

History 2001 Human Rights in History

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This course traces the evolution of 'human rights' through both primary and secondary texts, revealing the heated—and ongoing—debates that have taken place over their meaning from antiquity to the present day. What are human rights? How did they originate and what made them so central in the 20th century? Are they simply a western invention imposed on the rest of the world, or inherent in the human nature? We begin with the emergence of 'universalism' in antiquity, then focus on the 'natural law' tradition of the Enlightenment and the idea of 'rights of man' in the French Revolution. We also explore the abolition of slavery in the 19th century with the rise of 'liberalism.' We examine the human rights doctrine of self-determination in the dismantling of imperialism after WWII, followed by the revival of humanitarian intervention and the 'responsibility to protect' in our time. We conclude with the supposed 'end times of human rights' and the re-emergence of claims of difference—by nation, race, creed, gender, and class—that contests the status of universal rights claims.