ECONOMY, CULTURE AND POWER

What is the economy? The answer today is mostly markets, choice, investment, and profit. Yet, this seemingly universal definition tells us more about the power of capitalism and contemporary economics than the specific, diverse, and complex relations between economy and society, markets and culture, power and domination. This course enables students to understand, go beyond, and critique such narrow visions of the economy through an introduction to economic anthropology. Based on the classical foundations from Marcel Mauss, Karl Marx, to Karl Polanyi, the anthropological perspective on economy focuses on how people in different places produce, circulate, and consume things to make a living. This living is not just a pay check, it is everything, it is society, family, intimacy, struggle, belonging, and alienation.

This course provides an overview of these key concepts and debates across time and space by focusing on things, how they hold value, how they become commodities, and how commodification turns labour, land, or money into things. Each week of this course introduces a different thing or commodity from shells, cotton, fashion designs, cocktails, land, mobile money, credit, water, sugar, papayas, mushrooms, to life itself. Through things, this course provides a different, critical perspective on contemporary issues of economy, culture, and power from financialization, branding, global commodity chains, work, outsourcing, uneven development, to environmental degradation, and neoliberalism.

Learning Outcomes:

Students taking this course will:

1) learn to see the cultural nature of the economy and of power;
2) be able to understand how economic behavior that seems irrational in market capitalist contexts can make sense in other cultural contexts;
3) learn how to combine universalizing theories and ethnographic understanding of particular cultures;
4) understand the way the culture of capitalism shapes the way we see the world and affects our behavior;
5) be aware of the history of capitalism, consumerism, globalization, neoliberalism, commodification, branding, the changing forms of work and craft, and see how they are related to each other.

Readings:
This course is based on primary texts (articles, book chapters) to access the depth and complexity of economic anthropological thought, theory, and ethnography. All required readings will be available as PDF on blackboard.

I have included two helpful economic anthropology readers (Hann/Hart + Wilk/Cliggert) in the introduction/first class session (and some chapters in the recommended readings). These readers provide an introduction to the field of economic anthropology, but they are not required to be purchased for this course.

Course Format:
This course is conducted in lecture and tutorial format. The lecture will discuss and introduce the required readings, but it will not give a detailed summary of the readings. It is therefore essential that you do the required readings before class and come prepared with questions and comments. There will be no transcript of the lecture provided afterwards, so please take notes. The lecture will be interactive with room for your questions and discussion. The tutorial is an extension of the lecture based on the student’s needs and interest. The tutorial is further meant to facilitate questions of clarification of concepts and to engage more in-depth with the specific readings.

You are expected to come to all lectures and tutorials. While you will not be graded on in-class participation, I strongly encourage you to ask questions and participate in discussion. You are also welcome to e-mail me questions or comments before class if you feel uncomfortable in this
format. In case you have to miss class, please also e-mail me beforehand. It is your responsibility to obtain notes from your fellow students about the missed sessions.

**Requirements and Assessment:**

The following are the required assignments that will be graded.

1. **Out-Of-Class Assignments (20 %):** To help you apply the topics and readings to contemporary problems and issues, you will have to finish **two** out-of-class assignments and may be asked to present and discuss them during class. For these assignments you have to find sources that can be understood or investigated through the specific concepts, theories or problems discussed in the readings of that week. You are free in your selection. Sources could be a newspaper article, ‘you-tube’ clip, blogpost, movie, advertisement, song, etc. The only restriction is that the source you chose has to be in English and available to present during class (online link or PDF). As part of this assignment you will have to write a short accompanying note, in which you explain why the source you chose is related to the class readings of the week, what anthropological questions or problems it raises, or answers it provides. This note should be about 200 words. Please post this note and the source before the class session (**on Tuesday** on blackboard. Please be prepared to present and discuss your idea and thoughts during the lecture or tutorial (not more than 5 minutes). Your ‘Out-Of-Class’ assignment has to be for the **reading of the specific class session**, it can not be for previous or upcoming weeks! You will have to submit two of these assignments for the semester. You can choose which week, but **one has to be presented before and after the Midterm Exam.** Please note that you will have to submit your own assignment, no group work!

2. **Midterm Paper (40 %):** The Midterm-Exam is a paper discussing the readings and lectures of the first half of the course (including week 7). The questions will be handed to you in class (**8th** week: March 11th). The paper should discuss two main approaches of economic anthropology (i.e. Mauss, Polanyi, Marx). Your essay should answer the following questions: How does each author (and how other authors use them) define and analyze economy? What are the differences between the authors’ perspectives? What are the strength and weaknesses? How could each perspective illuminate a contemporary issue of economy, culture, and power? The paper should be **7-8 pages** (double spaced, Times New Roman 12, 1 inch margins). Please send your paper as a word-document from your CUHK e-mail account to the instructor. The deadline for the instructor to receive the e-mail is **Tuesday, March 17th by midnight.** Please label the document: “LastName_FirstName_Midterm.”

