

Economies and Culture (Summer Course: June 1, 2026 - July 3, 2026)

Instructor:

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Course Description:

We learn about the “economy” and “the market” as self-contained units that obey complex natural laws that in an ideal world operate free from things like culture, religion, and politics, even though they rarely do in practice. This course foregrounds the aspects of economic activity that other perspectives often place in the background. We will see how economies are infused all the way through by culture and examine the cultural assumptions of the very idea of things like “efficient markets” and “natural prices.” We’ll do this in two ways – through the work of anthropologists on economies that operate according to very different premises, and through cultural analyses of capitalist marketbased economic worlds. Since digitalization and financialization are also significant components of modern human economic activities, in Part III, we will discuss how digital technologies and finance influence “the market” and our everyday life.

Learning goals:

- Students will learn about the relationship between economies and culture as studied in the field of “economic anthropology”.
- Students will examine the premises of economic ideas such as the application of scarce means to alternative ends as a guiding principle of all economic activity.
- Students will learn about economies in diverse cultural contexts, including influences of finance and digital technologies on economic activity.
- Students will productively and respectfully debate different approaches to economic activity.
- Students will write short critical analyses and reflections of ethnographic and historical texts.
- Students will master basic concepts in economic anthropology and will be tested on these in a midterm exam.

Expected Workload:

Success in this 4-credit course is based on the assumption that you will spend an average minimum of 9 hours per week outside of class on readings, class preparation and assignments.

Disability Accommodations:

Brandeis seeks to welcome and include all students. If you are a student who needs accommodations as outlined in an accommodations letter, please talk with me and present your letter of accommodation as soon as you can. I want to support you. In order to provide test accommodations, I need the letter more than 48 hours in advance.

I want to provide your accommodations but cannot do so retroactively. If you have questions about documenting a disability or requesting accommodations, please contact Student Accessibility Support (SAS) at [781.736.3537](tel:781.736.3537) or access@brandeis.edu.

Academic Integrity:

You are expected to be honest in all of your academic work. Please consult **Rights and Responsibilities** (<http://www.brandeis.edu/studentlife/srcs/rr/>) for details concerning academic integrity. Use of Artificial Intelligence in this course for essay assignments, exams, and discussions is not allowed in this course. On the first day of class, when we go over the syllabus, I will share writing guidelines and answer your questions about the use of AI if you have any.

Recommended Books:

In addition to the required books, students may find the following books useful. These are all introductory and offer a broad overview of key debates in economic anthropology.

- Carrier, James G. (ed.). 2005. *A Handbook of Economic Anthropology*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Hann, Chris and Keith Hart. 2011. *Economic Anthropology: History, Ethnography, Critique*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Wilk, Richard R. and Lisa C. Cliggett. 2007. *Economies and Cultures: Foundations of Economic Anthropology*. Cambridge, MA: Westview Press.

Course Requirements:

Attendance and Participation - 28%

Quizzes - 12%

Mid-Term Exam - 20%

2 Papers (5 Pages) - 20% each

Attendance and Participation (28%)

As long as you attend a class and regularly state your opinion in discussion, you will get a full mark on attendance and participation for that class. Since this summer course is more condensed than courses during the regular semester, missing one class will mean missing two normal-semester courses, so come to the class as much as possible. Depending on reasons such as medical emergencies and family-related issues, I can excuse your absence once and it will not influence your grade. Each class counts for 2% of your attendance and participation and there will be 14 classes in this course.

Quizzes (12%)

There will be 6 quizzes throughout the course. Quizzes will be online and multiple choice and have a time limit (5 minutes). Quizzes will be very basic, for example, asking you where a given author did fieldwork and definition of concepts they describe in their account. As long as you read assigned readings, you will be able to answer all questions correctly.

Mid-Term Exam (20%)

Unlike quizzes, the Mid-Term Exam will not ask you definitions of each concept or redescribe findings of each reading. It will be online and be structured by open-ended questions that ask your thoughts and how you reflect on each reading and construct an original critique. You will be asked to answer 5 questions in two hours. The mid-term exam is scheduled to happen in Class 10 (June 22).

