SAN 1. SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY: THE COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

Paper Coordinator
Prof Matei Candea (mc288@cam.ac.uk) Michaelmas and Lent terms
Prof Joel Robbins (jr626@cam.ac.uk) Easter term

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INTRODUCTION TO SAN 1

Paper Aims and Objectives

To introduce Social Anthropology by exploring ethnographic analysis of different societies and cultures; the comparative study of social institutions; and the different theoretical approaches involved in anthropological work.

Syllabus

Social Anthropology addresses the really big question – what does it mean to be human? The discipline takes as its subject matter the full range of human social and cultural diversity. Social anthropology considers what this diversity tells us about the foundations and possibilities of human social and political life, and how contemporary social changes are experienced by people around the world.

In this paper we consider how categories like gender, family, sexuality, race, the economy, and the state are subject to radical cultural variation, and how everyday matters such as food, clothing, work, and trade may be bound up with religious and other symbolic meanings. You will also learn about the ideas and concepts developed by anthropologists in response to the challenge of understanding this diversity, and about the distinctive forms of ethnographic field research anthropologists use to gain close, first-hand knowledge of the societies they study.

Structure of Teaching – Lectures and Supervisions

The course is delivered through a combination of lectures and supervisions.

Supervisions

Students will receive regular supervisions covering the key topics of this course, in preparation for which an essay will normally be required. Supervisions are arranged by college Directors of Studies, and should be distributed evenly through each term, avoiding “bunching” of supervisions. A normal supervision load would be three supervisions in each of Michaelmas and Lent, and one or two in Easter; a small number of additional discussion/revision sessions, without requiring an essay may be helpful.

Lectures

A set of lectures running throughout the year supports students to build an increasingly advanced understanding of social anthropology. **The second section of this guide provides detail on each of these lecture series**

Michaelmas term

Lecture series I. How Anthropologists Think Dr Matei Candea (8 lectures, weeks 1-8)
Lecture series II. Critical issues: Political and economic life Dr Andrew Sanchez (8 lectures, weeks 1-8)
Lecture Series III (Part 1). Ethnographic Film Dr Tim Cooper and Dr Naomi Richman (4 film screenings, Weeks 2, 3, 5 and 6)

In Michaelmas Term, students will be introduced to anthropology through two parallel and complementary series of lectures. How anthropologists think will explore key concepts and tools for thinking developed by anthropologists, and provide a critical overview of some important approaches, theoretical schools and moments in the intellectual history of the discipline. Critical Issues: Political and economic life focuses on the ways anthropologists have studied political and economies around the world.

Lent Term

Lecture series IV. Anthropology Now Various (8 lectures, weeks 1-8)
Lecture series V. Kinship, Love and Care Dr Pervez Mody (4 lectures, weeks 1-4)
Lecture series VI. Symbolism Dr Rupert Stasch (4 lectures, Weeks 5-8)
Having established an overview of key concepts and encountered a selection of recent anthropological topics of concern in Michaelmas, in Lent Term students will delve deeper into the core substantial topics and themes of anthropology through two sets of lectures which provide sustained explorations of Kinship and Symbolism. In *Anthropology now*, a number of different lecturers will present case-based explorations of topics at the forefront of current anthropological concern, such as political protest, the digital economy, race and racism, human-animal relations, or refugees and borders.

**Easter Term**
**Lecture series VII. Ethnography Prof. Joel Robbins (7 lectures, Weeks 1-4)**

In Easter term, *Ethnography* considers how ethnographic work is researched, written and read. The course also brings together a number of the key strands of the paper through the in-depth analysis of two social groups via the ‘core’ ethnographies. *Kinship, Love and Care* considers how human beings structure and experience family and intimacy, and how anthropologists have debated those areas of life.

**The relationship between lectures and supervisions**

- Lectures provide framing and background to a topic. They act as a map to a complex and extensive set of literatures and problems.
- Information gained from attending lectures must be supported by independent reading and essay-writing that students undertake under the guidance of their supervisors.
- It is through supervisions that students’ substantive knowledge of the discipline will be developed, along with their skills in building critical and well-evidenced arguments. These are the knowledge and skills that will be assessed in the end-of-year examinations.
- During the year, supervisors will set students a series of topics to read and write about. These will be chosen from across the range of subjects lectured on, reflecting the range and diversity of the lecture course. When developing the learning pathway for your supervision, your supervisors may suggest new readings and questions that they feel best support you in your education. Some sample supervision topics relating to the different lecture series are included below.
- Supervisions and essays will not normally follow the order in which lectures are given.
- Different parts of the course are related in multiple ways. They are not separate modules. As the year progresses, you will piece together your own sense of ‘the big picture’ as you master the material and see for yourself connections between different topics.
- Your Director of Studies oversees your education for the year. Any concerns with your learning and supervision (including difficulties around organisation, essay writing and reading, and with your progress) should be directed to your Director of Studies so that they can support you and guide you towards solutions.

**Assessment**

This paper is assessed through a five-hour written examination. Candidates must answer three questions from a choice of (approximately) 12, which reflect the range and diversity of the lecture course. Note however that not every topic that has been lectured on, and not every essay that you have written, will be directly reflected in the exam questions set. Answering exam questions is an exercise in producing new arguments from familiar material. Credit will be given to students who display a wide range of ethnographic knowledge drawing on material from across a range of lecture courses and beyond. **A Mock exam paper is included at the end of this document**

**Ethnographic monographs**

A characteristic feature of anthropology is the fact that it relies extensively on “ethnographic monographs”: book-length arguments based on first-hand accounts of particular peoples, places and situations. You will encounter a range of ethnographic monographs on this course, but two in particular have been selected to act as your ‘set texts’!


The Department recommends that all students read these two books early during the year, and then return to them in the Easter Term, when they will be the subject of a course of lectures.

