

“The United States and the Question of Rights”

In U.S.-American politics, society and culture, questions concerning the justification, attainment and protection of human and civil rights have always been essential. Despite its obvious legal connotations, however, the intense concern with the question of rights cannot be understood exclusively from a legal perspective. The conviction that humans as citizens possess natural and constitutional rights and that they are defined through these very rights as humans and citizens is an integral part of the historical, political, social, and cultural self-conceptualization of the United States. This basic understanding is both constitutive as well as formative, i.e. it serves as the foundational argument for a number of interconnected, yet often also conflicting narratives, discourses, and practices through which the question concerning the rights of humans and citizens is constantly being re-negotiated. The history of the U.S. may be – or even must be – viewed as an ongoing struggle about the realization and protection, but also the limitation and violation of rights.

The emphatic understanding of the fundamental status of rights in U.S.-American history and culture has also found expression in international and intercultural relations and controversies, as, for instance, contemporary debates about the NSA or the U.S. support (or lack thereof) for human rights groups and their struggles in non-democratic regimes clearly suggest. The “question of rights” is thus not merely constitutive of the self-understanding of the United States, it also – and with the same intensity – affects its perception from outside. The key theme of the 2016 convention is meant to encourage much more than the mere reproduction and reflection of historical controversies or more current political debates in the context of an academic conference. On the one hand, due to its historical depth and its significance across different disciplines and fields, the question of rights addresses all areas of American Studies and thus serves as a fulcrum of any research focused primarily on the United States. On the other hand, the fact that the field of American Studies itself – in its development, its central questions and objectives, and its changing self-understanding – time and again has been, and continues to be, influenced by a fundamental concern for justice and rights, endows the conference theme with a distinct potential to reflect upon the discipline’s central concepts and theories. The 2016 convention will attempt to tackle the question of rights in the context of U.S.-American politics, society, history, and culture from the diverse angles of literary and cultural studies, media studies, the arts, history, political science, sociology, economics, and legal studies.

The confirmed keynote speakers are:

- Michael Dreyer (Friedrich Schiller University Jena)
- Blair LM Kelley (North Carolina State University)
- Susan Herman (Brooklyn Law School)
- Joseph Slaughter (Columbia University)
- Leti Volpp (University of California Berkeley)

For questions regarding the topic of the convention and its venue please contact the local organizer, Prof. Dr. Peter Schneck, Osnabrück University, peter.schneck@uos.de