rights and Justice**

a. Winifred Tate, “US Human Rights Activism and Plan Colombia,” Colombia Internacional 69 (Jan-June 2009): 50-69