Papers (20% each)

Papers will be 5 pages and double spaced. There are two paper assignments, due after Class 6 and the final class, respectively. The description of each paper assignment is written below. Since the final paper assignment replaces the final exam of this course, there will be no final exam.

Part I : Introduction of Economic Anthropology

Class 1 (June 1): What is Economic Anthropology?

In the first class, we discuss how economic anthropology is different from economics and other disciplines that think about human economic activities. First off, the class will explain what “anthropology” is, in a very general sense, before I introduce economic anthropology to you. Please read Carrier’s “Introducing Economic Anthropology” before you read Polanyi’s text, which is one of the foundational texts of economic anthropology. We will also go over the syllabus and I will introduce some representative “economic anthropologists” during my lecture.

Required Readings:

- Carrier, James G. 2005. “Introducing Economic Anthropology” in *A Handbook of Economic Anthropology*
- Karl Polanyi. 1957 “Economy as Instituted Process”

Class Activities:

- Introduction
- Going over the syllabus
- Lecture about the introduction of economic anthropology
- Discussion about Polanyi’s reading

Class 2 (June 2): Gift

In this class, we will discuss gift exchange as one of the human economic activities. What is the gift economy and how does it function in different ways from our capitalist society? Why can it

be the foundation of society? I will introduce classic accounts of two economic anthropologists, Bronislaw Malinowski and Marcel Mauss, to talk about how gift exchange can be the basis of the economy with the case of the Kula ring in Melanesia.

Required Readings:

- Malinowski, Bronislaw. 2005 (originally published in 1922). Chapter 3 in *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, Pp. 62-80.
- Mauss, Marcel. 2002 (originally published in 1954). Introduction and Chapter 1 in *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, Pp. 1-23

Class Activities:

- Lecture about gift exchange
- Discussion about assigned readings
- Pair Activity: discuss the significance of gift exchange which you conducted with your family member, friend, or acquaintance with your pair. Talk about why you exchanged that gift and what meanings were attached to it. Also, talk about why we still exchange gifts in a highly capitalistic society where money buys most things and think about what could count as a gift and what wouldn't be regarded as a gift, if "no gift is free", as Mauss says.

Class 3 (June 4): Reciprocity

In this class, we talk about reciprocity, which is the non-market exchange of goods and services, including direct barter and gift exchange we discussed last week. We use Sahlins' famous account of "original affluent society" to discuss reciprocity. In preparing for the class, please read Sahlins first and then Bird-David as she develops the case of Sahlins. In class activity, we will talk more about examples of non-market exchange in our daily life, what "affluence" would mean in the contemporary capitalist world, and how the concept has been changing in the US.

Required Readings:

- Sahlins, Marshall. 1972. "Chapter 1: The Original Affluent Society." In *Stone Age Economics*. Pp. 1-40.
- Bird-David, Nurit. 1992. "Beyond 'The Original Affluent Society': A Culturalist Reformulation". *Current Anthropology* 22 (1): 25-47.

Class Activities:

- Lecture about reciprocity and why it is important in anthropology
- Discussion about assigned readings
- Pair Activity: In your pair, talk about examples of reciprocity (generalized, balanced, and negative) which you can think of. Also talk about what you think "affluence" means now in our highly capitalistic society.

Class 4 (June 8): Ritual Economy

In this class, we discuss how ritualistic activities are related to the function and maintenance of the economy in a given society. Why is ritual necessary for production and consumption? We deal with two cases from New Guinea and Fiji. Rappaport's account on New Guinea describes how the ritual cycle of the Tsembaga Maring tribe has not only economic but also social, ecological and even nutritional meaning, which regulates a balance of their society. Toren's case delineates how modern money (cash) needs to be "drunk" in a ritual to be purified to maintain social relations in Fiji. During this class, we will also watch a short movie about the Tsembaga Maring tribe. For in-class activity, we will talk about other examples of "ritual-like-things" that we or others do in our livelihood.

