

Anthropological Theory

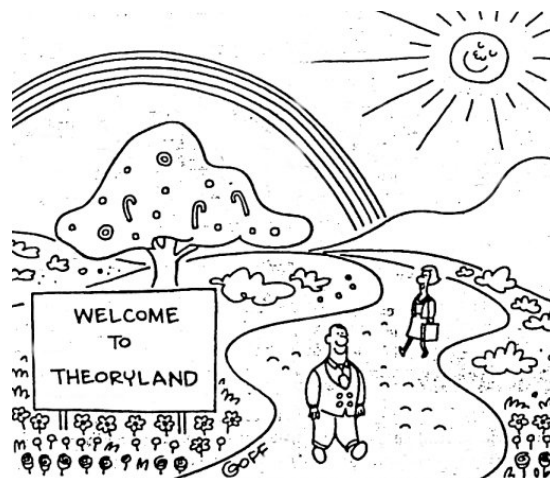
ANTH5010
Chinese University of Hong Kong
Spring 2025

DRAFT SYLLABUS: SOME DETAILS MAY BE REVISED

Lecture time	Th 18:30–20:15
Tutorial time	Tu 20:30–21:15
Lecturer	Niko Besnier
Office hours	Online and by appointment
E-mail	n.besnier@latrobe.edu.au

Course Description

This course focuses on intellectual continuities and transformations in anthropology across time and across space. Across time, we explore ways in which anthropological concerns at various historical moments both inherited and differed from the previous generations of anthropologists. Across space, we pay attention to the differences and similarities among the four important “national” anthropological traditions, associated with British, North American, French, and other European intellectual histories. We will also discuss the power that these traditions have had in eclipsing other intellectual traditions. Beginning with the most notable moments of thinking about human variation and otherness prior to the 19th century, the course reviews Victorian-era anthropology, and then concentrates on the foundations of modern social science (Marx, Durkheim, Weber) and of modern anthropology (Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown, Boas). We then turn to how these foundations gave rise to the theoretical efflorescence of the 20th century, highlighting the analytic tensions in terms of which we can make sense of theoretical positions, such as materialism vs idealism, structure vs agency, synchrony vs diachrony, and particularism vs universalism. We pay particularly attention to the relationship between anthropological knowledge and the historical context in which it arises.



[Ted Goff 1996]

Learning Outcomes

Upon the successful completion of the course, students will be able to:

- Describe in general terms major theories relevant to contemporary anthropology and its historical development
- Compare different theories, focusing on the strengths and limitations of each theory
- Use general anthropological concepts (e.g., materialism vs idealism, structure vs agency)
- Recognize theoretical leanings in particular ethnographic works
- Understand why theory is necessary and unavoidable

Course Format

The lectures will discuss the readings in their broader contexts and introduce other materials of relevance. You will benefit from the lectures only if you have done the required readings ahead of time. You are welcome to ask questions and raise discussion points during lectures. Tutorials will be interactive, with additional time for questions and discussion.

Physical presence is a basic requirement for the course. Absences are generally only permitted with a medical doctor's note or in case of a personal emergency. If you have to miss class, please e-mail me beforehand and it is your responsibility to obtain notes from your fellow students.

Assessment

Two Take-home Examinations (40% each)

For each of the two examinations, you will be given a choice of questions, one of which you should answer in a paper of 2,000-word maximum length. You should refer to the readings you will have done for the course, as well as any other readings that you find relevant. The examinations will take place in weeks 7 and 15.

Participation and Discussion Board Postings (20%)

Participation: Participation includes doing the readings, coming to all the lectures and tutorials, asking questions, and taking part in tutorial discussions.

Discussion board postings: In the course of the semester, you are required to make five substantial contributions to the discussion board (minimum 100 words), due on Friday before 17:00, which can be an informed comment on the readings or the lectures or a response to another student's comment.

Practicalities Relevant to the Book Review and Examination

- You must write clearly, concisely, and in an organized fashion. Your texts must begin with an introduction and end it with a conclusion, use sections,

section titles, and paragraphs. If relevant, you must use a standard method of citing and referencing sources.

