
ANTH G6116

Social Theory and Contemporary Questions

Overview

This course is designed for students in their first-year of the MA program in the Department of Anthropology. We will explore key theoretical approaches that have animated anthropology from its disciplinary inception to today. We will also analyze the process and mechanics of theorizing, with the goal of developing theoretical approaches for our own research projects. Combining canonical texts, contemporary ethnography, and methodological guides, we will examine the key questions that contemporary anthropologists are discussing and learn how to frame our own insights as part of this ongoing discourse.

Format

Class sessions will follow a combined lecture/seminar format, with sustained discussions complemented by presentations that offer preparatory, contextual, and summative information.

Goals

Upon completion of this course, students will be able to:

1. Identify major social theorists and theories that have inspired contemporary anthropological questions and debates.
2. Relate several social theories to each other by establishing their contributions to a core anthropological theme of interest.
3. Develop a theoretical genealogy that can be mobilized toward your evolving research interests in anthropology.
4. Hone your ability to appreciate and critique social theories relevant to anthropology.

Books

Behold the Black Caiman: A Chronicle of Ayoreo Life by Lucas Bessire

Malignant: How Cancer Becomes Us by S. Lochlann Jain

Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History by Sidney Mintz

Tricks of the Trade: How to Think About Your Research While You're Doing It by

Howard Becker

* All other readings are available on Courseworks

Spring 2016

Thursday 10:10 am – 12 pm

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Office Hours: Thursday 1- 3pm or by appt.

Policies

- RESPECT!
- Electronic devices should NOT be used during class (unless you have received my permission).
- If you have a disability, you are welcome (but not at all required) to see me to make arrangements. You may also contact the Office of Disability Services to arrange support services. <http://health.columbia.edu/disability-services>
- If you have any other issue (e.g., religious observance, family duties, illness) that hinders your participation in this course, please see me to make arrangements.
- Please be patient with e-mail. I will do my best to respond to messages within two days.

Milestones

Week 4

Statement of Problem Space Due

Week 15

Final Paper Due

Ongoing

Theoretical Genealogy

In-class Presentations

Assignments

To succeed in understanding the complex material that we will be reading, students must bring their full commitment to the course. Students are expected to come to class having read and prepared to discuss all assigned readings. Students are also expected to participate in each class session, engaging in thoughtful and respectful dialogue about the readings with each other and the instructor.

1. Concept Essay 40%

Students will use their written work as a means of pursuing their own emerging research interests. Early in the term, each student should select one of the course's central themes and start to articulate questions based on it to bring to the readings. Students will articulate this "problem space" (theme and core questions) in week four in a 1-2 page statement of research. They will subsequently write an essay (approx. 12 double-spaced pages) related to it, due week fifteen. The papers should make an intervention into this problem space by analyzing and evaluating the chosen theme, outlining its origins, significance, development, advantages, limitations, and relevance for contemporary anthropology. A list of possible themes follows, though you may propose your own. These themes are not mutually exclusive.

Sovereignty

Violence

Capital

Affect

Personhood

Value

Status

Mobility

Local/Global

Alterity

2. Theoretical Genealogy 40%

Students will maintain a theoretical genealogy throughout the term. The theoretical genealogy will consist of short entries (1-2 pages) for eight weeks of the term (excluding weeks 1, 4, 9, and 13). Given the limited space, you will not be able to provide comprehensive summaries of the weekly readings. You should rather aim to accomplish three tasks: (i) pick one or two ideas that strike you from the readings; (ii) elaborate how these ideas relate to your course theme and evolving research interests; (iii) offer your thoughts on what you still do not understand or wish to know more about. I will collect the *individual* entries each week at the end of class. I encourage you to save this as one, multi-page document or folder and to use it as a resource for your concept essay. The entries will be graded on the following check-based scale.

✓+ (= 5 pts) means that you have demonstrated mastery of the texts and original and insightful thought in relating them to your theme of interest.

✓ (= 4 pts) means that you have demonstrated sufficient understanding of the texts and reasoned thought in relating them to your theme of interest, though your response could reflect more original or insightful engagement with the texts.

✓- (= 3 pts) means that you have demonstrated an incomplete grasp of the texts and/or did not adequately relate them to your theme of interest

0 (= 0 pts) reflects inaccurate or incomplete work.

3. Presentations 20%

Working independently or in groups, students will prepare a presentation about the reading for one week of the course. The presentations, lasting approximately 20 minutes at the start of class, should accomplish two goals: (i) clarify the arguments of the texts and how they relate to each other and other readings; (ii) pose complex and provocative questions for discussion. Each presentation will be followed by discussion and debate of the points raised in the presentation. Following a break, we will return for the last hour of the class, where I will fill in any gaps and facilitate an open discussion of the readings. We will sort out who leads which week in our first course meeting. I encourage you to meet with me in office hours prior to your presentations to address questions or concerns.