Beyond these, you are strongly encouraged to read ethnographic monographs on subjects you are interested in – this is the best way to get to grips with social anthropology. Anthropologists have written ethnographic monographs on a huge variety of topics and places, from prison life in Papua New Guinea to the craft of magicians in Paris, from blood donation in India to poetry in Egypt, from the rituals of weapons scientists in the USA to shamanism and hunting in Siberia. Don't hesitate to ask your supervisors and lecturers for reading suggestions.

**General Background Reading**


Cambridge Encyclopedia of Anthropology: [https://www.anthroencyclopedia.com/](https://www.anthroencyclopedia.com/)


THE LECTURE SERIES IN DETAIL

Lecture series I.
How anthropologists think: tools, theories and puzzles

Matei Candea (6 lectures including two double lectures, Michaelmas weeks 1-8)

This set of lectures provides an introduction to some key anthropological puzzles, theories and tools for thinking. How is it that social arrangements persist even as the individuals in them move on? Why do our symbolic lives present intricate patterns which no one seems to have designed or intended? Why do people do things which seem not to be in their own interest? How do inequalities get entrenched and how can these change? Can one ever accurately represent the perspective of another culture? Should one try? Given the combined weight of culture, society and history, are humans in any sense free? Over the past 150 years, anthropologists have developed fundamentally different answers to these questions, grounded in very different theories about the nature of culture and society. While many of these theories have been rightly critiqued and some aspects of them abandoned, they continue to provide useful tools for thinking about these and other pressing problems today.

Other lecture series on this course will introduce you to a spate of very recent and emergent concepts, arguments and theories. By contrast this set delves deep, in order to explore, interrogate, and contextualise historically and politically some fundamental key concepts (progress, culture, social structure, discourse, practice) which form the bedrock, the sedimented background of so much contemporary anthropological argument, and which have travelled beyond anthropology into public debate.

These lectures have three aims. The first is to give you a critical introduction to some elements of the intellectual history of the discipline, that will then allow you to situate the books and articles you will read in SAN1 during the rest of the year. The second aim is to open up a broader conversation about how knowledge works in the social sciences and humanities. The third aim is to give you a practical guide to building your own anthropological arguments.

Background Reading

*Stewart, M. 1997. *The time of the Gypsies*. Oxford: Westview Press. (I recommend you read this from cover to cover – I will be using it throughout the course to demonstrate how these different conceptual tools and schools live on in one key example.)

Lecture 1. Introduction: concepts, puzzles and theories

Week 1

This first lecture introduces the broad themes of this lecture series. What are the key puzzles anthropologists have identified and how have different concepts of 'culture' and 'society' helped (or hindered) in resolving them? What is theory and why is it worth knowing about? This lecture introduces the idea that anthropology is the art of 'seeing things twice' – and that's what we're proposing to do to the theories examined here: to see them both as potentially useful tools for making sense of the world, and as products of a particular time, with particular blindspots, limits and political entailments that require critical examination.

Lecture 2. 'Progress': evolution, development, and the problem of change

Week 2

How can we explain the diversity of human social arrangements in different times and places? 19th century evolutionists relied on notions of 'progress', 'evolution' and 'development' to make sense of this diversity. They envisioned human groups being in different 'stages' of a single historical process. They imagined that by comparing accounts of the diverse customs of non-Western and Western peoples, historical and contemporary, they might be able to reconstruct a history of human progress – from 'primitive beginnings' to the 'modern age'. Contemporary anthropology in its various forms was born out of a critique of this evolutionist vision. Yet notions of 'progress' and 'development' are still with us today in various forms, and this lecture urges us to think critically about the work such concepts do.


Tylor, Edward B. 1889. 'On a method of investigating the development of institutions; applied to laws of marriage and descent'. Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland, 18, pp. 245-72. (including a response by Francis Galton)


Engelke, M. 2017. Think Like an Anthropologist. Pelican. (Chapter 2)


Boas and the birth of US cultural anthropology


**Fieldwork and British social anthropology**


*Malinowski, B. 1922. Argonauts of the western Pacific.*


**Lecture 3. 'Social structure': functionalism and the problem of stability**

Week 3 (double lecture)

Individuals have different interests and perspectives, they often feel they are acting freely, and yet much of their social behaviour is repetitive, expectable and patterned. Individual humans change, grow old and die, and yet the institutions they live within persist. Anthropological functionalism (including the variant known as 'structural-functionalism') provided a powerful explanation of these puzzles, by arguing that each society could be seen as a stable, self-regulating assemblage of mutually functioning parts – rather like a giant organism. By envisaging each society as a whole, with its own stable 'social structures', its own logically articulated religious, legal, political arrangements, and its own broadly coherent world-view, functionalists demonstrated the possibility, efficiency, and elegance of alternative, non-Western ways of organising economy, politics, knowledge or family life. Aspects of this vision are still there implicitly in many contemporary anthropological analyses. But do notions of 'social structure' go too far in discounting the importance of history, change and transformation? And how did the perspectives of functionalists interface with the British colonial structures within which many of these studies were conducted? These critical questions are particularly important given the enduring work that notions of social and political 'structure' and structural effects, do in contemporary anthropology and public discourses.


*Radcliffe-Brown, A.R. 1940. 'On social structure'. *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland.* 70:1, 1-12 (also in Structure and function in primitive society –see below)*


**On anthropology and colonialism**


Lecture 4. 'Culture', two ways

Week 6 (double lecture)

Part I: structuralism and the search for patterns

Social structures might explain why human behaviour is often repetitive. But how can we explain the intricate and sophisticated patterns of human meaning-making and symbolism which no one seems to have intended or designed, and the way these make sense to individuals even when they can't explicitly pinpoint their logic. Why are some (but not all) wedding dresses white? Why do Europeans think rotten food is disgusting, unless it is cheese or wine? The much disputed anthropological concept of 'culture' comes in to make sense of these questions. While British functionalists were studying 'social structures', French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss developed an interest in a radically different kind of structure: the logical structures which hold together systems of signs. Language – a structured system of sounds – is the obvious example, and Lévi-Strauss developed a hugely influential theory based on the notion that culture might be a similar kind of system. By studying ritual and religious practices, kinship arrangements, and myths, structuralists provided a powerful framework for understanding both the dizzying diversity and the fundamental commonality of human cultures. But were these structures really in the minds of the people anthropologists studied, or were they merely in the mind of anthropologists – or could it be both?