- You will not be penalized for grammar, vocabulary, or spelling mistakes, although you are invited to be as careful as possible with language, using your computer spellchecker.
- Remember to write your name and the name of the course, and to provide a title to your assignment.
- The exam answers and book reviews cannot exceed the word limit (exclusive of headings and references) and you must write the total number of words at the end of your answers and book review.
- Book reviews have no footnotes and make very limited use of quotes, and only list references cited in the text.
- Submit your files in a format that can be opened with MS Word.
- You must submit each assignment through Blackboard, which closes down at the time specified.

For the book review, you will receive a one-point penalty for each of the following:

- Exceeding the word limit or failing to provide a word count
- Failing to provide your name and the title of the assignment.

Study materials

Selected readings, all required. Students are expected to have done the readings ahead of course meetings and to be able to discuss them when called upon.

Academic Honesty

Plagiarism is a serious offense. Using AI-based writing programs (such as ChatGPT) is considered plagiarism. Students are required by university policy to submit all take-home assignments to VeriGuide. A take-home assignment without a signed declaration from VeriGuide will not be graded.

University Policy on Academic Integrity:

http://www.cuhk.edu.hk/policy/academichonesty/Eng_htm_files_%282013-14%29/p06.htm

University Policy on VeriGuide:

https://academic.veriguide.org/academic/login_CUHK.jsp

Grade Descriptors

- A Outstanding performance on all learning outcomes.
The work has creatively synthesized course materials and key ideas in an original way. The argument is logical and cohesive, the discussion is well-organized, and the writing is clear. The work goes beyond merely summarizing key ideas. The work clearly differentiates between the position of the author versus the position(s) the author wishes to challenge. Concrete evidence corresponds to statements and claims.
- A– Generally outstanding performance on all (or almost all) learning outcomes.
The work synthesizes course materials and key ideas in an original way, but there are areas for improvement.
- B Substantial performance on all learning outcomes, OR high performance on some learning outcomes which compensates for less satisfactory performance on others, resulting in overall substantial performance.

- The work demonstrates a solid grasp of course materials and key ideas. There are areas for improvement with respect to building a cohesive argument, organizing the discussion, communicating clearly, and/or identifying relevant evidence. There is some confusion over what position the author has taken versus the position(s) the author wishes to challenge.
- C Satisfactory performance on the majority of learning outcomes, possibly with a few weaknesses.
The work shows some effort, but course materials have not been sufficiently engaged or the paper fails to directly address the prompt. The argument and the writing is not clear.
- D Barely satisfactory performance on a number of learning outcomes.
The work shows little effort to engage course materials. There are major problems with clarity of argument and writing.
- F Unsatisfactory performance on a number of learning outcomes, OR failure to meet specified assessment requirements.
The work has failed to respond to the assignment prompt.

Programme

Please do the readings *ahead* of course meetings and bring questions and comments to the meetings.

Week 1: Introduction to the course: why do we need theory and cannot avoid it? Ancient Greek philosophers, Classical Arabic scholars, and European Renaissance thinkers reflect on Other and Self; European Enlightenment and Romanticism at the foundation of modern-day anthropology.

Week 2: Nineteenth-century evolutionism and the beginnings of theoretical thinking about human diversity; critiques of the racialist underpinnings of evolutionism.

Readings

- Morgan, Lewis Henry. 1877. "Ethnical Periods." In *Ancient Society: Researches in the Lines of Human Progress from Savagery, through Barbarism, to Civilization*. [<http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/morgan-lewis/ancient-society/ch01.htm>]
- Firmin, Anténor. 1885 [2002]. "General Perfectibility of the Human Races." In *The Equality of Human Races: Positive Anthropology*, translated by Charles Asselin, 269–293. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.

Week 3: The sociological foundations of anthropology: Durkheim and his influence on anthropology; solidarity, the "social glue"; theorizing pre-modernity and modernity; Durkheim's legacy in France: Mauss' comparative ethnology and the theorization of social complexity; gifts and commodities.