Required Readings:

- Roy Rappaport. 1967 "Ritual Regulation among a New Guinea People" *Ethnology* 6(1): 17-30.
- Toren, Christina. 1989. "Drinking Cash: The Purification of Money Through Ceremonial Exchange in Fiji." In *Money and Morality of Exchange* edited by Parry Jonathan and Maurice Bloch, Pp. 142-164.

Class Activities:

- Lecture about ritual economy
- Discussion about assigned readings
- Watch a short movie about Tsembaga Maring tribe and their pig festival
- In-class activity: let's discuss any "ritual-like things" we do in relation to consumption, production, use of money, etc.

Class 5 (June 9): Money and Spheres of Exchange

In this class, we start to discuss "money", something which we use everyday but do not think about so much. Why don't we think about it when we use it and how does money function? Money has been one of the central foci of economic anthropology, however it remains a mysterious topic where anthropologists cannot reach a universal understanding. Its mystery comes partly from diversity in human monetary practices. We will talk about two cases: Spheres of Exchange among the Tiv (Nigeria) and Cattle Money among the Nuer (South Sudan). I will also introduce my research topic, cryptocurrency, as one such example of diverse human monetary practices.

Required Readings:

- Bohannan, Paul. 1955. "Principles of Exchange and Investment among the Tiv." *American Anthropologist* 57(1): 60-70.
- Hutchinson, Sharon. 1993. "The Cattle of Money and The Cattle of Girls among the Nuer, 1930-83." *American Ethnologist* 19(2): 294-316.

Class Activity:

- Lecture about anthropology of money

- Discussion on assigned readings
- Discussion on our daily use of money and what we think about “western money” and how it is different from how Nuer and Tiv people use money

Part II: The Economy and Social Life (Morality, Gender, Race, and the Environment)

Class 6 (June 11): Morality and Economy

In this class, we discuss relations between the economy and morality. Behind every economy, including a highly capitalistic one where money buys most things, there is an underlying ethics and social rule - morality - which makes the economy work and sometimes even stops it. We use the case of E.P.’s Thompson work “The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century” to start thinking about how morality influences our economic life. In the second half of the class, I will explain the first essay assignment along with some anthropological writing samples.

Required Readings:

- Thompson, E.P. 1971. “The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century.” *Past & Present* (50): 76-136.

Class Activities:

- Lecture about relations between morality and the economy
- Discussion on Thompson’s work
- Workshop for **the First Essay Assignment** (I will share grading guidelines and a rubric. I will also share other relevant readings and writing samples, as well as respond to your questions about anthropological writing and this assignment)

The First Essay Assignment

As a starter, this essay assignment will ask you to write a 5 double-spaced page essay about two of the classic themes of economic anthropology (ritual, gift, money, or reciprocity). Pick two themes and write about your relevant experiences that are related to the selected themes. Then, write an analysis of your experience by applying concepts of assigned readings. In the workshop, I will share more recommended readings for each theme, which you can use to write this essay. If you have a writing plan, I can also suggest specific readings to your case.

Class 7 (June 15): Economy and Race

Race is a foundational concept and reality that shapes the economy in many societies. In this class, we use Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s “Motion in the System” and W. E. B. Du Bois’ “Black Reconstruction”. We will compare Trouillot’s case about Haiti and its plantation economy and Dubois’s account on Black workers and white workers in the US. By reflecting on these two cases, we will understand that the economy is never a self-autonomous and objectively fair system, but it is always in favor of a certain racial group. We also talk about indications from Dubois’ book on the economic structure of contemporary American society.

Required Readings:

- Michel-Rolph Trouillot. 1982. "Motion in the System Coffee, Color, and Slavery in Eighteenth-Century Saint-Domingue." *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)* 5 (3): 331-388.
- Dubois. W.E. 1935. "The Black Worker" and "The White Worker" in *Black Reconstruction in America*, Pp. 3-31.