Part II: interpretivism and the search for understanding.

Imagining 'culture' as a kind of grammatical structure does a good job of explaining some intricate and often unconscious symbolic patterns, but what about everything else? What about the richly layered, explicit cultural interactions and interpretations – the attitudes, motivations, the winks and nudges, the sense of appropriateness and politeness, the conventions about what might be funny, disgusting or sad – which make up people's (always partial but nevertheless significant) sense of belonging to the same meaningful world? American interpretivist anthropologists of the second half of the 20th century developed an influential approach to these questions, which sought not to explain cultural difference in general, but rather to model how one might understand both cultural coherence and cultural difference. In the process they revolutionised the anthropological concept of 'culture' and the work this concept could do. The key here is seeing that 'understanding' is precisely what cultural actors are constantly trying to do to and with one another. Humans are forever interpreting each other's actions and words; this 'intersubjective' work is what generates and sustains shared cultural words. Interpretive anthropologists such as Clifford Geertz, in turn cast themselves as experts at interpretation across cultures. Unlike structuralism's search for deep hidden structures beneath the surface of culture, interpretivism proposed a vision of culture as a kind of publicly visible text, which the anthropologist, in Geertz's famous phrase, "strains to read over the shoulders of those to whom they properly belong."

*Clifford Geertz, The Interpretation of Cultures. (Basic Books, New York, 1973). (esp. chapters 'Thick Description' and 'Deep Play')


Sources of interpretivism: Weber and US cultural anthropology


*Engelke, M. 2017. Think Like an Anthropologist. Pelican. (Chapter 1)

Some critical engagements (see also next week)


Lecture 5. 'Discourse': Critiques of anthropology and the problem of representation.

Week 7

Soon however, a younger generation of anthropologists raised some questions about this interpretive vision. Were cultures really as internally coherent and externally bounded as interpretivists seemed to make out? And if so, what made anthropologists so good at interpretation? A foundational critical volume, Writing Culture, raised the contention that these visions of clearly delineated cultural worlds and omniscient anthropological interpreters were in part at least fictional constructs – results of particular writerly techniques and rhetorical strategies. In making such claims, anthropologists were drawing on postmodern critiques of scientific authority more generally, but also on a range of arguments by feminist, Marxist and postcolonial scholars, who had pointed to the political nature and political effects of scientific (including anthropological) knowledge, and raised fundamental questions about who ought or can write authoritatively about what (and for whom), within and across distinctions of class, gender, ethnicity or race.

In the process a new set of conceptual tools, including Michel Foucault's notions of 'power/knowledge' and 'discourse' came to prominence in anthropological analysis and debate.

On and around 'Writing Culture'

*Clifford, James, and George Marcus, eds. 1986. Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography. Berkeley: University of California Press. (esp chapters by Crapanzano, Asad and Rosaldo)


Some critiques of 'Writing Culture'


On being double and seeing twice: writing and identity


See also


**Lecture 6 'Practice': Bodies, habits and the problem of agency**

Week 8

While some of the critiques of anthropological representation were in danger of getting lost in postmodern abstraction and endless reflexivity (as the joke about the postmodern anthropologist goes "But that's enough about me, what do you think about me?") another rising school of thought came at the enduring questions of inequality, power, historical change and identity from a different angle. "Practice Theory" combined core themes from Marxist work on ideology and political economy, with insights drawn from the various anthropological traditions we have examined so far — and a few others. Practice theory returned to some of the fundamental puzzles we have encountered so far: how can we make sense of the articulation of social stability and social change? How far do social and political structures constrain human action and under what conditions can and do individuals push back? How can we explain the powerful ways in which perspectives are grounded in and shaped by social and cultural differences? A key to resolving these puzzles lay for practice theorists in paying attention to the human body, not as a mere natural object, but as a lived-in, cultivated, trained, material source of human "practice". And yet this seemingly all-encompassing theory still had some important blind-spots, as critics soon came to point out.

Bloch, M. 1985 *Marxism and anthropology. The history of a relationship* (OUP)


Bourdieu, Pierre 1990 *The Logic of Practice* (chs 1 and 5)

Jenkins, R 1992 Pierre Bourdieu (esp. chapter 2)


**Example supervision question:**

‘You have to leave some things out in order to build a successful theoretical model’. Discuss in relation to structural-functionalist notions of social structure.

**Suggested readings**

*Theoretical background*


*Some examples of structural-functionalist analysis*


*Some critiques and reconsiderations of structural-functionalism*


Lecture series II. Critical Issues: Political and Economic Life

Dr. Andrew Sanchez (Michaelmas term weeks 1-8)

This course explores how social anthropology approaches the most critical issues of political and economic life. We do so by focussing upon comparative analyses of power and resistance, nationalism, conflict, inequality, exchange, work, environment, and development. These topics form the core of political and economic anthropology, and are engaged with by ethnographers working in all global societies.

The course demonstrates how Social Anthropology uses ethnographic study to provide unique insights into the nature of power and economy. By the end of the term, our engagement with these debates will help us to develop a more critical, comparative understanding of how human beings structure and experience their societies.

Background Reading:


Sharma, A. & A. Gupta (eds.) 2006. The Anthropology of the State: A Reader (Blackwell)

Lecture 1. Power and resistance

- What is the relationship between power and authority?
- Are relations of power inherently coercive?
- What types of behaviour constitute ‘resistance’?

