POLI70492
HUMAN RIGHTS IN WORLD POLITICS

Photograph: Olivier Pin-Fat, Agence VU.

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COURSE GUIDE
SESSION 2007/2008
Seminar 1:
The questionable universality of human rights

Aim: The aim of this seminar is to examine the claim that human rights are universal. Often, this question appears in the form of an either/or debate; either human rights are universal or they are particular. We will re-enact this debate in order to assess not only the arguments on each side, but the assumptions which inform the structure of the debate itself.

Seminar task:
You must complete this task as an entry for your seminar learning log (p.3). Preparation is essential for this seminar to succeed in delivering its teaching aims and therefore, for your learning experience and that of others. You will be expected to hand this in at the beginning of the seminar. Failure to do so will lead to a deduction of marks.

You may choose whether you want to be a universalist or particularist.
We will debate the motion “This house believes that human rights are universal”.

Universalists
Prepare answers to the following questions in advance:

1. What do you understand by the idea of universal human rights?
2. What foundations are there for believing in universal human rights?
3. In your own opinion, can the universality of human rights be defended in the light of criticisms from so-called ‘relativists’?
4. What are difficulties with the universalism vs relativism debate, in your view?

Particularists
Prepare answers to the following questions in advance:

1. What is cultural relativism?
2. What sorts of difficulties does it create for those who hold a universalist position?
3. In your own opinion, do you believe that a commitment to universality can be defended?
4. What are difficulties with the universalism vs relativism debate, in your view?

Essential Reading


**General Reading**


[http://www.lacan.com/zizviol.htm](http://www.lacan.com/zizviol.htm)
Seminar 6

War, Violence and Human Rights II:
Torture and the ‘war on terror’

Aim: To look at how the present ‘war on terror’ impacts on the moral and political status of torture. We begin with an overview of the Convention Against Torture examining its strengths and weaknesses. We then turn to the question of whether, and how (if at all), the justifiability of torture should be discussed. Can we escape our complicity in practices of torture? We will interview each other and ask whether this seminar should be part of the module.

Group presenters

Provide the group with a presentation on the Convention Against Torture (CAT) and the relation between it and the ‘war on terror’. What are the CATs key features? What problems are there with it? What strengths and weaknesses does it have? Does it constitute an absolute prohibition against torture? How? What issues does the ‘war on terror’ raise in relation to the CAT?

Seminar task

Consider the following quotation along with your readings:

“essays…which do not advocate torture outright, [but] simply introduce it as a legitimate topic of debate, are even more dangerous than an explicit endorsement of torture…[because it] changes the background of ideological presuppositions and opinions much more radically than its outright advocacy”

Slavoj Žižek cited in Lukes (2005:1).

Given your thoughts on this you will interview someone in the class, ask and answer the following questions:

1) Should this seminar on torture be part of the module?/Should you stay in the class for the rest of this seminar?
2) If so why? What should it include?/What content does this exercise have that makes you want to stay?
3) If not, why not?
4) What, if anything, is objectionable about discussing torture? (eg specific accounts of torture, images of people being tortured, complicity in facilitating ideological frameworks that produce and legitimise torture practices).
5) What is your opinion of the quotation from Žižek above?

Presenters’ reading

Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment

Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment  http://untreaty.un.org/English/notpubl/iv_9bE.pdf

Declarations and Reservations: Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment


Essential reading


Further reading