Readings

- Durkheim, Émile. 1887 [1972]. "Religion and Ritual." In *Emile Durkheim: Selected Writings*, edited by Anthony Giddens, 219–238. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Mauss, Marcel. 1925 [2000]. "Gifts and Return Gifts; Gifts and the Obligation to Return Gifts; Distribution of the System: Generosity, Honour and Money." In *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, translated by W.D. Halls, 1–59. New York: W.W. Norton.

Recommended readings

- Lukes, S. 2002. "Durkheim, Emile (1858–1917)." In *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, 3897–3903.

- Karaday, V. 2002. Mauss, Marcel (1872–1950). In *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, 9419–9421.

Recommended film

- Interview of Mary Douglas (Alan Macfarlane, 2006), available on Films of Anthropological and Other “Ancestors” [<http://www.alanmacfarlane.com/ancestors/douglas.htm>]

Week 4: Durkheim’s legacy in Great Britain: structural-functionalism and psychological functionalism; fieldwork becomes *de rigueur*; social cohesion and the problem of change.

Readings

- Radcliffe-Brown, A.R. 1940. “On Joking Relationships.” *Africa* 13, no. 3: 195–210.
- Leach, Edmund R. 1954. “*Gumlao and Gumsa*.” In *Political Systems of Highland Burma: A Study of Kachin Social Structure*, 197–212. London: London School of Economics and Political Science.

Recommended reading

- Young, M.W. 2002. “Malinowski, Bronislaw (1884–1942).” In *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, 9147–9151.

Recommended films

- Tales from the Jungle: Malinowski (BBC 4, 2006), available on YouTube in 6 parts [<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f22VsAlOwbc>]
- Interview of Edmund Leach (1982), available on Films of Anthropological and Other “Ancestors” [<http://www.alanmacfarlane.com/ancestors/Leach.html>]

Week 5: The political-economic foundations of anthropology: Marx and his influence on anthropology; approaching society and culture from a material and historical perspective.

Readings

- Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels. 1845. “Idealism and Materialism.” In *Feuerbach: Opposition of the Materialist and Idealist Outlooks*. Marx and Engels Internet Archives. [<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/ch01a.htm>]

Recommended reading

- Carver, T. 2002. “Marx, Karl (1818–83).” In *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, 9280–9286.

Week 6: The neo-materialist revival: the return of history and inequality in anthropological theory; power and resistance, and the romance of the subaltern.

Readings

- Nugent, David. 1982. “Closed Systems and Contradiction: The Kachin In and Out of History.” *Man* (n.s.) 17, no. 3: 508–527. (Followed by correspondence by Edmund Leach, 18:191–199, and David Nugent, 18:199–206.) [Note: This journal has had several “series,” so make sure you find the right online series]
- Scott, James. 1986. “Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance.” *Journal of Peasant Studies* 13, no. 2: 5–34.

Recommended reading

- Mintz, Sidney W. 1979. "Time, Sugar, and Sweetness." *Marxist Perspectives* 2, no. 4: 56–73.

Week 7: The sociological foundations of anthropology: Weber and his influence on anthropology; approaching society and culture from an ideational perspective; Protestantism and the spirit of capitalism; power and charisma.

Readings

- Weber, Max. 1904. "The Spirit of Capitalism." In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. [<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~hyper/WEBER/toc.html>]
- Weber, Max. 1922 [1973]. "Class, Status, Party." In *Essays in Sociology*, edited and translated by H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Recommended reading

- Turner, S.P. 2002. "Weber, Max (1864–1920)." In *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, 16401–16407.

Weeks 8: Particularism and the origin of personality-oriented anthropology in North America: Boas, Benedict, and Mead, and the turn to "culture."

Readings

- Boas, Franz. 1920. "The Methods of Ethnology." *American Anthropologist* 22, no. 4: 311–322.
- Benedict, Ruth. 1930. "Psychological Types in the Cultures of the Southwest." In *Proceedings of the Twenty-Third International Congress of Americanists*, 572–581. New York: Science Press.

Film

- Margaret Mead and Samoa (ABC-TV, 1988), available on Google Video [<http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=-3157675332479529894>]

Recommended reading

- Elwert, G. 2002. "Boas, Franz (1858–1942)." In *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, 1266–1270.