Core Reading:


Recommended Reading:

Sa’ar, A. 2006. ‘Feminine Strength: Reflections on Power and Gender in Israeli-Palestinian Culture’ Anthropological Quarterly 79 (3): 397-430


Further Reading:

Lecture 2. Nationalism
- Is a nation state an ‘Imagined Community’?
- How is the development of modern nation states related to colonialism?
- Why is nationalism more prevalent at some times than others?

Core Reading:

Recommended Reading:

Further Reading:

Lecture 3. War and Conflict
- Are human beings naturally prone to war and social conflict?
• How does war impact everyday life?
• How do societies engage with histories of suffering and violence?

**Core Reading:**


**Recommended Reading:**


**Further Reading:**


**Lecture 4. Inequality**

• Is social inequality a human universal?
• How does inequality relate to race, gender, and class?
• Is the world more unequal than it used to be?

**Core Reading:**


**Recommended Reading:**


Further Reading:


Lecture 5. Exchange
• Why is economic exchange important to building relationships?
• How does exchange relate to social status?
• Why are anthropological ideas about gift exchange helpful to social scientists?

Core Reading:


Recommended Reading:


Further Reading:


**Lecture 6. Work**

- What types of work do people find satisfying?
- How do societies differ in their conception of what ‘work’ means?
- Why is social anthropology useful for understanding modern employment conditions?

**Core Reading:**


**Recommended Reading:**


**Further Reading:**


**Lecture 7. Environment**

- How do conceptions of the environment vary in different societies?
- What is the ‘anthropocene’ epoch, and are we living in it?
- How does anthropology contribute to understandings of environmental crisis?

**Core Reading:**


Recommended Reading:


Further Reading:


Lecture 8. Development

• How does international development relate to empire and colonialism?
• What should be the focus of international development efforts?
• Why are anthropologists often so critical of development professionals?

Core Reading:


Recommended Reading:


Further Reading:

Gupta, A. 2015. ‘An Anthropology of Electricity from the Global South’. Cultural Anthropology 30 (4):555-68


**Example supervision topic**

‘All exercises of power are essentially coercive’
Critically discuss this claim with reference to a range of ethnographic and theoretical material.

**Recommended Reading**


Sa’ar, A. 2006. ‘Feminine Strength: Reflections on Power and Gender in Israeli-Palestinian Culture’ Anthropological Quarterly 79 (3): 397-430


Lecture series III. Ethnographic Film
Dr Tim Cooper and Dr Naomi Richman (Michaelmas term, weeks 2, 3, 5 and 6)

This module consists of a series of film screenings and post-film discussions intended to introduce students to the history and possibilities of ethnographic film as a medium of anthropological understanding and education. The directions of discussion are entirely open to students’ own responses to the films and curiosity about them. One concern of each viewing will be with the ethnographic ‘content’ of the films: what information have we learned as viewers, what generalizing interpretations of the shape of some people’s world have we been given by the film, and how does this content relate to what students are learning in other parts of the SAN 1 curriculum. Another concern of each viewing will be to see the film as a film. How is it put together? What are its formal properties? How does it compare to other films in the wider genre of ethnographic film, to ethnographic writing, to other kinds of documentary films, or to more popular genres of audiovisual media? How do variations in how ethnographic films have been constructed over time compare to how ethnographic writing has changed? In this way, we try to inquire not only into what anthropological knowledge can be gained through film, but also what kinds of social and cultural structures are built into activities of making and watching specific genres of visual media.

Background Readings:


Screening 1.

*Ongka's Big Moka.* 1974, Charlie Nairn
Ongka is a charismatic big-man of the Kawelka tribe who live scattered in the Western highlands, north of Mount Hagen, in New Guinea. The film focuses on the motivations and efforts involved in organising a big ceremonial gift-exchange or moka planned to take place sometime in 1974. Ongka has spent nearly five years preparing for this ceremonial exchange, using all his big-man skills of oratory and persuasion in order to try to assemble what he hopes will be a huge gift of 600 pigs, some cows, some cassowaries, a motorcycle, a truck and £5,500 in cash.

Recommended Reading:


Screening 2.

The film investigates and portrays the life of Afghan refugees living in and around the city of Peshawar in northern Pakistan through the experiences of the musician Amir. The aspirations of Afghan refugees are expressed through their political songs dealing with the civil war in Afghanistan, with exile, with Afghan
nationalism and with the Islamic revolution. In highly charged and tragic circumstances music can be used in very direct ways, both to promote solidarity and as an agent of catharsis. Amir brings that musical power to the viewer. John Baily made this film during his training as an ethnographic film-maker. He had come to know Amir earlier when carrying out ethnomusicological research in Herat between 1973 and 1977. The result is an an intimate and collaborative portrait by one musician of another. The film has a degree of reflexivity, in that Baily introduces himself early in the film, but after that it is very much Amir’s story, a story of insecurity but with a strong determination to survive.

**Recommended Reading:**


**Screening 3.**

**Divorce, Iranian Style.** 1989, Kim Longinotto & Ziba Mir-Hosseini

This film is set in the Family Law Courts in central Tehran. The three main characters are Jamileh who punishes her husband for beating her, Ziba, a 16 year old girl who is trying to get a divorce from her 38 year old husband, and Maryam who is fighting for the custody of her daughters. The film moves away from portraying Iran as a country of war, hostages and Fatwas. It concentrates instead on ordinary women who come to this court to try and transform their lives.