Class Activities:

- Lecture about the economy and race, especially anthropological explanation of the history of capitalism
- Discussion on assigned readings
- Pair discussion on connections between Dubois' work and contemporary American capitalism

Class 8 (June 16): Economy and Gender

In this class, we talk about relations between the economy and gender roles by paying attention to family, kinship, property, and reproduction. We will use two readings. Gayle Rubin is a feminist anthropologist who proposed her famous concept of "sex/gender system". Claude Melliasou tries to fill in the gaps of Marxism by paying attention to women's unpaid labor in capitalism. First off, I will go over basic details of Marx's view of capitalism in the lecture to explain why Melliasnou and Rubin make a critique of Marx. In class discussion, we will further talk about relevant gender-related economic problems in the US and try to think about those in terms of assigned readings and previous discussions.

Required Readings:

Rubin, Gayle. 1975. "Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex." *In Toward an Anthropology of Women*, in Rayna Reiter, Pp. 157-210.

Melliasoux, Calude. 1975. "Domestic Reproduction (Pp. 33-49)" and "Conclusion (Pp. 138-144)", In *Maidens, Meal, and Money: Capitalism and Domestic Community*

Class Activities:

- Lecture on relations between gender roles and capitalism, including explanation of Marx's understanding of capitalism
- Discussion on assigned readings
- Pair Discussion: find a key economic problem related to gender with your pair and connect it to relevant concepts and share it with others in class.

Class 9 (June 18): Economy and Environment

The economy often has detrimental effects on the natural environment and humans constantly need to navigate relations between the economy and the environment for the sustainability of their economic activities. Dutch meteorologist Paul Cruzen proposed the word "Anthropocene" to

describe the current epoch where human activities function as a dominant force that shaped the earth's environment. In this class, we talk about anthropological interpretations of the anthropocene and discuss relations between nature and our economic life. At the end of this class, we will do a short mid-term review for 30 minutes.

Required Readings:

- Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt. 2015. *Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*: Preface: "Enabling Entanglements" (Pp. vii-xii), "Prologue: Autumn Aroma" (Pp. 1-9), Chapter 1 "Arts of Noticing" (Pp. 17-25), Chapter 5 "Open Ticket, Oregon" (Pp. 73-83), Chapter 9 "From Gifts to Commodities—and Back" (Pp. 121-128)
- Howe, Cymene and Dominic Boyer. 2016. Aeolian Extractivism and Community Wind in Southern Mexico. *Public Culture* 28(2): 215-235

Class Activities:

- Lecture on anthropology of the "Anthropocene" and "late-stage capitalism"
- Discussion on assigned readings
- Mid-Term Review

Class 10 (June 22): Mid-Term Exam

During this class time, you will take an online mid-term exam. You have two hours to answer 5 questions that are related to topics of each week up to Class 9. Since this is an online exam, you can look at readings and definitions of each concept, but the exam asks you to construct your own argument, show relevant examples, and develop your own reflection and critique in your answer. Sample questions are written below.

Mid-Term Exam Sample Questions:

- What are the main differences between Dubois' interpretation of relations between race and the economy and that of Trouillot in their accounts?
- To what extent is Bohannan's concept of "spheres of exchange" applicable to the modern-day economy? If not, develop your critique of the concept by showing some examples.
- To what extent does the concept of "Anthropocene" accurately describe relations between our economic life and the environment? What problems does this concept have as a word to describe human exploitation of the environment?
- How does non-market exchange of goods and services influence the function of the market and economy?

Part III: Digitalization and Financialization in The Market

Class 11 (June 23): Finance and Anthropology

Starting this class, we talk about anthropology of finance to understand how even highly rational phenomena like finance operate in very human ways in the market. We will use Karen Ho's work, "Ethnography of Wall Street", to start discussing the culture of Wall Street to understand how a given financial system is run and contested by actual human beings. Ho's work partially explains an inner logic of how the worldwide financial crisis began at Wall Street in 2008.

Required Readings:

Ho Karen. 2009. "Downsizers Downsized (Chapter 5: 213-249)" and "Liquid Lives (Chapter 6: 249-293)", in *Liquidated: An Ethnography of Wall Street*.

