ANTH 322: Anthropology of the United States

Spring 2016

Professor Sandra Morgen

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Office hours: Thursdays 9:00-10:00 and by appointment

Course Description

This class explores the culture and political-economy of the contemporary U.S., with a particular focus on inequality, including examination of class, race, ethnic, and gender relations. The core questions the course examines are: How does anthropology contribute to understanding different social groups, communities, regions and social and political institutions in the U.S? How have anthropologists shed light on complex issues such as rising inequality, poverty, debt, economic insecurity, immigration, health disparities, and environmental degradation?

Cultural anthropologists use a variety of theoretical frameworks and methodologies in research and scholarship. Given the complexity of the economic, political and cultural issues facing the U.S., as well as the nation’s growing diversity, an informed examination of issues needs to draw on multiple perspectives, disciplines and information derived from different research methodologies. In this class we will privilege ethnography as one valuable tool. The core reading for the class includes four ethnographies that differently exemplify how anthropological research can inform scholarly and public exploration of pressing social issues. We will also use documentary film and selected public policy research to supplement the ethnographies as a way of enriching our understanding of these complex issues.

In addition, students will have the opportunity to actively learn how anthropologists do ethnographic research in short exercises that involve putting into practice the skills of close observation and listening. Although most of you won’t become professional anthropologists, ethnographic skills, including close listening, rigorous observation, and careful documentation are valuable skills in many work and personal contexts.

Required Reading

I have ordered four books; they are on sale at the UO Bookstore and on reserve at the Knight Library.
Debt for Sale: A Social History of the Credit Trap by Brett Williams (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005)

Labor and Legality: An Ethnography of a Mexican Immigrant Network by Ruth Gomberg-Munoz (Oxford University Press, 2011)


Other required readings are posted on Blackboard and listed on the syllabus.

Learning Outcomes

Explain the meaning of the following key concepts: political-economy, inequality, difference, ethnography

Interpret the interrelationships among sociocultural, political, and economic dynamics that impact individual and group experiences and identities, focusing on the contemporary U.S.

Analyze how public policy reinforces and/or challenges historically rooted inequalities

Demonstrate skill development in the craft of writing ethnographic field notes

Course Policies and Tips for Being Successful in the Class

To be successful in this class, and to make the most of this learning opportunity, please follow the following course policies:

- Complete the reading assigned for each class before the class for which it is assigned.
- Think critically about the reading, and come prepared to discuss it.
- Attend class regularly, pay attention, and participate in class discussion.
- Ask questions when you don’t fully understand lectures, discussions or readings.
- Active participation will greatly enhance what you learn in the class. Moreover, we are collaboratively constructing a community of learners. Each of us gains when others come well prepared, ask good questions and share what you have learned, and work together to understand complicated questions.
The ethic of reciprocity applies in this class. Put simply: treat others as you would like to be treated. Listen when others are asking or answering questions. If you have a different answer, interpretation or perspective than a speaker (including the professor), share it without belittling or being otherwise hostile or defensive.

Because we are exploring difficult, often controversial, issues, you are likely to encounter ideas or opinions that challenge what you might think or feel. Consider this class a chance to approach new or contentious ideas with curiosity and an open mind. It is not important that you agree with a position, reading, or lecture. It is important that you carefully consider the information and engage actively with the material.

Turn off cell phones in the classroom. You can use computers or tablets to take notes, but it is not okay to surf the web, check email or Facebook, etc. during class. It is distracting to others and disrespectful to the professor and your fellow students.

Complete assignments on time and with respect for the quality of your own work and the time of the person grading that work. Proofread your work before handing it in and use appropriate vocabulary and grammar. Although this is not a writing class, grammar and clarity of expression are professional skills and will be considered in grading.

Academic integrity is crucial. If you are struggling with the material get help before you are faced with poor performance or the temptation to cut corners or cheat. You can get help from the professor or GTF during office hours or by appointment or from Academic Learning Services. For more information about academic dishonesty, including plagiarism, see the following resources: on student conduct: http://studentlife.uoregon.edu/StudentConductandCommunityStandards/tabid/68/Default.aspx and on plagiarism: http://libweb.uoregon.edu/guides/plagiarism/students/.