**Recommended Reading:**


**Screening 4.**

**Scratches on Celluloid.** 2019, Timothy Cooper and Vindhya Buthpitiya.

In the rapidly changing urban landscapes of Jaffna and Lahore, the social and public space of cinema halls are recognisable for their longevity and resilience amid insurgency, war, and infrastructural breakdown. Scratches on Celluloid explores such urban cinemas as symbols of state-enforced amnesia and collective attempts to remember. Between 1983 and 2009, Sri Lanka endured a protracted civil war between the Government and the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) centred on the group’s demand for a separate Tamil state. In Jaffna, the largest city in the Tamil-majority North, cinemas became places of political significance. Government embargoes forced larger spaces to close, making way for “mini theatres”, providing cinemagoers escape from war and the social segregations of caste and class. In Pakistan, film and cinema-going have been the subject of fierce debate. Countrywide riots in 2012 destroyed dozens of inner-city cinemas, while new multiplex cinemas in gated developments widen economic divisions. Ever since the closure of the last domestic celluloid processing lab, Punjabi films have struggled to switch to digital technologies. The remaining repertoire of celluloid films circulate between the three remaining analogue cinemas in Lahore. The similar stories heard in cinema halls in Lahore and Jaffna contrast with a wider history of institutional and military collaboration between the Pakistani and Sri Lankan governments. Conducted through extensive ethnographic research in Jaffna and Lahore the film seeks to contribute to an understanding of how belonging and exclusion are forged in the built heritage of urban cinemas.

**Rites Undone, 2021, Naomi Richman.**

This documentary about Nigerian sex work in Italy investigates the methods of control used by human traffickers for the purposes of sexual exploitation, and explores the epistemic challenges faced by European mental health workers seeking to offer therapy across cultural and religious divides. These trafficking practices deliberately exploit African religious fears of ‘juju’, by making victims fearful of breaking certain oaths, which they are told will invite a spiritual curse onto themselves and their families. Rites Undone is centred around a victim narrative by a trafficked woman from Benin City, Nigeria, and includes interviews with anthropologists, cultural mediators and psychiatrists. These conversations invite us to reflect on the ways that mental health diagnoses can be culturally determined,
and the limits of psychoanalysis as a western form of treatment for those who inhabit other cultural worlds.

Suggested Supervision Topic:

Do ethnographic films give an analysis of the human processes they depict? If so, how do films’ possible methods of analysis compare to the methods of analysis that are possible in ethnographic writing?
**Lecture series II: Anthropology Now**  
*8 lectures (Lent term, weeks 1-8)*

Alongside the key concepts, theories and puzzles explored in the 'How Anthropologists think' series, and which map a history of anthropological thought, students will have a weekly lecture throughout Michaelmas term in which a range of lecturers will each tackle an issue, topic or case which is currently at the forefront of anthropological enquiry and which is close to their own research interests and expertise. This series thus presents a showcase of the distinctive insight which anthropological approaches bring to a range of key topics of concern today. Running through all these lectures is the key question of what anthropology’s distinctive methodology and approach – its concern with ethnographic fieldwork, with extended description of particular cases, and with comparison in its various forms – brings to themes and topics which are of key interest to social scientists and the public more broadly.

**Lecture 1. Debating Race**  
*Natalie Morningstar*

This lecture tells the story of two key periods in which anthropologists have engaged intensively with questions of race, inequality, and science. First, it examines how early critics of evolutionism, including W. E. B. Du Bois and Franz Boas, helped unsettle claims about the scientific basis of racial difference. Second, it explores how unfinished business in this early literature has reemerged in debates about social constructivism and new genetic technologies since the 1990s. Enduring lessons and tensions anthropologists are still confronting are drawn out in light of a case study: a comparison between social conceptions of race and ancestry in the US versus Latin America.

**Key Readings:**


**The History of Race, Anthropology, and Social Constructivism:**


**The New Genetics:**


TallBear, K. 2013. *Native American DNA: Tribal Belonging and the Falso Promise of Genetic Science*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press

**The Case of the US and Brazil:**


**Lecture 2. Protest**

Sian Lazar

This lecture will discuss street and social media protests, drawing especially on protests in Latin America. We will discuss some of my own ethnography as well as writing on ongoing protests. Depending on events at the time, we will discuss issues such as visual codes, embodied action, collective subjectivity, political morality, the relationship between street protest and the city, the role of social media, neoliberalism, race and gender violence.

Readings referenced in the lecture:


For dipping into:

Durkheim, E. (1915) *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (search ‘effervescence’ and read around that)


Further reading:


**Lecture 3. Platform Capitalism**

Sian Lazar

Digital platforms are increasingly important forms of organising work today, from the physical labour of driving, delivery, cleaning and other tasks – organised through platforms like Uber, Lyft, Deliveroo, Instacart etc., to freelance digital labour through sites like UpWork, Amazon Mechanical Turk, Fiverr. This lecture explores some of the ways that anthropologists might consider this form of work, what kinds of politics might be possible, and how the global economy is changing as digital technologies develop.

**Key ethnographic/anthropological texts:**


Gray, M and Suri, S (2019) *Ghost Work: How to Stop Silicon Valley from Building a New Global Underclass*. Also see [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KKxs5UZO10U](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KKxs5UZO10U) or [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zi2DEQCOTh0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zi2DEQCOTh0)


Lecture 4. Complicating Conservation
Liana Chua

As climate change and mass extinction radically reshape the planet, calls to ‘do something’ to ‘save the environment’ have grown louder and ever more urgent. But what do ‘doing something’ and ‘saving’ actually involve? How are such interventions designed, who gets to shape and run them, and what are their effects on the ground? In this lecture, we’ll take a critical look at the sprawling, influential, yet often highly problematic global industry of biodiversity conservation, which is built around that urge to ‘save the environment’. Thinking through my colleagues’ and my ongoing research on orangutan conservation, we’ll ask what anthropological methods, perspectives and insights can bring to our understandings of conservation as a global phenomenon – particularly its ethics and practices.

Suggested essay questions:
- What can ethnographic methods and insights bring to our understanding of biodiversity conservation?
- ‘Nature is not political’. Critically discuss this claim with reference to at least two of the readings listed below.