3. **Final Exam (40 %):** The Final Exam consists of three questions connecting the contemporary themes explored throughout the class to the foundational theories of economic anthropology discussed in the midterm paper. The questions will be handed to you in the last class (**15th** week: April 29th). Each question will address at least two specific themes and sets of readings from the course (craft and labour, consumption and power, debt and finance, etc.). The paper should be **9-10 pages** long (double spaced,
A successful exam answer will show: 1.) That you can critically identify important debates of economic anthropology and situate your answers within them; 2.) That you can make informed and independent connections between the different approaches and across the discussed themes of economic anthropology on the basis of the required readings. The final exam is due on **Wednesday, May 13th by midnight** via e-mail. Please send your paper as a word-document from your CUHK e-mail account to the instructor. Please label the document: “LastName_FirstName_FinalExam”.

**VeriGuide requirements:** Students are required by university policy to submit all exam papers to VeriGuide (https://academic.veriguide.org/academic/login_CUHK.jspx). An exam (midterm and final) assignment without a signed declaration from VeriGuide will not be graded.

**Grade Descriptors:**

A: Outstanding performance on all learning outcomes.
A-: Generally outstanding performance on all (or almost all) learning outcomes.
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.
C: Satisfactory performance on the majority of learning outcomes, possibly with a few weaknesses.
D: Barely satisfactory performance on a number of learning outcomes.
F: Unsatisfactory performance on a number of learning outcomes, OR failure to meet specified assessment requirements.

**Policies and Support:**

- **Educational Technology:** This class relies on the use of Blackboard. All required class readings, the out-of-class assignment submissions, as well as announcements will be done through it. Note that it uses the email address assigned to you by the University, so it is your responsibility to have an electronic mail forwarded to your main email address.
- **Respectful Conduct and Discussion Rules:** We will discuss many interesting and important topics. While I encourage thoughtful, engaged, and controversial discussion, I expect you to be polite and respectful of your classmates’ opinions, limit your statements
to academic (not emotional) arguments, and not use offensive language or judgmental statements. Please give each other time to talk, do not interrupt, and most importantly listen to each other.

• **Late Submission:** Late submission will suffer a fraction of a grade per day. For example, an A will become an A-.

• **Academic Honesty and Plagiarism:** Academic honesty is crucial and plagiarism is a serious offense. The university has recently updated its policies on Academic Integrity and the penalties for plagiarism and cheating:
  

• **Technology Use:** While technology is an important tool to aid learning, please be respectful and do not distract yourself and your fellow students. **Students are only allowed to use their tablets or laptops in class to take notes.** Please do not use your devices for non-class related activities (e-mail, social media, etc.) **Mobile phones must be turned on silent (not vibrate) and kept in your bags.**

• **Independent Learning Center:** If you need help with communication and learning skills, the University has a great resource for you. You can schedule a consultation or attend workshops on various strategies for improving learning outcomes [https://www.ilc.cuhk.edu.hk/EN/mission.aspx](https://www.ilc.cuhk.edu.hk/EN/mission.aspx)

• **Special Accommodation:** If you need special accommodations or classroom modifications, you need to notify both me and the University’s Wellness and Counseling Center ([https://www2.osa.cuhk.edu.hk/disability/en-GB](https://www2.osa.cuhk.edu.hk/disability/en-GB)) no later than the third week of class.
Part I: Introduction and Foundations

Week 1 (Jan 8): Introduction and Overview


Week 2 (Jan 15): Gifts, Circulation, and Value


Recommended Readings:


Week 3 (Jan 22): Markets and Economy


Recommended Readings:


+++ Week 4 (Jan 29): No class due to Lunar New Year vacation+++  
+++ Feb 5 + Feb 12: Cancelled+++  

Part II: Fictitious Commodities –Labor, Land, Money

Week 5 (Feb 19): Labor, Time, and Alienation


Recommended Readings:


Week 6 (Feb 26): Labor and Craft


Recommended Readings:


Week 7 (March 4): Land and Property


Recommended Readings:


Week 8 (March 11): Money, Mobile Money, and Social Relations


+++ *Handing out questions for midterm exam paper (due on March 17th) +++

**Recommended Readings:**


**Week 9 (March 18): Finance and Crisis**

**In Class Movie:** The Big Short (selections)

No readings because of midterm exam due before class on March 17th !!!

**Week 10 (March 25): Finance and Debt**


**Listen:** David Graeber, “What is Debt?”: [http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b054420y](http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b054420y)

**Recommended Readings:**


Part III: Things, Commodities, and Commodification

Week 11 (April 1): Things and Commodities


Recommended Readings:

Week 12 (April 8): Commodity Chains and Power


Recommended Readings:


Week 13 (April 15): Branding and the Public Good


Recommended Readings:

**Week 14 (April 22): Commodities, Environment, and the Anthropocene**


Recommended Readings:


**Week 15 (April 29): The Economization of Life + Conclusion**


**In Class Movie: Moneyball (beginning sequences)**

+++ Final discussion + handing out questions for final exam paper (due May 13)+++