

**“The State of Human Rights:
Historical Genealogies, Political Controversies, and Cultural Imaginaries”**
18th Annual International Conference of the Bavarian American Academy
July 5-7, 2018, Amerikahaus Munich

- Call for Papers for a Postgraduate Panel -

“All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.”
— Article 1 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)

The BAA's 2018 international conference investigates the role of human rights, both in diachronic and synchronic perspective and with an interdisciplinary research design. Since their proclamation in the 1948 *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, human rights have become a dominant language in controversies over ethics around the globe and a normative basis for concepts of a just society and ideas of the public good. This concerns a variety of issues, from slavery and warfare through fights over indigenous rights and disputes over preserving the heritage of minorities to same sex marriage debates or current conflicts over asylum law and the status of refugees.

The doctrine of human rights has been highly influential, both for states as actors in public policy as well as for non-governmental organizations. In *The Idea of Human Rights*, Charles Beitz holds that "if the public discourse of peacetime global society can be said to have a common moral language, it is that of human rights" (1). Yet human rights principles are not viewed without skepticism, as their specific content, nature and legitimacy continue to provoke controversy as well. These debates concern the status of the term "right" (Shaw 265), their universalist claim, or the question of the inclusion of certain rights (and not others) in the general doctrine. As law professor Samuel Moyn can show, the modern human rights discourse is largely founded on the natural rights concept that became prominent in Enlightenment thinking and was a pertinent influence on both the American as well as the French Revolutions (8). The idea and concept of human rights that we know today gained momentum during the second half of the 20th century. Moyn more specifically identifies 1977 to be a "breakthrough year" (129), as Amnesty International was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, U.S President Jimmy Carter addressed the centrality of human rights in his Inaugural Address, and Charter 77 was published. Canadian scholar and politician Michael Ignatieff has even proposed the term "rights revolution" for the contemporary large-scale phenomenon in which human rights have become a 'trump card' in public policy arguments.

As a normative basis, human rights discourse operates internationally and claims universality – while the Eurocentric/imperialist bias of a Western conception of human rights continues to be critically discussed. And yet, a human rights agenda can serve as a vehicle to

problematize asymmetries of power and of resources between the 'exclusive club of Western democracies' and the so-called global South along with various forms of inequality. A human rights semantics can thus help articulate concepts of solidarity, global citizenship as well as conditions of precarity (cf. Butler) and war crimes. After all, as Elaine Scarry reminds us, the salient thing to know about torture is "that it *is happening*" (9). Conference presentations analyze the language of human rights, as steeped as it is in a moral idealism and sentimental humanism of Western origin, as a much debated, but also powerful tool to voice the desire for social justice. Panels will also identify periods and contexts in which human rights and humanitarianism have been used as pretexts for war and military intervention. Human rights have not only been instrumentalized in law and politics, but there is also a degree to which human rights and human suffering have been turned into a commodity (cf. Slaughter). We will shed a critical light on the alleged complicity of human rights in the power structures and the kinds of state violence it actually seeks to eradicate. Taking the cue from Hannah Arendt's classic "The Decline of the Nation-State and the End of the Rights of Man," it is crucial to consider that the recognition of rights-bearing individuals vanishes precisely in the moment when it is needed most. The vision of securing dignity and creating conditions in which people of different race, gender, class, or religious denomination can live free from persecution and want remains the most important challenge and utopian hope that is expressed by the concept of human rights.

Hence what is the state of human rights both within and exceeding the boundaries of the nation state and how can it be considered from a multidisciplinary angle? This conference offers perspectives from literary and cultural studies, history, political science, philosophy, sociology, and law, looking at historical controversies on human rights as well as at its current political and imagined state. Contributions reflect theoretical implications of interdisciplinary work on human rights agency and also take into account the significance of cultural texts in envisioning and critically reflecting the 'state of human rights'.

The program includes keynote presentations by **Saskia Sassen** (Columbia University) and **Heiner Bielefeldt** (FAU Erlangen) as well as invited speakers among them Crystal Parikh (New York University), Lynn A. Hunt (University of California, Los Angeles), Jane Lydon (University of Western Australia), Thomas Möllers (University of Augsburg) or Benjamin Gregg (University of Texas at Austin).

The conference commences with a postgraduate panel for young American Studies scholars for which we invite proposals (abstract of 150 words and brief CV) until March 15, 2018. Doctoral scholars from the disciplines of political science, history, sociology, cultural and literary studies, law, economics, and geography are welcome to apply.

Please send your proposals (**in one PDF-file**) to:

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