Core ethnographic case study:

Further reading: ethnographies of conservation/ists
Bocci, P. 2017. ‘Tangles of Care: Killing Goats to Save Tortoises on the Galápagos Islands’. *Cultural Anthropology* 32: 424-449. https://doi.org/10.14506/ca32.3.08


Further reading: Critiques and alternative visions of conservation

Note: Not all of these are anthropological writings, but then this is a pretty multidisciplinary conversation! When reading non-anthropological work, always ask yourself how it differs from what you’ve been learning in SAN1 and what anthropological methods and analysis might bring to it.


**Lecture 5. Infrastructure**

*Michael Degani*

More information to follow.

**Lecture 6. Pandemics and the stories we tell**

*Kelly Fagan Robinson*

Pandemics can offer “a window on the underlying structures of social relationship within and across group boundaries, including the mechanisms used to sustain complex social architectures of inequality over time” (Singer 2009). Through reflecting on the formal structures of communication resources employed during recent pandemics - diagrams, animations, social media posts, news bulletins and others - this lecture will map out the ways that semiotic abstractions can have fleshy real-world impacts on human connectivity, inclusions, and exclusions. It will foreground the role that anthropologists have played and continue to play in understanding who ‘we’ are in the stories we tell as we navigate global health crises.

Don’t feel daunted by the length of the reading list below! I have included a very long list, partly in order to give you starting points for exploring a range of different pandemics. Consider the following two questions as you read: How does the positionality of the researcher/author affect the narration of pandemic sociality? How
does temporality affect the message received and resulting forms of knowledge? Consider your own experiences of the last twenty months.

**TEXTS (Key Readings)**


**FILMS**

“The Story of Ebola” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_iT7Rrb4wqs (Global Health Media Project with International Federation of Red Cross, Red Crescent Societies, UNICEF, & Yoni Goodman)

“What is a coronavirus and what should you do?” Lesson: Elizabeth Cox, director: Anton Bogaty. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D9tTi-CDjDU

**Recommended Further Reading:**


**More on Pandemics**


**Disease-specific discourses**

COVID19

“The Coronavirus Explained & What You Should Do” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BN-guy9VOY (Kurzgesagt – In a Nutshell)
http://www.medanthro.net/announcing-issue-3-of-medical-anthropology-weekly-covid-19/

Ebola
“In the Shadow of Ebola” (shortened version) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y5z3Rb8YBC8

Zika

HIV/AIDS

Structural Violence

Supervision Questions:
Looking back at the Covid19 pandemic what might refute narratives suggesting we have broken with the past and created a “new normal?”

What role do human and/or non-human animal villains play in pandemic discourses?

Charles Briggs has argued that pandemics are “not unprecedented in being as much “communicative” as “medical.” Discuss.

Lecture 7. Getting Along with Animals and Others
Rosie Jones

What might constitute interspecies co-operation? What does it mean to suggest that we can communicate with non-human animals? These are questions which attract attention from a number of disciplines today, reflecting a fervour of critical attention that human-animal relationships receive within public debates. In this lecture we will investigate the sorts of understanding that anthropology might bring to bear on these topics. We will see how two cornerstones of anthropology – ethnography on the one hand, and comparison
on the other are being utilised within recent ethnographies of human-animal interactions. I'll show that human relationships with animals are always also about human relationships with other humans.

**Key readings**


García, María Elena. 2019 "Death of a Guinea Pig: Grief and the Limits of Multispecies Ethnography in Peru." *Environmental Humanities* 11, no. 2: 351-37


**Further reading**


Lecture 8. Witchcraft as politics

Joe Ellis

This lecture will introduce students to a range of ethnographies which show how practices that have been called ‘witchcraft, spirit possession & shamanism’ might be thought as forms of political discourse/action rather than ‘traditional remnants’. The lecture will show how this shift is a key moment in the development of the theoretical canon and invite students to rethink the bounds of what ‘politics’ might be.

Key Readings


Further Readings


Example supervision topic 1:

‘It is impossible to study a natural disaster through ethnographic methods.’ Discuss.

Readings:


Example supervision topic 2:

How do human-human relationships matter in anthropological understanding of human-animal relationships?

Readings – see reading list for lecture 7 above.

Recommended reading strategy: Read Samantha Hurn (starred above) and then select 3-5 of the other texts. Consider what sorts of comparisons are drawn out within the ethnographies. For example, look out for the way authors highlight differences, or similarities, between humans and animals, between some humans and other humans, between anthropologist and interlocutors, or between anthropology and other disciplines.
Lecture series V. Kinship, Love and Care
Perveez Mody (Lent Term, weeks 1-4)

This lecture series looks at the anthropological study of kinship and examines the ways in which anthropologists have sought to understand the structures, meanings and processes that make it an integral feature of everyday life in all societies in the world. Central to anthropological work on kinship are the ways in which it addresses some of the most pervasive concerns of our lives – our social constellations, our bodily well-being, our relations with those we regard as kin, our loves and our cares brought into being through anthropological study focussed on concrete ethnographic settings. The first pair of lectures in this four-part series introduce you to theories of kinship and anthropological theories of gender and explore their generative aspects for analysing social relations. I begin by focusing on developments in the past few decades to shed light on the changes in kinship theories borne of a reappraisal of models of the past, followed by an assessment of how kinship shaped the anthropological study of gender. The second pair of lectures focus on the more subjective meanings and content of relationships, seeking to understand the constitutive forces of kinship. Both love and care are subjects of increasing and intense anthropological interest and encourage a view of kinship as a process that is intersubjectively shaped by the societies, relationships and exchanges that come to matter.

