



Statement on Human Rights

Preamble: Anthropology's perspectives and humanitarian methods position its practitioners extremely well to explore how and why appeals to human rights come to be accepted or resisted, and also to engage with, and critically comment on, human rights discourses. Anthropologists have accumulated a vast body of knowledge about people's social and cultural behaviours and values, and also about how institutional structures are constructed and how they affect everyday activities. Anthropologists have an obligation to share with others their understanding of what underpins human rights discourses and of how they relate to structures of domination and to the oppressive practices such structures all too often produce. In doing so, one reveals the fallacy underlying claims that anthropology's commitment to cultural relativism necessarily mutes anthropologists' advocacy of human rights simply because such rights are regarded as universal.

1. The development of the notion of human rights is a product of historically situated social forces. That history shows that the notion has been contextually and socially constructed. The notion of inalienable human rights initially came about in the late 1940s in the wake of concern regarding the atrocities of World War II. The rights promulgated then (later known as first generation rights) were mainly concerned with political rights and the basic security of persons. Second generation rights, formulated from the 1960s onward, reflected the influence of social democratic and socialist concerns with the socioeconomic. In this conceptualisation, rights include rights regarding working conditions, rights to a standard of living that ensures good health, rights to education and special rights for women and children. Third generation rights grew out of the post-colonial world order where African nation-states, in particular, emphasised the need for the right to an equitable global socioeconomic order and to a sustainable environment. Fourth generation rights, where anthropology has come to be most

involved, are concerned with what are called indigenous rights. So-called universal human rights have, therefore, been formulated within specific local, regional and international political contexts.

2. The apparent incommensurability between human rights as a universal discourse and anthropology as a culturally relativising discipline relies on an extremely outdated idea of culture as static and homogeneous. Moreover, it is an idea that fails to account for power differentials within any one society or social group. Cultural norms (as also rights discourses) are products of social processes over time and are thus fluid. Culture is neither fixed nor homogeneous within any social groups – themselves always fluid entities. Cultural identities, too, are thus not fixed. Consequently, a culturally relativising standpoint needs to account for both fluidity and the historically situated effects of power imbalances in the making of meaning. Moreover, the resourcefulness of humans in society means that social constructions, such as ideas about human rights as universal norms, come to be used by people precisely in order to shift power relationships. Suggestions that cultural relativism should trump human rights draw on a refuted notion of culture that fails to recognise the social constructedness of both.
3. The expansion of rights over time shows that they evolve in terms of social context and political interest. Moreover, the malleability of rights discourses shows that human rights should be understood as a resource that is mobilised in exercises of power – either to resist oppressive regimes or to impose from on high a set of principles on the basis that they are universally applicable.
4. Human rights discourses, as other globalised discourses, are commonly used tactically, and in localised ways, that need not be viewed as universal. Human rights discourses should, therefore, be understood as embedded in socio-political practices through which power is exercised to make meaning – meaning that, if accepted, in turn affects that exercise of power and may marginalise or even oppress some by others. Rather than debate the applicability of human rights on an abstract level, anthropology's contribution is to explore the issues on the ground, and to explain both how and why human rights are appealed to and also how and why those appeals are resisted in practice. In both instances, doing that will reveal the power dynamics at play in local and global contexts.
5. Human rights discourses are of greatest potential significance in historical contexts where major power differentials are present. That is because they are commonly used as a political resource, either creatively to resist impositions of global or state-structured power or, all too often, by such structures to undermine the capacity of people facing apparently overwhelming exogenous forces to exercise autonomous power.

The statements of ethics and ethical codes to which various anthropological associations have committed themselves all include a core assertion that people who are most vulnerable should not be harmed through anthropological practices. Moreover, most such statements express concern that anthropologists should care for local worlds in the context of exogenous state and global forces within and alongside which these worlds exist. Along

with the above statement on human rights, these statements on ethics imply the following for anthropologists in particular:

1. Examining and working with human rights needs to be undertaken through the lenses of practice and process in order to enable exploration and description of how rights discourses can give voice to people who are oppressed or feel thwarted in their efforts to develop their capacities. Such a perspective also provides a window onto how appeals to human rights can also be used, as has all too often been done by powerful regimes, to impose principles that further marginalise and discriminate negatively against such oppressed people.
2. All anthropologists, whether in the academy or in applied roles in state structures or working with grassroots activists, should strive always towards the goal of realising, in their practice, the discipline's ethical commitment not to cause harm, especially to those who are most vulnerable. Two further goals follow. One is that anthropologists must always be aware of contextual power differentials and the extent to which those can create, reinforce and indeed increase the vulnerability of some members of society – including the vulnerability of anthropologists themselves when they work in contexts of extreme contestations over power. The second is that anthropologists should accept their ethical responsibility publicly to expose and, if necessary, to protest against acts of oppression, deprivation and deprecation. In the case of human rights concerns, anthropologists are best able to realise these goals when:
 - a. they explicitly recognise human rights discourses as historically situated and therefore of major potential significance in contexts where power differentials are greatest;
 - b. they acknowledge the potential and real use of human rights discourses as a political resource, and when they acknowledge the extent to which such discourses, while sometimes used creatively to resist impositions of global, state-structured or a local elite's dominant power, are all too often also used to undermine people's capacity to exercise autonomous agency and power, especially when such people face overwhelming exogenous forces and/or those emanating from a local elite; and
 - c. they publicly explicate their opposition to examples of oppressive and deprecating acts and practices where the victims see the perpetrators as impinging on their human rights.

A consequence of the above is that WAU, and its constituent IUAES and WCAA chambers, should always be ready, institutionally, to protest against such acts and practices.