If you miss class it is YOUR responsibility to get notes from another student and to catch up. If a film has been shown it is YOUR responsibility to go to the library and watch that film. Feel free to come talk to the professor if there are things you do not understand or questions you want to pose about material missed, but do not expect me to re-teach the class you missed.

Late work will be penalized unless arrangements have been made in advance. In general if the work is handed in after class, but on the same day, the penalty will be minimal. If you hand in work the following day or later there will be progressive penalties for lateness.
Disability Services – see http://ds.uoregon.edu. Any student with a documented disability should inform the professor early in the term of what accommodations have been determined to be necessary with Disability Services.

Assignments and Grades

- Midterm Take home essay = 40
- Final Take home essay = 40
- Field notes exercises and compilation of exercises in Field notes Journal = 20

Take home essays: Take-home essay questions will be posted on Canvas a week preceding the due date. Papers are due at the beginning of class on which they are due. To hand them in email them as word document attachments to the professor at smorgen@uoregon.edu.

Papers must be typed, double-spaced, and in either 11 or 12 point font. They will be limited to 5 pages.

There will be penalties for late work: ½ grade if received within 24 hours of the due date; a full grade if received after 24 hours but within a week. If there are extreme circumstances please contact the professor by email as soon as you can to discuss to avoid potential penalties. Sending the paper to the wrong email address will not be an excuse – get it right the first time.

Field notes Exercises and “Journal” We will be doing a series of exercises designed to help you learn about the practices and skills involved in ethnographic fieldwork. These will involve learning to take field notes related to the documentary films being used in the class. You will be viewing particular clips from the DVDs after we have viewed them. These will essentially be like simulated fieldwork observations. You will take notes during the film, work on them later at home, and then turn your field notes at the beginning of the next class. You need to hand in both the handwritten notes taken while viewing the film clip and the expanded field notes you type up. They are due the class following the exercise. Due dates are listed on the syllabus. If you miss class on the day of the field notes exercise you will not be able to do the assignment. You will have the option to “drop” one of the exercises for the final grade so missing one will not hurt your grade. I strongly recommend you do all of them, however and then hand in the four best for your journal. The only one of these you cannot miss without penalty is the final one (on 5/26) due 5/31.

Field notes journal - You will also turn these notes in again in a Field notes “Journal.” This will allow me to assess improvement over the course. The Field notes Journal is due May 31st. Please hand in the copy of the field notes on which I wrote comments. You do not need to turn in the handwritten notes in the field notes journal except those related to the final assignment.
Your final grade for field notes will be determined on the basis of four of the 5 exercises (you choose which one not to include), although it is not possible to “drop” the final exercise.

**Schedule of Class Topics, Readings and Assignments**

*Note on reading: The reading for the class is not evenly distributed. Some classes require more reading, some less, and there is no reading required for 5 classes. Plan ahead, especially for those days with more reading, recognizing that over the term it balances out. You should plan about 1 ½ -2 hours to complete the reading for each class.*

3/29
Anthropology of the U.S. - Course Overview: core concepts, inequality, ethnography, fieldwork, field notes

3/31
Thinking about Inequality in the U.S. – an overview
Ethnography as Anthropological Practice -Ethnographic Field notes and Reading

DVD (shown in class) Unnatural Causes: Is Inequality Making Us Sick? Segment 1: In Sickness and Wealth

Field notes Exercise #1 –from “In Sickness and Wealth”

READING: (on CANVAS)

Robert Emerson, Rachel Fretz and Linda Shaw – (from Writing Ethnographic Field notes University of Chicago Press 1995_pp. 1-16; 66-84 (located under Files in CANVAS)

Fry, R and R. Kochhar (2014) America’s wealth gap between middle-income and upper-income families is widest on record (located under assignments in CANVAS)

http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/12/17/wealth-gap-upper-middle-income/

