SOAN 134: Economic Anthropology

Winter 2019

Carleton College
Department of Sociology and Anthropology

Professor Jerome Levi
Class: Tue/Thu Leighton 305
Office: Weitz 239A
Hours: Tue and Thu 3:10-4:10 pm, or by appointment
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Course Description and Objectives

This course examines the ways that economies are embedded in social relations. How should we define affluence? Is barter a useful system for today? What relationships exist between ecology and culture? Formulating an anthropological perspective for the interpretation of pre-capitalist economies, what practical lessons can we learn from the study of hunter-gatherers, horticulturalists, and peasants? We will also discuss the meaning of money, articulation between local and global economies, gender bias in classical exchange theory, Mauss on gift-giving, and Marx on "commodity fetishism." Theoretical material will be illustrated with ethnographic examples from Africa, Asia, Oceania, and the Americas.

As one of the four pillars of British social anthropological theory, “economic anthropology” has been a subfield within the discipline for over a century. Malinowski's pioneering work on the kula among the Trobriand Islanders off the coast of eastern New Guinea, as well as Boas's studies of the potlatch among the Kwakiutl of British Columbia, stimulated both practical and theoretical questions regarding the supposed universality of homo economicus. The institutions of kula and potlatch, for example, seemingly did not “make sense” according to Western categories of economic analysis. A new perspective was required. Hence, economic anthropology was born.

The course will cover six interrelated topics:

1. Orientations in Economic Anthropology
2. What is Affluence? Rethinking Ecology, Development, & Economic "Types"
3. Classical Exchange Theory
4. Extending the Exchange Model: Power and Gender
5. The Negotiation of Value
6. Economy, Ecology, & Culture in a Global System

Theoretical material will be illustrated with ethnographic examples from Africa, Asia, Oceania, and the Americas.
A primary objective of this course is to have students critically reflect upon their "economic" assumptions about the world by 1) seeing the relevance between cross-cultural examples and scenarios in their own lives, and 2) applying theoretical debates to the first-hand knowledge they have gained themselves through fieldwork projects.

Course Requirements and Evaluation

The student's grade for this course is based upon a midterm exam (25%), self-scheduled final exam (30%), affluence study (25%), presentation (15%) class attendance and participation (5%).

Note: If you have any special needs which may affect your performance in this class, and which you feel I should know about, please speak with me early in the term.

Exams

Both the midterm and final examinations are intended to show not only that one has attended the lectures and completed the readings but more importantly to demonstrate how well one has understood them. The midterm will cover topics discussed during the first part of the term. The final will be comprehensive but will focus on the second half of the course.

Class Participation

Daily class attendance is expected; dates when papers are due are no exception. Students are also expected to enter into the discussion of course topics. The amount one speaks, however, is less important than the quality of things that are said. At the same time, please don't feel that pearls of wisdom are expected to come from your mouth every time you open it. Literally, the dumbest question is the one left unasked. Often times many people are wondering the same things. In short, I strive to generate an atmosphere in which you feel free to think creatively, hash out ideas, and challenge -- each other as well as me.

Affluence Study and Presentation

These two assignments are designed for students to demonstrate their creativity, writing, and thinking skills outside of examination settings. The “affluence study” requires students to discuss quality of life issues in relation to economic development, the monitoring of their own behaviors, and the anthropological debate on the definition of “affluence.” The second assignment gives students an opportunity to select one of the readings from the last section of the course and present an oral presentation on it as well as prepare a brief précis and critique of the reading. More specific information on these assignments will be handed out later in the course. Both assignments will be graded on content as well as mechanics (grammar, spelling, proof-reading, etc.).

It is departmental policy to mark down late papers one grade for each day they are handed in after the due date. Rather than footnotes, use in-text citations, e.g. (Doe 1968) if you
are referencing the entire work, or (Doe 1968:115-119) if you are quoting or referencing specific pages. The format to use for the references cited in your bibliography is the Style Guide for American Anthropologist, which can be found on the AAA web site https://www.uvm.edu/wid/writingcenter/tutortips/AAASTyleGuide.pdf or in American Anthropologist 97(1): 191-194. For all other questions regarding style, consult this same source.

If students have any special needs please notify me so that arrangements can be made.

Readings

The following books, available at the Bookstore, are required for this course:


*All other required readings will be placed on Moodle and on Reserve at the library.*

I. ORIENTATIONS IN ECONOMIC ANTHROPOLOGY

**Tue. 1/8** Course overview.

Film: “*A Poor Man Shames Us All*” (in class)


Listen to this on the “Fictional” nature of money and the stone money of Yap (10 minutes)


**Thu. 1/10** Philosophical Perspectives: Economy, Ecology, and Culture

II. WHAT IS AFFLUENCE?
RETHINKING ECOLOGY, DEVELOPMENT, & ECONOMIC “TYPES”

Tue. 1/15    Hunter-Gatherers (Foragers)


Thu. 1/17    Pastoralists


Tue. 1/22    Cultivators

Film: “In Good Hands: Culture and Agriculture in the Lacandon Rainforest” (in class)


Thu. 1/24    Peasants

**Tue. 1/29 Economic Progress and the Quality of Life**

PowerPoint presentation on Tarahumara (Rarámuri) subsistence strategies


**III. CLASSICAL EXCHANGE THEORY**

**Thu. 1/31 Cultural Economics (Affluence Study Due)**


**Tue. 2/5 Perspectives on the Gift: Marcel Mauss and the Potlatch**

Film: “Smoke from his Fire: The Kwakwaka’wakw of the Pacific Northwest Coast” (48 minutes)

Richard Wilk and Lisa Cligget, Economies and Cultures, Ch. 6 “Gifts and Exchange” pp. 153-175.

Robert Netting, Cultural Ecology, Ch. 3 “Northwest Coast Fishermen” pp. 27-40.

**Thu. 2/7 Midterm**

**IV. EXTENDING THE EXCHANGE MODEL: POWER AND GENDER**

**Tue. 2/12 Women: From Objects of Exchange to Subjects of Agency**

Annette Weiner, Inalienable Possessions: The Paradox of Keeping-While-Giving (Ch. 1, 2, 3, and 5)

**Thu. 2/14 Political Economy and Marxian Perspectives**


**Tue. 2/19**  The Fetishism of Commodities

Michael Taussig, *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America*. (Skim all of Parts I & II, and Ch., 8 and 14 in Part III).

**Thu. 2/21**  Capitalist Rebuttals and Neoclassical Economics


**V. THE NEGOTIATION OF VALUE**

**Tue. 2/26**  Markets - and Money


**Thu. 2/28**  Commoditization and Transnational Trajectories


**VI. ECONOMY, ECOLOGY, & CULTURE IN A GLOBAL SYSTEM**

**Tue. 3/5**  Need or Greed? Directions for the 21st Century


**Thu. 3/7**  **Enduring Issues and Problems: Some Final Thoughts**


**Tue. 3/12**  **Conclusion**

Film: *Affluenza* (in class)