Spring 2025

Wealth and Culture

Anthropology 303 (01:070:303)

Meets Mondays and Wednesdays 3:50-5:10pm
in Hickman Hall, room 205 (Douglass campus)

Instructor:
David M. Hughes, Professor
Department of Anthropology
dahughes@rutgers.edu
Office hours by appointment

Course description

We think we know what wealth is. It is an abundance of something … but of what? The course will discuss possibilities ranging from material objects, to social relationships, to the ability to make things. Or, perhaps, free time has become the truest form of wealth. The answers all depend, obviously, on context – on the cultural models of and models for the world within which one lives. In the second case, models for the world suggest ways in which we may strive for greater wealth. "Wealth," in other words, implies a process: aspirations and actions by which people seek both life and livelihood. In so doing, they also displace costs onto other people, places, and species. Often, we don't such shifting, or stories and fantasies within capitalism obscure it. The course will, therefore, examine the myths of modern wealth-seeking: that is, how economic activity systematically makes inequality and suffering invisible. Equipped with an interdisciplinary set of classic and more recent texts, this course will emphasize reading comprehension and oral performance in class discussions.

Objectives of the course

By the end of the course, students should be able to:

1. Understand various definitions of wealth;
2. Appreciate the historical and cultural context of those definitions;
3. Analyze the co-production of wealth and poverty in capitalism;
4. Orally assess and criticize advanced texts in social science.

Reading

All of the required reading is available as electronic files in the course's Canvas site (under the "Files" tab). You are expected to have completed all the class reading – and to be prepared to discuss it – by the time of the Wednesday class meeting.

Participation

Due to the prevalence of what I call "literoids" (ChatGPT and other algorithms for packaging and repurposing human-created, public knowledge), this course will operate in a somewhat-old fashioned way. Fully half of your grade will rest on oral participation in our class meetings. To do well, you will need, first, to show up and, second, to show up having already engaged critically and profoundly with the assigned reading. As you read, I suggest that you note down answers to these five questions and mark relevant passages in the text:

1. What are the main arguments of the reading?
2. How does the reading intersect with previous reading, lectures, and/or discussions in the course?
3. How does the reading relate to some aspect of our everyday lives and/or to current events?
4. Is there a gap, flaw, or limit to the argument of the author of the reading?
5. What are three questions that I might pose to the class regarding the reading?

In order to facilitate a fruitful discussion along these lines, you must bring the week's text or texts to class – either printed out or visible through a device. I will expect each of you to volunteer responses to prompts from myself and the other students. If a student does not volunteer, I will "cold call" directly upon that student. In the first class meeting, we will determine the best means of evaluating participation. I propose to emphasize creativity and risk-taking, rather than right-or-wrong answers.

Grading

The grade is determined as follows:

1. class participation 50%
2. midterm 20%
3. final exam 30%

Health and well-being

Your health and well-being are essential parts of this class. This means that we understand you may get sick. We will make appropriate accommodations if this happens. You should not attend lecture or recitation section if you are ill. Let us know the situation using the absence reporting system (*https://sims.rutgers.edu/ssra/*). Do not "power-through" illness. Rest and recover. Class periods missed for a medical reason and reported via the absence reporting system will be excused and a lecture recording will be made available. I encourage students to take advantage of rapid antigen tests for covid because they are a good guide to when you may be infectious. When you experience symptoms, you should be sure to take two tests separated by at least 24 hours because a single negative result often occurs when symptoms first manifest but while viral load is low. If you contract covid, you should not return to class until you have no symptoms and have two negative rapid antigen tests separated by 24 hours.

Absences

Except in the circumstances above, students are expected to attend all classes; if you will miss one or two classes, please use the University absence reporting website (https://sims.rutgers.edu/ssra/) to indicate the date and reason for your absence. This procedure does not *excuse* the absence. You must communicate with Professor Hughes or Zainab Najeeb to seek an excused absence. The only acceptable grounds for an excused absence are medical, religious, bereavement, or court appearances.