Course Readings and Schedule

Week One (Jan. 21) **Introduction to the Course**

Foucault, Michel, *Nietzsche, Genealogy, History* (background reading)

Week Two (Jan. 28) **Capital, or Marx's Legacy**

Marx, Karl, "For a Ruthless Criticism of Everything Existing"

Marx, Karl, "Estranged Labor" from *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*

Marx, Karl, Selections from *The German Ideology*

Mintz, Sidney, *Sweetness and Power* (Introduction, Ch. 2, 3, and 4)

Week Three (Feb. 4) **Status in Society, or Weber's Legacy**

Weber, Max, "Class, Status, Party" from *Economy and Society*

Weber, Max, "Politics as a Vocation" from *From Max Weber*

Foster, Stephen, "Reading Pierre Bourdieu"

Chu, Julie, "Stepping Out: Contesting the Moral Career from Peasant to Overseas Chinese" in *Cosmologies of Credit*

Week Four (Feb. 11) **Methodological Interlude I.**

Scott, David, Selections from Prologue of *Conscripts of Modernity*

Booth, Wayne C. et al., Selections from *Craft of Research*

Becker, Howard, "Imagery," "Logic," and "Concepts" in *Tricks of the Trade*

Statement of Problem Space (theme and questions) Due

Week Five (Feb. 18) **Value and Exchange, or Mauss's Legacy**

Mauss, Marcel, Selections from *The Gift*

Falcone, Jessica, "The *Hau* of Theory: The Kept-Gift of Theory Itself in Anthropology"

Gagné, Nana Okura, "Eating Local in a U.S. City"

Week Six (Feb. 25) **Affect, or Durkheim's Legacy**

Durkheim, Emile, Selections from *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*

Bonilla, Yarimar, "The Past is Made by Walking"

Kivland, Chelsey, "Becoming a Force in the Zone: Hedonopolitics, Masculinity, and the Quest for Respect on Haiti's Streets"

Week Seven (Mar. 3) **Affect, or Freud's Legacy**

Freud, Sigmund, "Mourning and Melancholia"

Berlant, Lauren, "Cruel Optimism"

Briggs, Charles, "Dear Dr. Freud"

Fennell, Cassie, "The Museum of Resilience"

Week Eight (Mar. 10) **Sovereignty and Violence, or Foucault's Legacy**

Foucault, Michel. "Right of Death and Power Over Life" in *History of Sexuality*

Agamben, Giorgio, Selections from *Homo Sacer*

Mbembe, Achille, "Necropolitics"

Comaroff, Jean and John, "Introduction" and "Criminal Obsessions, after Foucault: Postcoloniality, Policing, and the Metaphysics of Disorder" in *Law and Disorder in the Postcolony*

Week Nine (Mar. 17) *No Class for Spring Break*

Week Ten (Mar. 24) **Management of Life, or Foucault's Legacy (cont.)**

Li, Tanya Murray, "Governmentality"
Jain, S. Lochlann, *Malignant: How Cancer Becomes Us*

Week Eleven (Mar. 31) **Performance and Personhood, or Austin's Legacy**

Austin, J.L, Selections from *How to Do Things with Words*
Morris, Rosalind, "All Made Up: Performance Theory and the New Anthropology of Sex and Gender"
Stout, Noelle, "Smarter than You Think: Sex, Desire, and Labor Among Hustlers" in *After Love*
Watch *Paris is Burning*

Week Twelve (Apr. 7) **Diaspora and Mobility, or Gilroy's Legacy**

Hall, Stuart, "Interview" and "The Local and the Global: Globalization and Ethnicity"
Gilroy, Paul, "It Ain't Where You're From, It's Where You're At"
Jackson, John, "Ethnography Is, Ethnography Ain't"
Chu, Julie, "To Be Emplaced" in *Cosmologies of Credit*

Week Thirteen (Apr. 14) **Methodological Interlude II.**

Abbott, Andrew, Selections from *Methods of Discovery*
Swedberg, Richard, Selections from *The Art of Social Theory*
Marcus, George and Michael Fischer, "Two Contemporary Techniques of Cultural Critique in Anthropology" in *Anthropology as Cultural Critique*
Your choice of an *Annual Review of Anthropology* article (related to your theme)

Week Fourteen (Apr. 21) **Alterity, an Ontological Turn?**

Bessire, Lucas, *Behold the Black Caiman*
Watch *From Honey to Ashes*

Week Fifteen (Apr. 28) **Theorizing Today**

Latour, Bruno, "War of the Worlds"
Comaroffs, Jean and John, "Theory from the South"

***Final Paper Due in Class**