

ANTH 5550
Term 1, 2025/26
Tuesday: 6:30 – 9:15 PM
Venue: TBA

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Office Hours: By Appointment

Working Cultures – Understanding Work in the 21st Century

We all work, sooner or later. Work is one of those social activities that makes us human. But how does work work? When is work a gig, a job, a career, a duty or a calling? What makes us employees, freelancers, slaves, serfs, apprentices, masters, experts, or amateurs? Why is work for some pointless and for others deeply fulfilling? What makes work collaborative or exploitative? This course explores these questions through different ethnographies of work in the 21st century that take place around the world.

Focusing on working cultures, this course offers an anthropological perspective to understand how work is a matter of place, time, power, and meanings; how current social, technological, and cultural transformations of work can be understood across places, in their historic continuities and disruptions. We will read about hotel and sex workers in California, factory workers in Mexico, bottle service ‘girls’ in the global party circuit, on-demand painters in China, game designers online, Sushi chefs in Tokyo, migrant construction labor in Qatar, taxi drivers in New York and Uber drivers in India, domestic workers in Hong Kong, and Indian software coders in Berlin.

The course is structured to explore, discuss, and rethink a key concept in the anthropology of work each week: Class, time, race, gender, value, craft, ownership, creativity, autonomy, discipline, etc. By learning through contemporary ethnographies of different places and circumstances, students will gain the tools to connect observation, analysis, writing and theory to explore work in familiar or unexpected forms, as well as in different organizational settings from the office, into the home and onto social media platforms.

Learning Objectives:

By the end of this course, students will be able to:

- Understand work’s cultural diversity as well as its more general structures and patterns.

- Know different anthropological perspectives of work and be able to use them in different contexts.
- Comprehend and be able to apply the different theories explaining transforming or stable relations, organizations, and processes of work.
- Be able to use anthropological modes of understanding, to think critically and perceptively about one's society and the world.
- Read ethnography critically
- Understand how theory is used in doing ethnography and writing ethnography
- Explore ethnographic issues involved in his or her own fieldwork

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. All required readings will be made available as PDFs on Blackboard. 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 interests. The tutorial will also facilitate the preparation for the final project/paper.

Physical presence in all lectures and tutorials is a basic requirement for this course. Excused absences are generally only permitted with a medical doctor's note or in case of a personal emergency. If you have to miss class, please e-mail me beforehand. It is your responsibility to obtain notes from your fellow students about the missed sessions. There will be no transcript of the lecture or tutorial provided afterwards, so please take notes.

Requirements and Assessment:

The following are the required assignments that will be graded.

1. **Observation Assignment and Participation (20 %):** You are expected to do the readings and come to all lectures and tutorials. I strongly encourage you to ask questions and participate in discussion. **I encourage you to share thoughts, questions, and critiques of the readings in the discussion forum on blackboard before class.** You are also welcome to e-mail me questions or comments before or after class.

To help you engage with ethnography as a genre beyond critically reading them, you will have to do **one** observation assignment before the midterm! You need to observe what happens in a place of work of your choice. You need to spend at least one hour there, observe and take notes about what happens (interactions, processes, practices). Afterwards you need to write a short, descriptive account about what you saw (500 – 1000 words) and answer: How is what you observed work? You have to post your assignment in the discussion section on blackboard **the day before the lecture of week 6 (Oct 8th)**, we will discuss it in our tutorials afterwards.

2. **Midterm Exam (30 %)**: The Midterm-Exam will consist of one question discussing the readings and lectures of the first half of the course (including week 7). The questions will be handed to you in class (6th week: Oct 9th). The total exam length is 1000 – 1500 words (excluding references) due on **Wednesday, Oct 14th before midnight**. The exam needs to be submitted in the assignments on blackboard together with a signed veriguide statement.

Topic-Centered Final Essay (50 %): This course highlights different forms of work as a crucial activity of humans and foundational for their societies. We have discussed many different issues of work reaching from exploitation to freedom, equality to injustice, precarity to opportunity, from discipline to autonomy. We have discussed how work-time, -places, and -technologies are cultural. Inspired by these focuses, this assignment asks you to write a critical essay of a contemporary issue in ‘working cultures’. You are encouraged to engage with news (from world news to online content), books, films, podcasts, etc. You will need to submit an outline of your essay topic/idea by week 8 (March 23rd) on blackboard. The final essay should be between 1800 – 2500 words (excluding references). The Final Essay is due on **Wednesday, December 12th**. The essay needs to be submitted in the assignments on blackboard together with a signed veriguide statement.

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:

- **Technology Use:** 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. Mobile phones must be turned on silent (not vibrate).
- **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:
http://www.cuhk.edu.hk/policy/academichonesty/Eng_hm_files_%282013-14%29/p06.htm. You are required to cite properly (guidelines: <http://www.cuhk.edu.hk/ant/tstyle.doc> and http://www.ilc.cuhk.edu.hk/english/resource/referencing_avoidingplagiarism1.pdf) to avoid plagiarism. Any use of AI-based writing programs (such as ChatGPT) is not allowed and is considered plagiarism. Please do not hesitate to talk to me and ask questions about this.
- **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>
- **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>) no later than the third week of class.

