

Justice Americas: An Inter-American Platform for the Promotion of Human Rights meets all together for the first time in Ottawa – July 2024



Creating dialogues across the Americas on democracy and human rights: this is the common thread that guides the career of Pierre-Gilles Bélanger, adjunct professor in the Civil Law Section.

It is also what led him, along with some twenty researchers, magistrates and lawyers from Canada, Central and South America, to form [Justice Americas](#), a research platform on public institutions and the promotion of inclusive justice and human rights throughout the continent.

The project was born [out of the Civil Law Section's course on the legal-political orders in Latin America and their relations with Canada](#), explains one of the platform's members, Vinicius Da Silva, a doctoral student in law and lecturer at the Faculty of Law.

"There is still a lot of work to be done for Canadians to understand that Latin America has much to contribute to the development of the rule of law and democracy around the world," says Da Silva. That's where Justice Americas comes in." He cites as examples the innovations of Latin American courts in the areas of women's rights, the law of nature and the rights of indigenous peoples.

Democracy and human rights have recently been consolidated in Latin America, after 40 years of "terrible dictatorships" across the continent, says Alvaro Fuentealba, a professor at the Faculty of Law of the Universidad de Chile Santiago. This makes it a kind of laboratory for the protection of human rights, he believes.

Latin America also has to learn from Canada on new issues, including immigration and LGBTQ2+ rights, he said. "It is not a division between the Third World and the developed countries," says Fuentealba. "The approach is to see each other as equals, despite the sometimes different levels of development."



Justice Americas is part of a broader movement to foster ties between Canada and the rest of the Americas, relationships that are often overlooked.

"In general, I think that the Canadian legal culture and its institutions, including universities, have prejudices about the economic and political reliability of Latin America," says Vinicius Da Silva, who evokes "a feeling of superiority." "The platform is an instrument to remedy this."

Partenaires & Alliances

Where are democracy and human rights going? : Former President of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights visits the Faculty



"I'm glad I was born a long time ago, because I was able to enjoy it before the apocalypse": The former president of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, James Cavallaro, cannot be blamed for mincing his words.

However, while the "turning point" that is our time poses serious dangers, it also presents opportunities to be seized, he told an audience of students from the University of Ottawa and Latin America on July 26.

Mr. Cavallaro, who teaches in the United States at Yale and Wesleyan University, was giving a lecture at the Faculty of Law on the evolution of democracy and human rights as part of the seminar of the Justice [Americas research platform](#), co-founded by Pierre-Gilles Bélanger, professor in the Civil Law Section.

Democracy, the environment, human rights: the crises we face are multiple, says James Cavallaro. Crises that he explains in particular by the failures of neoliberalism and the growing wealth gap.

"Since the Second World War, children have always been able to reasonably anticipate that their standard of living would be similar to or better than their parents," he said. "That's no longer the case today."

However, democratic structures cannot be maintained without addressing the underlying economic issues, first and foremost homelessness and extreme poverty, according to Professor Cavallaro: "Dangerous ethnonationalism, almost without exception, has its origin in major economic dissatisfaction. Masses of people are ready to take the Bastille [...] to change their minimum living conditions."



Possible solutions

The way out of the crisis is first and foremost through a better redistribution of wealth on a global scale, James Cavallaro answered one of the many questions from the student audience. In particular by reparations from the countries of the North to the countries of the South that they have exploited. Economic growth accelerates the climate crisis without reducing wealth gaps, he argued.

In addition, Cavallaro, who has lived and worked in Chile and Brazil with national and international human rights organizations, advocates for these organizations to "get their hands dirty" more and collaborate more with grassroots movements and activists on the ground. "The legal mechanisms are not enough," he said.

Finally, James Cavallaro encourages researchers and human rights defenders to move away from the consensus and denounce people in power. And this, despite the risks of professional consequences: "That's how they win. They make sure that you keep quiet on your own."

Despite the challenges and criticisms, James Cavallaro remains a staunch defender of international law and its institutions. "Repeated failures by countries threaten the system, but do not make it irrelevant," he said. "Most countries meet most standards, most of the time."