

## **First Provost's Lecture in Human Rights**

### ***At Last, an Arab Spring: Black Swans of the Middle East* Human Rights Watch Reports from the Ground**

**Presented by Sarah Leah Whitson  
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Human Rights Watch**

**Monday, March 5, 2012; 7:30 - 9 p.m. AGR Room, UC Davis Buehler Alumni and Visitors Center**

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#### Opening Remarks

I'm delighted to be here for this inaugural lecture of the Provost's Lecture in Human Rights. To the students, faculty, and community members here this evening who care so passionately about human rights, thank you for your presence.

I am also pleased that this lecture is part of the Human Rights and the Humanities Week, whose very existence reflects the importance of this cause and area of study, and UC Davis' commitment to its advancement.

As members of the UC Davis community, we are naturally sympathetic to the cause of human rights because it is central to our mission of public service—to a large degree defining what kind of institution we are and what we believe. This deep connection is underscored by the coincidence, this year, of the Human Rights and the Humanities Week, the first Provost's Lecture, and the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Morrill Act, which established universities dedicated to the public good, such as the University of California.

In a sense, though, the institutional connection misrepresents the reason we are all here for this lecture. We are here because human rights are important to all people, at this university and in every corner of the globe, and before anything else, we are all members of the human race.

It might be argued that “human rights” is an idea whose time has come. In some ways, this is a positive statement: worldwide, there is greater attention to this subject than ever before, and we can all point to high-profile instances in which a belief in basic standards for the treatment of people has influenced the course of history.

Unhappily, though, the statement that human rights is an idea whose time has come also has its negative side. It is so urgent and pervasive a topic today because the abundant flow of information has made us aware of so many ways and places in which basic rights of decency are under threat, diminished, suspended, or denied. Those same information-gathering and communication tools can, of course, be used to advance the cause of human rights.

I want to make a slight detour at this point to express gratitude and also admiration for the individuals assembled here.

In this country, at this moment in history, there are powerful inducements to focus on career or financial success. Sometimes such a focus can be faulted as selfish, but often it comes from an understandable concern for one’s own ability to secure employment and afford the necessities of life.

There are also, I think, unprecedented inducements to focus on what I’ll call “amusing trivialities,” for lack of a better term. These are offered up to us, without interruption, from television, celebrity gossip magazines, the Internet, and even high-tech gadgetry itself. Today being a “gamer” has nearly become a noble occupation, and we are enthralled by the powers of our high-tech devices as much as by the music or movies or information that they put at our fingertips.

My point is not that one shouldn’t strive for personal success, or enjoy the occasional game of Angry Birds—there is a place for both. My point is that, while so much in our world pulls us in these directions, the group assembled here has chosen not to lose sight of something less trivial: the condition of your fellow human beings.

Not only that. Your commitment to human rights does not just state a position or value; it amounts to an act of courage. To stand up and say that you are committed to human rights is tantamount to drawing a line in the sand. You are telling the world that, whatever else is uncertain, or negotiable, the fundamental rights of all people must be jealously guarded.

And whether you take this stand in a high-profile effort halfway around the globe, or in casual conversations with friends or family, know that you are making a difference.

The focus of this week could have been on human rights alone, but it isn't. It's on "human rights *and* the humanities." Let's consider why this should be so?

The answer is partly to be found in another characteristic of contemporary society. When we consider how to solve our most-urgent global problems, almost always our first thoughts go toward solutions that come from a small number of disciplines: engineering, the hard sciences, and business and economics, and perhaps one or two others.

The humanities are conspicuously absent from this list for a simple reason that those of us in the field are reluctant to discuss openly: our society has marginalized the humanities. So much about contemporary life seems to affirm that the humanities are, in the big scheme of things, or at least at the present moment, peripheral, secondary, essentially recreational—along with the arts, they are the butter-cream frosting on a more important cake.

This week's emphasis on the humanities reminds us that the humanities are marginalized at our peril, for it is they, not other disciplinary areas, that are best equipped to understand the human dimensions of our existence, whether individual or social. And these dimensions, which include human rights, are anything but peripheral.

Recent years have given rise to a way of thinking that might be rolled up into the following ball: “If you really want to advance human rights, or democracy, what you need is Twitter.”

This is an understandable sort of claim, but a woefully incomplete one. Yes, these important causes can benefit from a tool like Twitter, but they can be effectively advanced and sustained only by people who have deep knowledge of history, culture, philosophy, and religion—as well as literature and language.

The pleasant personal assistant on our iPhones notwithstanding, technologies in themselves lack understanding, compassion, and ethical values, and so are just as useful for denying social justice as promoting it.

The humanities provide the vision that can make our use of technologies beneficial rather than harmful. They are both a roadmap and a conscience to guide the use of our sophisticated tools. Moreover, the humanities are most valuable in these roles when they function in the sort of interdisciplinary fashion that is represented by this week’s events.

I am struck by the fact that everyone in this room faces two very different, though interrelated, challenges.

The first is the *practical* challenge of engaging productively with people and the innumerable organizational permutations to which they belong. As anyone who has ever worked as a sales person or a barista knows, dealing with people is always difficult, and even more so when those people have something valuable at stake.

This is very much the case with your field. Typically, your work seeks to reach consensus with others who see human rights as threatening such precious entities as security, privilege, way of life, and core beliefs. You have not chosen an easy path.

At the same time, you also face a formidable *intellectual* challenge. At the highest level, the defense of human rights is a call for *simplicity*—for a clearing away of all of the complications that cloud our vision or otherwise obstruct our honoring what is really important: the fundamental rights of all people. But the idea of human rights is, in fact, far from simple, and we ignore its complexities at our peril.

I would surely lose my audience if I took this time to examine exhaustively these complexities, so let me do it selectively and suggestively. The idea of human rights may seem simple at first—until one discovers a problem that might be called “conceptual creep.”

The framers of the Declaration of Independence asserted that all humans are entitled to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” and leaving aside the unspoken limitations they themselves countenanced, what does that mean when we really get down to it? Is a right to “life” sufficiently guaranteed by the prevention of intentional mortal injury, or might it require other conditions in such areas as personal wealth, employment, education, environmental protection, and cultural inclusiveness? And once we’ve established the parameters, under what conditions, if any, might some of these rights be justifiably diminished or overridden?

Another intellectual challenge appears when we realize that any notion of human rights must depend on our understanding of what it means to be human, and of what can justifiably be called human needs. I don’t need to tell anyone here that answering such questions is an extremely difficult task, and reaching consensus on them even more difficult.

These challenges show why it is imperative that a commitment to human rights include an intellectual commitment to an informed and analytical understanding of its diverse issues—why it is so important that we support such major efforts as the Human Rights Initiative, the interdisciplinary Minor in Human Rights, the *UC Davis Human Rights Journal*, and this “Human Rights and the Humanities” week.

And so we've come full circle, back to the event that brings us together this evening.

For this inaugural Provost's Lecture in Human Rights, we are extremely privileged to have as our speaker Sarah Leah Whitson, director of Human Rights Watch's Middle East and North Africa division, one of the country's and world's leading human rights activists, writers, and thinkers—in other words, an individual whose work powerfully addresses the two challenges that I have stressed.

If I have one misgiving about her participation, it is that she sets a very high bar for future Provost Lecturers. But that is my worry, and it is for another day.

At this point, I will return the podium to Keith so that he can properly introduce Director Whitson. Thank you.