Part I: Issues of Work Reloaded

Week 1 (Sep 4): What is Work?

Introduction to course content. No readings.

Week 2 (Sep 11): Working Intersectional I: Gender and Class in the Global Factory

Salzinger, Leslie. 2003. "Chapter 1: Ways of Seeing", "Chapter 4: Bringing Fantasies to Life: Panoptimex" + "Chapter 5: Re-formulating the 'Traditional Mexican Woman': Particimex". In: *Genders in Production: Making Workers in Mexico's Global Factories*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Week 3 (Sep 18): Working Intersectional II: Race and Class in Migration

Amrute, Sareeta. 2016. "Introduction: Cognitive Bodies, Cognitive Work (until p. 18)", "Chapter 2: The Postracial Office [selections]" + "Chapter 3: Proprietary Freedoms in an IT Office". In: *Encoding Race, Encoding Class. Indian IT Workers in Berlin*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Week 4 (Sep 25): Working Time

Sheldon, Zachary. 2021. "Managing the Humanitarian Workplace: Capitalist Social Time and Iraqi Refugees in the United States." In: *Anthropology of Work Review* 42 (1): 35 – 46.
Occhiuto, Nicolas. 2017. "Investing in Independent Contract Work: The Significance of Schedule Control for Taxi Drivers". In: *Work and Occupations* 44(3): 268 - 295

Week 5 (Oct 2): Working Place and Space

Patel, Reena. 2010. "Introduction (until p. 18)", "Chapter 4: Traveling at Night" + "Chapter 5: Fast Money, Family Survival, and the Consumer Class". In: *Working the Night Shift: Women in India's Call Center Industry*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Week 6 (Oct 9): Working Self

Bernstein, Elizabeth. 2007. "Chapter 4: The Privatization of Public Women". In: *Temporarily Yours – Intimacy, Authenticity, and the Commerce of Sex*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Day, Sophie. 2010. "Ethics Between Public and Private: Sex Workers' Relationships in London," in M. Lambek (ed.), *Ordinary Ethics: Anthropology, Language, and Action*. NY: Fordham University Press: 292-309.

+++ Handing out questions for midterm exam paper (due on Oct 14th by midnight) +++

Part II: Thinking Work Differently

Week 7 (Oct 16): Working Platforms

Ettarfi, Khaoula. 2024. "Professionalization from Above in Domestic Work: Accessing Work on Marketplace Platforms". In: *Critical Sociology*. Pp. 1-15.

Schwartz, David. 2018. "Embedded in the Crowd: Creative Freelancers, Crowdsourced Work, and Occupational Community". In: *Work and Occupations* 45 (3). Pp. 255-282.

Week 8 (Oct 23): Working Service

Constable, Nicole. 2017. "Chapter 5: Household Rules and Relations." In: *Maid to Order in Hong Kong: Stories of Migrant Workers*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Sherman, Rachel. 2007. "Chapter 2: Managing Autonomy." In: *Class Acts – Service and Inequality in Luxury Hotels*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

+ submit short proposal (less than 300 words) for final project or essay (before class)

Week 9 (Oct 30): Working Creative

Wong, Winnie. 2014. "Introduction: After the Copy (until p. 22)" + "Chapter 4: Step 18: 'Sign Vincent'" [selections]. In: *Van Gogh on Demand - China and the Readymade*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Week 10 (Nov 6): Working Skill

Iskander, Natasha. 2021. "Chapter 3: How Skill is Embodied ...". In: *Does Skill Make Us Human? Migrant Workers in 21st Century Qatar and Beyond*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Week 11 (Nov 13): Working for Free?

Mears, Ashley. 2020. "Chapter 3: The Potlach" + "Chapter 4: Trafficking at Model Camp". In: *Very Important People – Status and Beauty in the Global Party Circuit*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Week 12 (Nov 20): Working Bullshit or Working Meaningful?

Chen, Carolyn. 2022. "Introduction". >Work >Pray >Code. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Graeber, David. 2018. "Chapter 1: What is a Bullshit Job" *Bullshit Jobs – A Theory*. London: Penguin Books.

Week 13 (Nov 27): Working Utopia (Dystopia)

Finkelstein, Maura. 2025. "Work Cannot Save Us but Let's Still Try: Labor, Utopias, and Futurity at an Equine Therapy Farm". In: *Anthropology of Work Review* (online first).

Graeber, David. 2021. *After the Pandemic, We Can't Go Back to Sleep*. <https://jacobin.com/2021/03/david-graeber-posthumous-essay-pandemic>

Graeber, David. 2014. *Caring too much. That's the curse of the working classes*. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/mar/26/caring-curse-working-class-austerity-solidarity-scurge>

+++ Final Project/Essay due on Dec 12th (by midnight) +++