

A Path to Action

The French-born photographer Gilles Peress has observed and recorded evidence of human rights violations in many places over the past several decades, including Northern Ireland, Iran during the 1979 hostage crisis, Bosnia during the civil war in the 1990s, and Rwanda during the 100-day war and genocide in 1994 that resulted in the deaths of more than 800,000 people. Last spring Peress taught Observation and Description, a course offered by Bard's Human Rights and Art History Programs. His goal for the course was to help his students acquire the observational tools they need in order to think critically about human rights and human rights reporting and, eventually, to plan their own paths toward taking action.

Peress's love-hate relationship with language, which he calls "being on both sides of the barricade," led him to photography and made him a critical reader and an articulate speaker. As a teacher, he tries to imbue his students with these skills. "When it comes to human rights, the language can be very automated," he said. "It's like a machine; it functions by itself, and that can be disconcerting. But if you are rooted in methodologies for observing and describing reality, then you are able to parse out fact from fiction."

From the start, Peress challenged his students to think about their relationship to the world. "It's a bottom-up approach, rather than top-down," he said. He worked with his students to look at human rights from the perspective of the disciplines they were studying—the sciences, anthropology, philosophy, and visual arts—to "help them feel safe with the rhetoric and the theory." Empathizing with the intellectual challenges his students face in their rigorous undergraduate academic experiences (Peress studied political science and philosophy in the highly charged atmosphere of Paris in the late 1960s and early 1970s), he was conscious that they were receiving theory from all quarters. "They're studying theory that involves relativity, postmodernism, and the impossibility of accurately representing the world and the dangers of representation of others," he said. "This theory has a lot of taboos. It makes them cautious about what they can and can't do, what they can look at, what they can represent."

At the same time that Peress taught his students to be comfortable with theory, he helped them to understand the implications of what he calls the "doctrine of unintended consequences," which is familiar to anyone who works in the human rights field. Unpredictable outcomes are all but inevitable, he explained, and so they must also learn to bring a "healthy consciousness" to their work. "I made sure they were grounded, that they had contemplated human rights through various theoretical angles, and then we moved on to figuring out the path to action."

Early in the semester, Peress told students they would work together to create a reader (see sidebar). Each student was to bring in 10 pages of text that they wished they had written about any of the three subjects that they would study during the semester: history and consciousness of history; methodologies of observation and description; and definitions and theoretical boundaries of human and universal rights. The discussion about the reader led to a lively conversation about what it means to make culture. After class that afternoon, one of the students said, “Maybe our generation has a problem with making our own culture, with shaping it for ourselves, because ever since we were kids, every one of our desires has been commoditized.”

This comment inspired Peress, who decided to have the class create and maintain a blog. “I realized that the best way for them to get involved with the world was to create their own newspaper, and contribute content and ideas from current events that interest them as students of human rights.” He asked the students to post articles, photos, links, and their own thoughts about human rights issues in the news. The project was wildly successful. “We made our own culture,” Peress said. “I saw their passion for the text rise. I encouraged them to push it—I wanted them to learn not to have an automated, mechanistic relationship with text.”

One of the texts in the “Being in History” section of the Observation and Description reader is a chapter from Bernard Malamud’s 1966 novel, *The Fixer*, a fictionalized version of a true story about Jakov, a Jewish man in czarist Russia who was accused of murdering a Christian child. Jakov is interrogated by a police official. “In the interrogation,” said Peress, “the official asks, ‘So, what do you think of it all?’ Jakov says, ‘Me, think?’ The official then asks, ‘Well, what do think of what’s happening?’ ‘What’s happening?’ asks Jakov. ‘All this stuff, all this history,’ says the official. ‘History? Am I part of it?’ Jakov asks. And then the interrogator explodes: ‘How do you dare to think that you’re not part of history?’ If you think about it, what happens during Jakov’s interrogation is similar to what’s happening at Guantánamo. Jakov’s crime is thinking of himself as ahistorical. No matter what, we are in history.”

When the class discussed possible paths to action, Peress encouraged several students who expressed interest in attending law school or medical school. “I see strong interaction between the law and human rights, and medicine and human rights,” he said, reminding the students of a lecture transcript they had read, by Paul Farmer, a founding director of the international charity Partners in Health. Farmer talked about the role that such organizations as Médecins Sans Frontières [Doctors Without Borders] and Physicians for Human Rights have played in human rights over the past 20 years. As for the law as a career, Peress said, “Becoming a lawyer is definitely a path to action—that’s how you can take governments to task.” He also talked about the connections between the sciences and human rights, which he said he considers “very relevant to Bard. The science students I’ve come to know here are committed to goals of a higher moral order, and Bard encourages them to embrace those goals as part and parcel of an ethical program. It’s a rich relationship.”

Peress told his Bard students that they were wise to begin studying human rights “upstream, at the college level, rather than having to play catch-up later at the graduate level.” Over the course of seven years in the 1990s, he taught human rights to graduate and postgraduate students at the Human Rights Center at the University of California, Berkeley. Most of his students were attending or had just finished law school, medical school, or a Ph.D. program in geography; for all of them, human rights was a new interest, one they hadn’t studied as undergraduates. “They had to

do a lot of catching up on the theoretical side of things,” said Peress. “For example, it’s helpful for a geography Ph.D. who is involved with creating physical maps to learn about narrative maps and cultural maps.” Some of Peress’s Berkeley geography students combined their interests in a project in the Amazon region of Brazil, where they taught indigenous people to use GPS [global positioning systems] devices so that they could map their land in order to claim it from oil companies that were attempting to take it from them.

As the semester drew to a close, Peress reflected on why he is so passionate about teaching in a human rights environment, and why, during the Observation and Description class, he shied away from talking about the career that introduced him to the field of human rights and made him famous. “It’s about them, not me. This generation is inheriting a complex and chaotic world, where things are not what they seem to be. There are lots of mysteries: extraordinary renditions, secret tribunals. These students are going to have to figure out a lot more than we had to, in the pre-9/11 or even the pre-1989 [fall of the Berlin Wall, and the effective end of Communism in Europe and Russia] world, when, by and large, things were what they seemed to be. One has to be more cautious these days. I think they intuit that, and this is why I wanted to listen to them and to their concerns, to give them the tools they need. This institution—human rights—is in their hands. They have their work cut out for them.”

—Kelly Spencer

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Selections from the Course Reader

Human rights is a relatively new subject in cultural history. Its literature borrows substantially from other genres that range from the novel to anthropology textbooks and ethnological treatises. Following is a selected list from the course reader that Peress and his students developed as a collaborative project.

James Agee and Walker Evans: *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*

Roland Barthes: *Camera Lucida*

Robert A. Georges and Michael O. Jones: *People Studying People: The Human Element in Fieldwork*

Nicholas Nixon: *Pictures of People*

Marcel Proust: *Swann’s Way*

Robert C. Tucker, editor: *The Marx-Engels Reader*

John Van Maanen: *Tales of the Field: On Writing Ethnography*

James Clifford: *The Predicament of Culture: 20th-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*

Erik H. Erikson: *Childhood and Society*

Eugene Richards: *The Knife and Gun Club: Scenes from an Emergency Room*

Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub: *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*

Seymour M. Hersh: “Annals of National Security: Torture at Abu Ghraib”; *The New Yorker*, May 10, 2004

Jane Mayer: “A Reporter at Large: The Black Sites”; *The New Yorker*, August 13, 2007







