Overview

Human beings live in connection, never totally of our own choosing. Our connections – with each other (family, friends, strangers), with our environments, with other forms of life – make us who we are. How we use our bodies, who we think we are, how we think, what our communities, families, and other groups look like – all of this comes about in and through our connections with things beyond us. These connections take on different patterns across history and across geography, and they shape the possibilities of what it means to be human. Sociocultural anthropology provides us with tools for understanding these formative connections – how they make us who we are, how some of them are readily visible to us, and how others can pass us by unnoticed. It provides us with tools to understand how certain possibilities of human life are made to flourish while others are diminished or precluded, how the good life of some is reliant on the misery of others.

This course is a critical inquiry into human connection. We will traverse sociocultural anthropology to explore prevalent techniques for understanding and transforming the connections that bind us together, shove us apart, and give shape to our lives. You will read exemplary theoretical and ethnographic texts, participate in structured discussion, and write papers, all with the aim of developing practical tools for understanding how connections give rise to similarity and difference, how power operates in and among groups, and how transformations – of our selves, of our relationships, and of the very nature of being human – happen. We start off by looking at some of the foundational approaches to these questions and examine the use of conceptual tools like ‘function,’ ‘structure,’ and ‘culture.’ We then look more closely at particular thematic within anthropological inquiry – the enduring legacy of Marxism, the power and presumption of practice, and anthropology’s dialectic relation with difference.

The objectives of the class are: 1) professional familiarity with a canon; 2) critical assessment of that canon in light of some of anthropology’s theoretical emphases; 3) critical assessment of that canon in light of anthropology’s geographical emphasis on “somewhere else” and theoretical claims of universality.
Objectives

1) Canons are arbitrary. Yet they are also necessary for professional training. Foundational texts of a discipline serve as a guide, showing us what tools people have tried before: what those tools are, what they can do, and what they can’t do. The foremost objective of this course is to assist you in establishing a conceptual foundation for your own research: for you to understand the important schools of thought and practice in sociocultural anthropology, for you to be able to engage these concepts in class and out, and, ultimately, for you to rework these concepts and develop your own.

2) The relevance of a canonical corpus to contemporary issues depends in part on the questions we put to that canon. In this course, we will focus on five kinds of question salient within sociocultural anthropology:

1. What are the connections that bind people together? The problem of structure.
2. How might those connections change? The problem of history.
3. How do actors perceive, if at all, the sociocultural systems of which they are a part? The problem of historicity.
4. How do actors engage such systems in light of their perception? i.e. How do cognition, volition, desire, and practice mesh together or contradict each other? The problem of the subject.
5. How do various groups of entities, who recognize each other as different in terms of these practices or perceptions, live in the same society or in the same world? The problem of alterity.

We will read the texts with these problems in mind. Each student will be asked to choose one of these five questions as a way to engage with the texts we read.

3) Anthropology takes great pride in its attention to “non-Western” peoples. Our foundational texts, however, are mostly “Western,” and we use evidence from the “non-Western” to make statements about humans more generally. It is not a coincidence that the discipline of anthropology came into being at the same time the “West” started an ongoing military, economic, racial, religious, and cultural domination of the world. Still, North Atlantic theorizing has proceeded as if that world and that domination were irrelevant to our theories. The third objective of this course is to contextualize anthropology’s imagination and engagement with its objects of study within broader political and economic projects. Anthropology’s attention and imagination are shaped by the larger connections in which this discipline sits. We will frame the course with a critical examination of the conditions that make a practice of anthropology possible.

Obligations

This course is intended to cultivate you as a professional scholar as much as it is intended to familiarize you with key arguments that have shaped anthropology and social theory through the 20th and 21st centuries. To this end, we will engage in a variety of activities aimed at honing your reading, writing, listening, presentation, and discussion skills.

Participation

You are expected to attend all class meetings having read the assignments for that day. We will be moving rapidly through a tremendous amount of difficult text. You are responsible for engaging with all of it, with an eye on developing strategies for dealing with large amount of texts in short periods of time. Please refer to the reading guide.

Our class time will be divided among lecture, writing exercises, and discussion. You are expected to post 3 questions about the readings by 7am the day of each class. These questions can
probe things you did not understand, or that you think are crucial to understanding the readings – or their interconnection – for that day.

Guiding Question
You are at the start of a decades-long process of establishing and following a trajectory of research. That research is more valuable to you and your interlocutors when driven by your fundamental questions. Your research will be shaped by how you frame your engagement – with texts, with other academics, with your conceptual objects of study – through the questions you bring to it. Part of this course will be to help you hone formulating such questions. **The third week of class (4/19), you will submit a guiding question based on one of the five central problems above** (e.g., structure, subject, alterity…). This question will be your theoretical lens for the quarter. You will ask it of each work we read, and you will use it as the basis of your writing. You can reiterate the questions above (e.g. structure: how do cultural systems hold together?) or you can refine it according to your interests (e.g. alterity: does difference require conflict?). Be thinking of your guiding question from the first week, and compose it in conversation with your burgeoning, long-term research interests.

Writing
You are expected to submit two papers that engage readings from the course through the lens of your guiding question. **The first is due via email by 11:59pm Sunday, May 13.** It should stake out an argument about the first six weeks of reading using your guiding question. The paper should be no more than 3,000 words. **The second is due via email by 11:59pm Tuesday, June 12.** It should also advance an argument about the readings of the course framed by your guiding question, no more than 6,000 words.

Writing is a craft that can always be improved. Part of the exercise of this course is the development of this fundamental skill set. I recommend that everyone get a copy of *Style: Toward Clarity and Grace* and use it as a regular reference as you develop your writing voice.

Note-Taking
I recommend that you develop habits of note taking for everything you read in graduate school. I have found it useful to take notes in a word processing program while reading and then, when finished with a text, craft a paragraph that summarizes the text and frames it with respect to my current research focus. I now have seventeen years of such notes readily available on my computer; they are an incredible resource.

Schedule – Please do the readings in the order they are listed.

**April 5** Anthropological Need


April 12 An Enlightened West: Anthropology’s Conditions of Possibility


April 19 The Law of the Fathers: Of Families and Witches


Evans-Pritchard, EE. 1933. “The Intellectualist (English) Interpretation of Magic.” *Bulletin of the Faculty of Arts, Egyptian University* 128-142.


April 26 The Function of Politics: Structure, Conflict, and Process


Leach, Edmund. 1954. Chapter 1 p1-17 in *Political Systems of Highland Burma*.


May 3 The Structure of Language


May 10 Culture and Interpretation — three moments

Mead, Margaret. 1928. *Coming of Age in Samoa*. William Morrow and Company (Skim).

Benedict, Ruth. 1934. Chapters 1, 2 p1-44 and 7, 8 p223-278 in *Patterns of Culture*. Houghton Mifflin.

Hurston, Zora Neale. *Of Mules and Men*. (selections)


---First paper due via email by 11:59pm Sunday, May 13---

May 17 Structuralism: The Rave for and beyond Order


May 24 Marxism


June 1 Practice, Performance, Pragmatics

Austin, J L. 1955. Lectures 1, 2, 8 in How to do things with Words. 20 pages.

June 8 The Subaltern Strikes Back (and always has)


Final paper due via email by 11:59pm Tuesday June 12.