Welcome from the Comparative Law & Society Studies Center
Director, Professor Katherine Beckett

Welcome! The Comparative Law & Society Studies (CLASS) Center emphasizes the instrumental and dynamic role of law in shaping our contemporary and globalized world. Law is truly “all over” and increasingly becoming the primary mode of social control and cohesion in collective life. Law has certainly been a foundation for modernity, but its scope, diversity and centrality is greater now than ever before. The forces of legalization are proceeding at unparalleled rates throughout the world. In particular, transformative globalizing processes facilitated by high-speed electronic communication, expanding multinational corporate capital, and transnational economic and political arrangements at once are led by, and create vast demands for, new modes of legal coordination and regulation.

The CLASS Center is rooted in the premise that new conceptual frameworks are necessary to analyze the growing, changing presence of law in modern life. The new intellectual agenda we have developed differs dramatically from traditional “law & society” scholarship in four interrelated ways:

1. We seek to enact a deep commitment to interdisciplinary research and teaching. Our effort aims to nurture a community of scholars who truly integrate understandings, knowledge, and methods derived from several different disciplines at once.

2. We seek to view law as deeply embedded in an array of social processes rather than as a separate state-centered institution. While we recognize the need to understand state institutions, we also are attentive to law’s variable presence as a constitutive force in society. In this “bottom up” view, law is not a unitary system of rules imposed on social relations, but rather it is understood to be manifest in multiple structures of knowledge, convention, and practice embedded and emergent within societies.

3. We explore law’s diversity through adopting an explicitly comparative approach to its study. We emphasize systematic comparisons among legal institutions and practices within many different social contexts and among differently situated social groups. Such comparative study contributes to knowledge about the legal practices of diverse populations in different geographical sites and historical moments, and thereby enables broader generalizations about the variable forms, workings, and significance of law itself.

4. We emphasize law’s emergent forms in a rapidly-globalizing world. In the contemporary world, transnational economic and political forces are developing to challenge, alter, and even supplant traditional local and state-based authorities. Indeed, law and legal experts are becoming more important than ever in structuring new realms of commercial market expansion, new forms of international and transnational political control (WTO, NAFTA), and new processes of political and economic dispute resolution (European Court of Justice) — all beyond traditional state authority. The emergence of transnational human rights advocacy networks represents but one dimension of such transformative legal forces. The CLASS Center is committed to promoting research and teaching that integrates all of these sophisticated insights.
The CLASS Center welcomes any faculty or graduate student who wishes to share in our passionate pursuit of greater and more comprehensive understandings of socio-legal dynamics in our contemporary and increasingly-globalized world.