Lecture 1. Kinship
This lecture looks at the anthropological study of kinship and asks why kinship is at the core of the discipline? It will question what kinship is and why anthropologists have been so interested in it as an organising principle of society. Centrally, it will address debates about the distinction between “biological” and “social” kinship and between “kinship” & “family”. Using Kath Weston’s now iconic account (1991) Families we choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship, this lecture considers the processes through which kin are given and made. Finally, we will look at the ways in which the advent of new possibilities to make kin (for example, through transnational capitalism, child adoptions or making babies through IVF technologies) have generated anthropological insights into the ways in which kinship (alongside race, class & gender) connects with other phenomenon such as capitalism, the state or technology.

• What makes kinship and how are people related?
• Is kinship about normative categories and roles or everyday relations, processes and change?


Lecture 2. Gender & Bodies

Central to concerns with kinship are the material bodies through which meanings are expressed and relations enacted. Anthropological studies of kinship and bodies and the work that people put into feeding, distinguishing and fashioning them allow us a view into the insistence of feminist anthropologists in the late 1970's of the importance of a “unified analysis” of gender and kinship. Attention to bodily acts, agency, and body topography open up possibilities of how we may understand the broader significance of the body for gender and kinship theory.

- How does kinship matter and what is its relationship to bodies, gender, race or sexuality?
- How might anthropological studies of particular bodily practices help to understand the families and relationships that ensue?


Lecture 3. Love

This lecture addresses the misleading conception that romantic love just springs forth spontaneously between young and attractive people wherever they encounter each other. Anthropologists working on love and courting in different times and parts of the world have found it to be profoundly shaped by class, cultural values, kinship organization, gender relations and the state such that love is never merely found to spring forth but is heavily conditioned by the constraints and social standing of its participants, even when the love or sexuality in question stands in direct contestation to those very social values. This lecture will focus on homosexual and heterosexual romantic love, sexual desire and erotic relations to argue that an anthropological reading of love shows the ways in which it connects to other histories and processes to reveal a striking range of concerns. As an analytic, love tells us something about the changing relations between two people but also elicits a reflection of the processes at work within the larger social constellations of meaning and value in which it finds itself.
• What motivates relationships generated through desire, sexual encounter and the erotic economy?
• Are they qualitatively different to relationships of love, marriage, family and kin?


See also this online piece by Dr Nurul Huda Mohd Razif (2020) on polygamous relationships in Malaysia in the time of COVID-19. Canopy Forum: https://canopyforum.org/2020/06/30/polygamy-in-a-time-of-pandemic-hard-times-ahead/

**Lecture 4. Care**

What is care and should it be neatly contained within the fields in which it is most immediately expressed and readily understood: that of the clinic and medical treatment, of bodily intervention by curative doctors, of technologies that seek to ameliorate bodily ills? Or is its ambit and scope far more wide and context-driven, encompassing what Yates-Doerr calls “field[s] of care” (2014) with its range of intimacies, political-economy, histories, relations and social structures that shape and define contexts in which care is expressed. This lecture looks at new anthropological studies of care to situate it as a worthwhile analytic capable of addressing ethnographic puzzles relating to how we understand relations of kinship and society at large.

• How has the anthropology of care characterised relations of autonomy and dependence in the context of kinship?
• How do states imagine the care of their citizens, and what do citizens make of states’ attempts to care?


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See Fieldnotes on Care (2014) for the Society of Cultural Anthropology, articles by Emily Yates-Doerr, Ruth Fitzgerald, Laura Heinnemann https://culanth.org/fieldsights/series/care

Example supervision topic

If kinship is not based on ties of “nature”, blood or biology, what makes kin?


Lecture series VI: Symbolism
Dr. Rupert Stasch (Lent term, weeks 5-8)

These lectures explore how social anthropologists analyze symbolism, and what insights and challenges arise in recognizing human life to be symbolically mediated.

Lecture 1. Introducing symbolism: signifiers standing for signifieds.
In everyday English, we often use the word symbol to mean a material object which stands for something else more abstract. This lecture introduces other terms for talking about relations of ‘standing for.’ The lecture asks us to see such relations as saturating human lives more extensively than we recognize in everyday talk, and it asks us to see what is strange and complex about the process of a symbol making present more than itself. Through the example of Korowai people’s houses in Indonesian Papua, the lecture explores how symbolism is not usually a matter of ‘A means B’, but involves cascading networks of relations. We consider Durkheim’s major early theory of the relation between symbolism and society, from The Elementary Forms of Religious Life.

Readings
Also read the table of contents.

Lecture 2. Symbolic order and symbolic analysis.
This lecture looks at cross-cultural examples of the meanings of animals, as a means to explore the hypothesis that symbolism is often a patterned system that needs to be studied carefully in its own terms rather than explained by something else. We develop this point by revisiting the theoretical school known as ‘structuralism’, previously introduced in Michaelmas by Dr. Candea.

Readings

Lecture 3. Performative Use of Symbols; Different Modes of ‘Standing For’.
This lecture draws on examples of English speakers using fake Spanish expressions like ‘Hasta la vista, baby,’ and Apache speakers pejoratively impersonating Whites, to raise two issues central to all symbolism. First, individuals’ use of symbols in specific situations is at the center of symbolic order itself, not separate from symbolic order. Second, symbols can stand for meanings in different ways. To appreciate the diversity of ‘standing for’ relations, the lecture introduces the idea of ‘indexicality’ (similar in some instances to ‘connotation’). The lecture further asks whether it actually makes sense to oppose ‘symbolic’ and ‘real’ (as we often do in everyday speech). Via examples such as hunger or child-raising, the lecture explores the degree to which many material, causal processes are also fundamentally symbolic.

Readings
Keane W. 2005. Signs are not the garb of meaning: on the social analysis of material things. In: Miller D

This lecture looks at art, stories, humor, and transgression as examples of areas where people are reflexive about their society's symbolic conventions. We use these examples to revisit earlier lectures' topics, but now with special attention to the relation between symbolism and subjective consciousness. We also consider challenges to symbolic theory posed by people's relations to gods, memories, places, social conflicts, or other areas where the 'meaning' of symbols includes qualities of uncertainty or contradiction in symbolic order itself.