Recommended film

- Tales from the Jungle: Margaret Mead and the Samoans (BBC 4, 2006), available on YouTube in 6 parts [<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cOa3ftAKnzo>]

Week 9: Re-introducing Weber into anthropology: Symbolic anthropology in North America and the turn from function to meaning; symbolic anthropology as 'seduction.'

Readings

- Geertz, Clifford. 1972. "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight." *Dædalus* 101, no. 1: 1–37.
- Roseberry, William. 1982. "Balinese Cockfights and the Seduction of Anthropology." *Social Research* 49, no. 4: 1013–1028.

Recommended film

- Interview of Clifford Geertz (Alan Macfarlane, 2004), available on Films of Anthropological and Other "Ancestors" [<http://www.alanmacfarlane.com/ancestors/geertz.htm>]

Week 10: The “literary turn” to postmodern reflexivity in North American anthropology.

Readings

- Pratt, Mary Louise. 1986. “Fieldwork in Common Places.” In *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, edited by James Clifford and George E. Marcus, 27–50. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Rosaldo, Renato. 1989. “Grief and a Headhunter’s Rage: On the Cultural Force of Emotions.” In *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis*, 1–21. Boston: Beacon Press.

Week 11: Structuralism and theoretical developments in France and Great Britain after Durkheim: thought structures culture.

Readings

- Lévi-Strauss, Claude. 1963. “The Bear and the Barber.” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 93, no. 1: 1–11. [This is a dense paper that requires careful reading]
- Ortner, Sherry B. 1974. “Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?” In *Woman, Culture, and Society*, edited by Michele Z. Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere, 68–87. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Week 12: Culture as practice: Bourdieu and the cultural reproduction of society.

Readings

- Bourdieu, Pierre. 2004. “The Peasant and His Body.” *Ethnography* 5, no 4: 579–599.
- Reed-Danahay, Deborah, and Kathryn M. Anderson-Levitt. 1991. “Backward Countryside, Troubled City: French Teachers’ Images of Rural and Working-Class Families.” *American Ethnologist* 18, no. 3: 546–564.

Week 13: The margin talks back: feminism, Orientalism, postcolonialism.

Readings

- Rosaldo, Michelle Z. 1974. “Woman, Culture, and Society: A Theoretical Overview.” In *Woman, Culture and Society*, edited by Michelle Z. Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere, 17–42, 322–324. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. 1988. “Can the Subaltern Speak?” In *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Carry Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, 271–313. Basingstoke, UK: Macmillan.

Film

- Edward Said on Orientalism, available on YouTube.com [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xwCOSkXR_Cw]

Recommended readings

- Said, Edward W. 1994 [1978]. Introduction. In *Orientalism*. Pp. 1–28, 353–354. New York: Vintage.
- Said, Edward W. 2000. *Out of Place: A Memoir*. New York: Vintage. [This is Edward Said’s autobiography, finished as he was dying of cancer, and a wonderful and moving book.]

Week 14: Theorizing power: Freedom and repression in the work of Foucault; Foucault’s inattention to colonialism, and anthropology’s redress of this inattention.

Readings

- Foucault, Michel. 1984 [1976]. "We 'Other Victorians.'" In *The Foucault Reader*, edited by Paul Rabinow, 292–300. New York: Pantheon. [This is a complex chapter that requires careful attention]
- Stoler, Ann L. 1989. "Making Empire Respectable: The Politics of Race and Sexual Morality in Twentieth-Century Colonial Cultures." *American Ethnologist* 16, no. 4: 634–660.

Week 15: Whither anthropological theory today? Rethinking the self, dismantling boundaries, dislodging the centre, dark anthropology vs. anthropology of the good.

Readings

- Comaroff, Jean, and John L. Comaroff. 2000. "Millennial Capitalism: First Thoughts on a Second Coming." *Public Culture* 12, no. 2: 291–343.
- Ortner, Sherry B. 2016. "Dark Anthropology and Its Others: Theory since the Eighties." *HAU* 6, no. 1: 47–73.