What Can Literature Tell Us About Human Rights?

Comparative Literature 57

Summer 2015

David Palumbo-Liu
Office 260-229
Email: palumbo-liu@stanford.edu

This course first presents some basic readings in human rights—providing the historical background and documents we need to understand modern human rights work from an historical and legal angle. But as even legal scholars of human rights attest, human rights discourse is imperfect, variable, and open to contestation—the ideals that undergird it are put into tension when faced with obdurate local realities. One major criticism of human rights is that these rights are based on a very particular western liberal philosophical tradition that is poorly suited to other cultures.

Furthermore, many who work in human rights feel that there is an over-emphasis on the legal framework; these critics say that the humanities, and specifically literature, offer an invaluable perspective with which to view a richer, more complex situation.

We will read a number of literary works from around the world that explore the contradictions and complexities of the principles that form the foundation of our sense of human rights.

Readings include basic texts; essays on human rights, and six literary works. Students are responsible for one midterm assessment, reflection piece, and one final essay.

Texts


United States Bill of Rights  http://www.law.cornell.edu/constitution/overview or https://www.aclu.org/united-states-bill-rights


American Convention on Human Rights  http://www.oas.org/dil/treaties_B-


**Essays**

Arendt, “The Decline of the Nation-State and the End of the Rights of Man”


James L. Cavallaro and Emily J. Schaffer, “Less as More: Rethinking Supranational Litigation of Economic and Social Rights in the Americas.”

Echo-Hawk, *In the Light of Justice*

Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights*

David Kennedy, “The International Human Rights Movement: Part of the Problem?” and “Still Part of the Problem?”


Makau Mutua, “Savages, Victims, Saviors” (PDF and video).

Nixon, *Slow Violence: the Environmentalism of the Poor*

**Literary works:**

Al-Koni, *The Bleeding of the Stone*

Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians*
Dorfman, *Death and the Maiden*

Ishimure, *Lake of Heaven*

LeGuin, *The Word for World is Forest*

Films:

La Haine

Don’t Beat Me, Sir!

**Schedule of Readings**

**Week One:**

Tu June 23)  Introductions. Set up website accounts.


United States Bill of Rights  [http://www.law.cornell.edu/constitution/overview](http://www.law.cornell.edu/constitution/overview) or [https://www.aclu.org/united-states-bill-rights](https://www.aclu.org/united-states-bill-rights)

Th June 25)


Arendt, “The Decline of the Nation-State and the End of the Rights of Man”

American Declaration of the Rights and Duties of Man.  [https://www.cidh.oas.org/Basicos/English/Basic2.American%20Declaration.htm](https://www.cidh.oas.org/Basicos/English/Basic2.American%20Declaration.htm)


**Week Two:**

Tu June 30)

David Kennedy, “The International Human Rights Movement: Part of the Problem?” and “Still Part of the Problem?”

Makau Mutua, “Savages, Victims, Saviors” (PDF and video).

Th July 2)

James L. Cavallaro and Emily J. Schaffer, “Less as More: Rethinking Supranational Litigation of Economic and Social Rights in the Americas.”

Echo-Hawk, *In the Light of Justice* (selections)

Week Three:

Tu July 7)

Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights* (selections)

Nixon, *Slow Violence: the Environmentalism of the Poor* (selections)

Th July 9) Dorfman, Death and the Maiden

Week Four:

Tu July 14) View La Haine. For Th read:

Th July 16) Discuss La Haine, in conjunction with readings listed above.

Week Five:

Tu July 21) Coetzee, Waiting for the Barbarians

Th July 23) Al-Koni, The Bleeding of the Stone

Week Six: Midterm discussions. On Tuesday we will have general discussion about the final essay assignment. We will also take a poll and decide which area of human rights we should talk more about, and new areas that we have not covered that you would like to have us consider. On Thursday we will discuss those topics.

Week Seven:

Tu July 28) LeGuin, The Word for World is Forest

Th July 30) Watch “Please Don’t Beat Me, Sir!”

Week Eight: Ishimure, Lake of Heaven. On Tuesday we will discuss the novel. On Thursday, our last day, we will have a broad and open discussion (hopefully over a meal), reviewing the course and talking about anything you would like that would help summarize the course and help you write your final essay.

Final essay assignment, due via email to me on August 20th by midnight (your time zone): select one topic in human rights and discuss how it is treated in two of the works we have read. At least one of these works has to be a literary work. The essay should be clearly written, and about 1500-2000 words.