Readings
Althusser, L. 1971. second half of “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays, pp. 158-186 (i.e. starting from the section heading “On Ideology”).

Example Supervision Topic
What is illuminated or obscured by analyzing spatial forms like buildings, or the bodies of humans or animals, as 'symbolic representations'?

Supervision topic readings: animals

Supervision topic readings: buildings
Lecture series VII: Ethnography
Prof. Joel Robbins (Easter Term, weeks 1 – 4)

Ethnographies – detailed accounts of the social life of a single society – are the one distinctively anthropological kind of writing. These lectures focus on the nature of ethnographic texts. Working in detail with the two set texts for SAN 1, the lectures explore productive ways of reading ethnographies and the best ways to take material from them to use in formulating anthropological arguments. Several lectures also take up issues of the relationship between ethnographic texts and anthropological theory. The core concern of the lectures, however, is on ways of learning about and working with ethnographic materials.

The crucial background reading for these lectures are the two set text ethnographies for SAN1:


Reading the Adam Kuper text listed below under Lecture 1 and the listed chapters from one of the two texts on kinship listed under Lecture 2 below would also be useful preparation.

**Lecture 1: Introduction to Ethnography; Ethnography and Social Structure.**
This lecture discusses the nature and history of ethnography as a kind of writing and a way of handling the data produced by anthropological fieldwork. It also discusses the concept of social structure and suggests reasons why focusing on their presentations of data on social structure is a good way to formulate an initial reading of many ethnographies.


**Lecture 2: Ethnographies of Kin-Based Societies: Kinship and Social Structure.**
This lecture discusses some of the basics of kinship analysis with an eye toward understanding how in some societies, including the two societies that are the focus in these lectures, kinship relations are the key building blocks of social structure. (Kinship will have been discussed in other lectures in SAN 1, but the presentation of this topic here will be somewhat different in emphasis.)

Read either: Fox, Robin (1967) *Kinship and Marriage*. Middlesex: Penguin Books; or Holy, Ladislav (1996) *Anthropological Perspectives on Kinship*. London: Pluto Press. [Holy is more recent, Fox is by now quite old and this shows in particular in its handling of gender, but it is also unusually clearly written and so it is worth consulting]. Chapters 4 and 6 in Fox’s book or Chapter 5 in Holy’s book are particularly relevant for this course, but reading one or the other in its entirety would be well worth the time.

**Lectures 3 and 4: Bemba: Producing Families, Practicing Rituals.**
These lectures explore Bemba society in detail. The first lecture lays out their social structure and some of the key challenges it presents to Bemba people. The second lecture looks at how the Chisungu ritual helps them to address these challenges.


**Lectures 5 and 6: Urapmin: Producing Moral Selves, Practicing Change.**
The first lecture looks in detail at Urapmin social structure and at the process of radical religious change the Urapmin people have experienced as they have converted to Christianity. The Second lecture further considers the role tensions in Urapmin social structure have played in shaping the course of Urapmin conversion to Christianity, and it explores how Christian ritual life addresses these tensions.
**Lecture 7: Ethnography and Theory.**

This lecture considers the relationship of ethnography to theory. It looks at the relationship between *Chisungu* and the structural-functionalist theoretical tradition and at *Becoming Sinners* and its relationship to the traditions of structuralism and symbolic anthropology.


**Example Supervision Topic**

**What is the relationship between ritual and social structure among the Bemba?**

(Starred readings are crucial, choose some from amongst the others)


*Handelman, D. 1998. *Models and Mirrors: Towards an Anthropology of Public Events*. New York: Berghahn Books. (Chapter 1: “Introduction”) (There is a long discussion of the Chisungu ritual in this chapter which you may find interesting, but it is the on the list for the broader theoretical position the author sets out.)


MOCK EXAMINATION PAPER

Below is a mock exam paper which reflects the course content as it will be delivered in 2022-2023

The instructions on a SAN1 exam paper are as follows:

Answer three questions.

Candidates will be expected to demonstrate a range of ethnographic knowledge in their answers, and to show a depth of knowledge of some specific ethnographic examples.

1. Discuss the strengths and weaknesses of one or more of these concepts as a key to understanding social stability and social change
   a. culture
   b. social structure
   c. discourse
   d. practice

2. What motivates relationships generated through love, care, sexual encounter and/or the erotic economy?

3. Why should one read the classics? Discuss with reference to one or more of the following theoretical traditions:
   a. evolutionism
   b. functionalism
   c. structuralism

4. ‘Weapons of the Weak are ineffective forms of resistance’. Critically discuss this claim with reference to a range of ethnographic and theoretical material.

5. ‘Nationalism is a response to feelings of insecurity’. Critically discuss this claim with reference to a range of ethnographic and theoretical material.

6. What distinctive insight does anthropology’s ethnographic method bring to one or more of the following topics
   a. Protest
   b. Borders
   c. Platform capitalism
   d. Conservation
   e. Human-animal relations

7. ‘Global health crises are not just about health.’ Discuss.

8. Does kinship matter and what is its relationship to bodies, gender, race or sexuality?

9. What is illuminated or obscured by analyzing spatial forms like buildings, or the bodies of humans or animals, as ‘symbolic representations’?

10. ‘Conflict and inequality are the natural state of humankind’. Critically discuss this claim with reference to theoretical and ethnographic material.

11. ‘The distinction between the symbolic and the real is of no value for anthropological analysis’. Discuss.

12. EITHER (a) ‘The relationship between social structure and ritual is central to both Chisungu and Becoming Sinners’. Discuss.
    OR (b) How do the different theoretical approaches of Audrey Richards and Joel Robbins shape their respective ethnographies, Chisungu and Becoming Sinners?