Class Activities:

- Introduce the anthropology of finance
- Lecture on Ho's book, especially on historical contexts of the book
- Discussion on assigned chapters

Class 12 (June 25): Finance and Technology

In this class, we talk about relations between finance and technology. Technology is an indispensable part of modern finance and daily influences financial decisions of traders and the global market, and financialization often means updating to a certain technology. We carry out a cross-cultural comparison of technological influences on finance between Chicago and Kolkata. We discuss differences and similarities in experiences of professional finance traders in Chicago and tea traders in Kolkata in the transition from traditional trading to machine-based trading and how it influenced their financial decisions and behaviors. We will also reflect on how technology has changed or has not changed the nature and idea of the market among traders in the global north and the global south.

Required Readings:

Zaloom Kaitlin. 2006. "Markets and Machines: Work in The Technological Sensoryscapes of Finance." *American Quarterly* 58(3): 815-837.

Besky, Sarah. 2016. "The Future of Price: Communicative Infrastructures and the Financialization of Indian Tea." *Cultural Anthropology* 31(1): 4-29.

Class Activities:

- Lecture on anthropological discussions on relations between finance and technology
- Class Discussion on assigned readings
- Pair Discussion: think about how modern technologies influence economic/financial activities in your daily life and how you are motivated to use your money in the digital sphere. We will share your thoughts with the class later.
- Workshop for the final essay assignment (I will share the rubric and grading criteria of the final essay assignment and tips to construct your own research question).

Assignment (After Class)

- Make your own research question by the next class (Class 13)

Class 13 (June 29): Islamic Finance

In this class, which is the second to the last, we talk about Islamic finance by using Rudnyckj's work in Malaysia. Islamic finance is a good representation of how finance works not only economically but also morally, socially, and religiously, and it functions significantly differently from Wall Street finance. We will talk about connections between Rudnyckj's work and other classic literature we discussed in previous classes.

Required Readings:

Daromir, Rudnyckj. 2013. "From Wall Street to Halal Street: Malaysia and Globalization of Islamic Finance" *The Journal of Asian Studies* 72(4): 831-848.

Daromir, Rudnyckj. 2014. "Economy in Practice: Islamic Finance and Problem of Market Reason." *American Ethnologist* 41(1): 110-127.

Class Activities:

- Lecture on Islamic Finance and its relation to Western finance
- Class Discussion on assigned readings
- Workshop for the final essay assignment (I will talk to each of you individually about your research questions).

Class 14 (June 30: Last Class): Bitcoin

As our last discussion topic, we discuss Bitcoin, which is mysterious yet one of the most major cryptocurrencies in the world. We will get ourselves familiar with the concept of bitcoin in relation to other kinds of money, the political ideologies behind it, and discuss the notion of "decentralization". At the beginning of class, I will offer a lecture on the basics of bitcoin and introduce my ethnographic research on a local bitcoin project in El Zonte, El Salvador. Economists claim that bitcoin cannot be money simply because of volatility, but as an ethnographer, I will show a more complex, nuanced picture of the bitcoin-based financial inclusion project in rural El Salvador.

Required Readings:

Swartz, Lana. 2018. "What Was Bitcoin, What Will It Be? The Techno-economic Imaginaries of a New Money Technology." *Cultural Studies* 32(4): 623-50.

Calvão, Filipe. 2019. "Crypto-Miners: Digital Labor and the Power of Blockchain Technology." *Economic Anthropology* 6(1): 123-34.

Class Activities:

- Lecture on social science of cryptocurrency
- Presentation of my research
- Discussion on assigned readings and crypto-finance
- Course wrap-up/final check-in for the essay assignment

Final Paper Assignment

The final paper assignment will ask you to construct your own research question about digital technologies or financial activities and use anthropological accounts to analyze your topic. You can choose a wide range of topics from Tiktok to AI to cryptocurrency if there is any economic activity in those digital and financial platforms that interest you. In the workshop of Class 12, I will share some tips to make research questions and talk to each of you about your research question and suggest some readings which you can use for your topic besides required texts. In class 13, I will talk to each of you about your research question. The final paper assignment is due July 7, so you have one week to write a final essay.