Kochhar, R and R. Fry (2014) Wealth inequality has widened along racial, ethnic lines since end of Great Recession (located under Assignments in CANVAS)

http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/12/12/racial-wealth-gaps-great-recession/

4/5
Producing Economic Insecurity: Anthropology of Debt and Credit

READING:Brett Williams Debt for Sale, pp. 1-60
DUE: Field notes exercise #1

4/7
The Production of Debt: Case Study – Students
READING: Brett Williams Debt for Sale, pp. 61-91

4/12
Producing Debt and Economic Hardship in Low-Income Communities
READING: Brett Williams Debt for Sale pp. 92-131


4/14
Migration and Immigration in the U.S.
READING: Ruth Gomberg-Munoz Labor and Legality pp. ix-xi; 1-62

4/19
The Experience of Undocumented Life
READING: Gomberg-Munoz pp. 63-123; 141-143

4/21
The Politics of Immigration and Immigration Policy
READING: Gomberg-Munoz pp. 124-140
Hand out take home midterm

4/26
The Politics of Immigration: DVD –Farmingville
Small group discussions of Farmingville
Field notes exercise #2

4/28
Documentary film: American Winter
Field notes exercise #3
Field notes Exercise #2 due
Take home paper due 10:00 a.m. to be send as word document as attachment to smorgen@uoregon.edu

5/3
Poverty and Welfare Restructuring: Oregon and Nationally
Discussion of American Winter
Field notes exercise #3 due

5/5 Welfare Restructuring and the Work of Welfare Provision
READING: Morgen, Acker and Weigt *Stretched Thin*: Chapters 3 and 4, pgs 64-110

5/10 Low-wage Work, Care Work and Client Experiences of Welfare Restructuring
READING: Morgen, Acker and Weigt *Stretched Thin*: 111-177

READING: Morgen, Acker and Weigt Stretched Thin pp. 178 - 203
Abramovitz, Mimi and Sandra Morgen *Taxes are a Woman’s Issue* pp. 44-49

5/17 Environmental Politics: Race, Class and Toxic Neighborhoods/Communities
READING: Melissa Checker, *Polluted Promises* pp. 1-68

5/19 Environmental Racism: Intersections of Race, Class and Gender
READING: Melissa Checker, *Polluted Promises*, pp. 69-147
DVD (shown in class): excerpts from *Hyde Park: Desperate, Determined*
Field notes exercise #4

5/24 Environmental Racism and Activism
READING: Melissa Checker, *Polluted Promises* p. 148-190
Field notes exercise #4 due

5/26 Indigenous Peoples, Environmental Degradation and Environmental Justice
DVD (shown in class): “Homeland– Four Portraits of Native Action”
Field notes exercise #5 – the class will be divided into four groups. You will only see the film once. Your field notes exercise requires you to take field notes based on all you can learn about (and descriptions of) the assigned activist.

1) Gail Small, Northern Cheyenne, Montana – issue 75,000 proposed coal bed methane gas wells that threaten to contaminate the Tongue River.
2) Evon Peter, Gwich’in, Alaska - fighting efforts to drill for oil in the fragile Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. At risk are the refuge, the caribou and the cultural survival of the Gwich’in people.
3) Mitchell and Rita Capitan, Eastern Navajo, New Mexico - Tribal activists rallying their community against a new uranium mining proposal that threatens
to contaminate the only source of drinking water for 15,000 people on the Navajo reservation.

4) Barry Dana, Penobscot, Maine - The Chief of the Penobscot who is battling powerful paper companies and the state government to save the Penobscot River—a source of culture, food and medicinal plants for the Penobscot people.

5/31
Environmental Activism
Discussion of activists portrayed in Homeland
Field notes exercise #5 due

6/2
Course conclusion

READING: Dan Ariely “Americans Want to Live in a Much More Equal Country (They Just Don't Realize It)

6/10
Take home final due – 8:00 a.m. to be send to the professor as word document as attachment to smorgen@uoregon.edu