

# Graduate Education and the Practice of Human Rights

by MATTHEW WOOTEN



**WE SPENT THE DAY DRIVING FAR FROM** the nearest city, pushing through muddy passes and crossing wide rivers to meet with representatives from communities throughout the Vale do Ribeira, the coastal valley region just south of São

Paulo, Brazil. These Afro-descendant *quilombo* communities had tied their livelihoods to their territory for three and four centuries, since forming autonomous settlements as escaped slaves. Although these communities' territorial and cultural rights are protected by Brazil's constitution and international law, the traditional use of their lands has come into conflict with the development of oil palm plantations, open-pit mining projects, the construction of hydroelectric dams, and public land use.

Before a meeting of representatives throughout the region, we spoke for hours with community leaders about their struggles for land rights. But why were we there? What role did five graduate students have in addressing the rights abuses facing some of Latin America's most marginalized communities?

Like many of my peers at LLILAS, I began my graduate education at UT Austin because I was already asking these types of questions—and had hopes of developing a deeper knowledge, a better sense of practice, and more useful tools for engaging social justice issues across the Americas. During the past two years, much of my graduate work has been dedicated to an interdisciplinary approach to human rights. While carrying out both practical and theoretical work, my fellow

graduate students and I have been asked to question the very premises, practice, and study of human rights law and activism.

I briefly reflect here on the significance of the human rights dialogue taking place at the University of Texas—on what it means for the graduate students who take part in it and for the practice of human rights more generally.

## Human Rights as Praxis

Within the intellectual communities I have been exposed to, the people involved in “human rights” have been the most dedicated to engaging in self-critique. Lodged between concrete social justice problems and an attempt at their remedy, many involved in international human rights hold a constant internal conversation attuned to constructing more effective forms of advocacy and overcoming the limitations of the academy in resolving injustices. UT Austin offers a unique space for collaboration between departments and styles of scholarship, bringing together students and scholars in law, anthropology, literature, policy, and political science to find common language for advocacy and research.

Through the Rapoport Center for Human Rights and Justice and the Human Rights Clinic at the UT School of Law, I was given an opportunity to share in this space, helping to coordinate the center's work on Afro-descendant collective land rights in Brazil and Ecuador, uncover pressing issues of environmental and health rights in Argentina, write legal briefs for the trial of Alberto Fujimori, and work on issues of racial

discrimination and community rights for a number of cases before the Inter-American Commission and Court on Human Rights.

Within our academic work, we had been given a space where our work felt more tangible. With my fellow students, I saw our reports on Afro-descendant collective land rights used by scholars throughout the world, felt a sense of accomplishment when our work was cited in the decision against Alberto Fujimori, asked difficult questions in tense conversations with top government officials in Argentina, and listened to the hearings on labor rights in the Guatemalan agricultural sector rights before the Inter-American Commission. At the same time, we often grappled with our sense of separation from communities we were “working with,” obstacles to constructing solidarity-based relationships, language barriers, and an awareness of global power hierarchies represented by our position. What are the limitations of human rights law? How can we improve our strategies for advocacy? Where do we go from here?

Involvement with these types of projects revealed how a critical engagement with human rights issues—both immediate and theoretical—could serve as a launching pad for more effective human rights advocacy. Instead of something abstract or exotic, our work represented the reality of long hours, the difficulties of forging partnerships with communities and activists across the hemisphere, and the dedication required to create a work product with the potential to affect the well-being of real people. Bridging the gap between the idea and practice of human rights, it turned out, took more than a sense of idealism or indignation about injustice.

### The Classroom as Practice

Only a few of my peers have left these projects with the intent to pursue a career in international human rights law or scholarship. Yet, by seeing human rights as a question of praxis, about the work that takes place at the intersection of academics and advocacy, we begin to recognize this space for critical reflection as one of the valuable contributions of the human rights community. Not only have we acquired practical tools and fresh experience, but we have been given the chance to ask questions about why and how we carried out our work.

Over the past two years, those of us involved in human rights advocacy at UT have left the program with a better understanding of our roles as educators, community organizers, policymakers, farmers, and future academics. Through challenging our own frameworks for thinking about rights, many of us have found answers not only about how to turn appalling situations in the world into potentially fruitful responses framed in terms of human dignity, but also about how to understand the limitations of a discipline while using it, how to find careers in which we feel comfortable, and how to recognize the power of a conversation that seeks new forms of collaboration across disciplines and perspectives. International human rights is a practice that is strengthened as it becomes more inclusive.

For my own work at UT, I have come to understand human rights law as one of many tools in larger struggles around the issues of community, land, and environmental rights to which I hope to dedicate myself. Yet, perhaps most important, I’ve come to see human rights as a discipline and movement that must be conceived of broadly, one that must recognize our individual gifts and limitations, and one that must mean as much in communities as it does in the academy.

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## HUMAN RIGHTS STUDIES AT UT

The UT School of Law’s Bernard and Audre Rapoport Center for Human Rights and Justice is engaged in a multiyear research project on Afro-descendant land rights in Latin America. Each spring break, a delegation of professors and students travels to a different Latin American country to assess the local land rights situation. So far, Rapoport Center delegations have traveled to Colombia, Brazil, and, most recently, Ecuador. The students use the results of the trips to write academic papers as well as comprehensive reports detailing the findings of the projects and making policy recommendations to relevant governmental, intergovernmental, and nongovernmental organizations as well as policymakers.

Delegation cosponsors include the Robert S. Strauss Center for International Security and Law and the Teresa Lozano Long Institute of Latin American Studies. The delegations consist of an interdisciplinary group of students from the University of Texas’s School of Law, Teresa Lozano Long Institute of Latin American Studies, and the LBJ School of Public Affairs under the direction of Rapoport Center Director Karen Engle. (For more information, please see: [http://www.utexas.edu/law/academics/centers/humanrights/projects\\_and\\_publications/afro-descendants.php](http://www.utexas.edu/law/academics/centers/humanrights/projects_and_publications/afro-descendants.php))

The LLILAS master’s program offers a human rights concentration that trains students in the field of human rights by providing a multidisciplinary array of courses that consider the history, theory, rhetoric, and doctrine of human rights. The concentration features three primary threads: (1) contemporary human rights doctrine and historical development of the human rights movement; (2) the role of human rights discourse in the formation and allocation of power among various social groups; and (3) the role of human rights in the formation and political and economic development of modern Latin American states. (For more information, please see: <http://www.utexas.edu/cola/insts/llilas/masters/ma/#concentrate>)