Rutgers University
Department of Anthropology
Spring 2023

Capitalism & Debt

01:070:224 (3 credits)
Mon 12:10-3:10pm
BIO 206

Instructor: Prof. Bridget Purcell
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Office hours: Wednesdays 1-2pm

Course Description:

We live in an age of debt. From student debt to medical bills, car loans to incarceration, it is nearly impossible to live in our world without becoming indebted. And yet there is a strange silence around the topic of debt—as though it were either an individual failure too shameful to discuss, or an economic fact too complex to understand.

In this class, we will learn to recognize and critique the workings of debt in our world, by examining the political economic processes that produce it. We will also gain the tools to imagine a world beyond debt. Using the comparative lens of anthropology, we will explore alternative forms of socio-economic organization, both in distant cultural contexts and in our own everyday lives. And we will engage with some of the activists and scholars that are working to build a world free from debt.

In short, we will learn to identify—and resist—the moral and material logics of debt *as they operate in our own lives*. To this end, the three major assignments will harness our own roles as participant observers in late capitalism, at its height and through its crises.

Course Goals:

1. Identify and critique the material workings of debt in our world today, by examining the historical and political economic processes that produce it.

2. Recognize the social, moral, and experiential dimensions of debt—including its role in producing and reinforcing gendered and racialized hierarchies.

3. Explore alternative non-capitalist modes of socio-economic organization and practice, using the comparative lens of anthropology.

4. Co-construct a learning environment that refuses logics of indebtedness (the focus on individual responsibility, assignments as debts owed, the counting of points and penalties, the awarding of credits), in favor of an ethic of mutuality and reciprocity ("each according to their abilities").

Course Policies

Accommodations: Students seeking accommodations should consult the Office of Disability Services at http://disabilityservices.rutgers.edu, dsoffice@rci.rutgers.edu, or (848) 445-6800. You should do this as soon as possible, but definitely before assignments are due. Students who suspect they may have an undiagnosed learning disability or other disability may visit the Office of Disability Services for assessment and guidance.

Absences**:** If you should need to miss class for any reason, please let me know prior to the class meeting. This is a courtesy, but it does not necessarily excuse the absence. Please note that any unexcused absence will impact your participation grade – I take this very seriously.

Academic Integrity: Please, familiarize yourself with the principles and policies of academic integrity. http://academicintegrity.rutgers.edu/. If you have questions, ask me. I cannot tolerate plagiarism or any other form of intellectual dishonesty.

Assignments and Grading: The success of this seminar relies on your commitment to complete all readings, to participate actively in class meetings, and to creatively engage with course themes in your discussion posts and assignments. Grading will be based on:

- **Attendance and participation (20%):** Your lively, thoughtful participation in class is both encouraged and expected. You should come to each class having completed that week's reading and writing assignments, and you should be ready to engage your classmates in discussions, workshops, and peer review sessions. *For real, participation is very important in this class! Any unexcused absence will impact your participation grade*.

- **Discussion board (20%):** By 11:59pm each Sunday, you are expected to write a 1 paragraph discussion post on that week's readings. Though brief, your posts should demonstrate your close reading of course materials, and reference specific passages from the readings. I will provide prompts for reflection each week.

- **Assignment 1 (15%):** At the end of Unit 1, you will write 3-5 page essay (10%), and design a poster (or a slide or another visual that can be shared with the class) (5%). The assignment is to identify the various modes of economic exchange that intersect in your own life, and to analyze these as arenas for forging, cementing, contesting, or otherwise negotiating social relationships. The essay and poster are due Sunday 2/19 at 11:59pm. During class time the following day (2/20), we will do a 'gallery walk' where you will discuss your poster with the class.

- **Assignment 2 (20%):** At the end of Unit 2, you will write a 4-5 page essay (15%), and then engage in an in-class peer review sessions (5%). The assignment is to write a "debt narrative," based on an interview with a friend or family member. The essay and presentation should situate the experiential dimensions of debt within the political-economic processes that produce it. The essay is due Sunday 4/9 at 11:59pm. The in-class peer review is scheduled for class time the following day, Monday 4/10.

- **Assignment 3 (25%):** At the end of Unit 3, you will design an annotated syllabus unit (3 pages total). If you were going to teach an additional week of this course, what would you teach, and why? What are the key texts and concepts you would explore? How would these themes connect to and expand our previous conversations? You will "assign" 3 scholarly texts, in addition to any other materials (like films or interviews) that you find pedagogically useful, and you will describe your rationale for choosing these materials. By our last class, Monday 5/1, you will have read your chosen materials. In class you will workshop your evolving ideas, and get suggestions from your classmates. The assignment is due that Friday 5/5, at 11:59pm.

Unit 1: The moral grounds of economic life

Week 1	1/23	Study (Moten & Harney)
Week 2	1/30	Capitalism (Marx, Graeber)
Week 3	2/6	The Gift (Mauss)
Week 4	2/13	The Grift (Robbins, Chu, Walsh)
Week 5	2/20	Assignment 1 due; class gallery walk

Unit 2: Debt & inequality in the US today

Week 6	2/27	Neoliberalism (Harvey, Walley, Lipsitz)
Week 7	3/6	Shock Doctrine (Klein) (virtual meeting)

Spring Break

Week 8	3/20	Racial Capitalism (Kelley, Robinson, Rickford)
Week 9	3/27	Financialization (Krippner, Appel et al, Joseph)
Week 10	4/3	Student Debt (Zaloom)
Week 11	4/10	Assignment 2 due; in-class peer-review

Unit 3: Debt & the global wealth divide

Week 12	4/17	Empire (Beckert, Williams, CLR James)
Week 13	4/25	Development (Hickel, Black)
Week 14	5/1	Students choose readings and materials; final project workshop.

Assignment 3 due Friday 5/5 at 11:59pm.