Classroom etiquette

Class begins punctually. Late arrival indicates disrespect to the instructor and to the other students. In order to minimize disruptions, late students should settle themselves as quietly as possible in the back of the classroom. Texting, emailing, and web surfing is similarly disrespectful and undermining. Those engaging in these activities will be asked to leave the lecture hall for the rest of the period. Finally, regarding cell phone rings, they are to be avoided at all costs.

Academic integrity

Cheating lowers the value of a Rutgers degree and the learning experience for all students. No form of cheating will be tolerated. No usage of artificial intelligence is allowed. Please visit the website of the Rutgers Office of Academic Integrity (http://academicintegrity.rutgers.edu) for a fuller explanation of plagiarism and of the penalties for it. Proved plagiarists will receive a disciplinary F in the course and possibly faced expulsion from the University.

Financial hardship

If you are facing other financial hardships, please visit the Office of Financial Aid at https://financialaid.rutgers.edu/.

Syllabus

Week 1 (22 Jan): Introduction – what is wealth?

No reading

Wealth as Stuff

Week 2 (27, 29 Jan): Cattle

Livingstone, Julie. 2019. *Self-Devouring Growth: A Planetary Parable as Told from Southern Africa*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. Prologue and Chapter 2 (40 pages).

Week 3 (3, 5 Feb): Food and drink

Mintz, Sidney. 1985. *Sweetness and Power: the Place of Sugar in Modern History*. New York: Penguin. Chapters 1 and 5 (50 pages).

Week 4 (10, 12 Feb) : oil
Huber, Matt. 2013. *Lifeblood: Oil, Freedom, and the Forces of Capital*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. Chapter 1 and Conclusion (50 pages).

Week 5 (17, 19 Feb): Tech
Sheller, Mimi. 2014. *Aluminum Dreams: the Making of Light Modernity*. Cambridge: MA: MIT Press. Chapter 1 and Conclusion (50 pages).

Wealth as People and Relationships

Week 6 (24,2 6 Feb): The persistence of feudalism
Graeber, David. 2018. *Bullshit Jobs: a Theory*. New York: Simon and Schuster. Chapters 1 and 5 (72 pages).

Week 7 (3, 5 March): Prestige
Miller, Daniel. 2011. *Tales from Facebook*. London: Polity. Chapter 4 and Part II (75 pages).

Week 8 (10, 12 March): Review and midterm
No reading
Review on Monday
Midterm in-class on Wednesday

Spring Break

Wealth as Productive Capacity

Week 9 (24, 26 March): Plantations and factories
Patel, Raj and Jason Moore. 2017. *A History of the World in Seven Cheap Things: a Guide, to Capitalism, Nature, and the Future of the Planet*. Berkeley: University of California Press. Introduction and Chapter 3 (60 pages).

Week 10 (31 March, 2 April): The growth machine
Cronon, Bill. 1991 *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West*. New York: Norton. Chapter 3 (50 pages).

Wealth as Leisure

Week 11 (7, 9 April): Consumption
Thorsten, Veblen. 1931. *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. New York: Viking. Chapter 4 (34 pages).

Week 12 (14, 16 April): Time
Sahlins, Marshall. 1972. *Stone Age Economics*. New York: Aldine. Chapter 1 (39 pages).
Mumford, Lewis. 1986. "The monastery and the clock." In Donald Miller, ed. *The Lewis Mumford Reader*. New York: Pantheon, pp. 324-32.

Towards a Good Life

Week 13 (21, 23 April): Theories of change
Marx, Karl and Friedrich Engels. 2008 [1888]. "The communist manifesto." London: Wordsworth. Pp. 3-24.

Week 14: (28, 30 April): Useful utopias
Hughes, David M. 2017. "A jobless utopia," *Boston Review* 19 May. https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/david-mcdermott-hughes-jobless-utopia/
Boyer, Dominic. 2021. "Rebellion and revellion: towards a solarity worth living," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 120,1: 25-38.

Week 15 (5 May): Review for final exam
No reading

Final exam at the time and place in the schedule of final exams