

ANTH 4102

The anthropology of mind and experience

A guide to the seminar



Robert Smithson, *Spiral Jetty* (Great Salt Lake, Utah), 1970 (Smithson 1970).

Seminar coordinator

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Coordinator's office hours

Mondays and Tuesdays, 10 to 11 a.m. in SSB 410 (A02)

About this guide

This is a guide to *ANTH 4102: The anthropology of mind and experience*, a core seminar on cultural theories of meaning in the anthropology honours program. This class will have a substantially different focus than what is described in the Handbook. You should use this guide as a reference point on the class. The official unit outline prepared by the University describes the official policies on attendance, late work, grading, and other matters that we will follow in this class. This guide is meant to explain what we will do in this class, and what you can expect to get out of the class and your study of cultural theory. If you have any questions about the class, the class policies, the assignments, or about anthropology in general, please feel free to talk to Ryan or see him in office hours. (Last updated February 10, 2019.)



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The weekly plan

| Week | Dates | Readings and topics |
|------|-------------|--|
| 1 | February 26 | Introduction to the class. Read Sahlins (2009). |
| 2 | March 5 | Morgan and Boas on history. Read Morgan (1877), chapter 1 and Boas ([1920] 2006). |
| 3 | March 12 | The Boasian school of anthropology. Read Benedict ([1934] 1946), chapters 1–2 and Whorf (2012). |
| 4 | March 19 | Levi-Strauss, the linguistic turn, and structuralism. Read Hanks (1996), chapter 1 and Lévi-Strauss ([1949] 1969), chapters 1–6. (Morgan 1871, preface and chapter 1 is useful as background.) |
| 5 | March 26 | Elementary structures. Continue reading Lévi-Strauss ([1949] 1969), chapters 1–6. |
| 6 | April 2 | British structuralism. Read Leach (1958), Douglas ([1966] 2005), chapters 1–2, and Douglas ([1970] 2004), introduction and chapters 1–2. See also Douglas (2006a) and Douglas (2006b) for background. |
| 7 | April 9 | Structures of values. Read Dumont ([1970] 1980), pp. 1–66 (introduction, chapter 1 and opening of chapter 2), pp. 239–245 (postface). |
| 8 | April 16 | Holism and hierarchy. Continue reading Dumont ([1970] 1980). |
| 0 | April 19–26 | Midterm break. |
| 9 | April 30 | A cultural account of anthropological theory. Read Schneider (1968). |
| 10 | May 7 | Questioning structuralist anthropology's ontological dualism. Read Marriott (1976), Wagner (1975), chapters 1–3, Strathern (1992), introduction and chapter 1. |
| 11 | May 14 | Flattening ontological dualism. Read Strathern (1996). |
| 12 | May 21 | An ontological anthropology? Read Viveiros de Castro (1998) and Viveiros de Castro (2004). |
| 13 | May 28 | Community in multiple dimensions. Read Sahlins (2012). |
| 14 | June 3 | Reading period begins |

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Assessments at-a-glance

| Assessment | Length | Worth | Due |
|----------------------------|---------------|-------|-------------------------------|
| Weekly writing assignments | 100–200 words | 10% | Before class starting Week 2. |
| First essay | 1500 words | 30% | April 18 at 4:00 p.m. |
| Second essay | 2500 words | 40% | May 31 at noon. |
| In-class presentation | 500 words | 10% | As assigned. |
| Seminar participation | n.a. | 10% | Weekly in tutorial. |

About this seminar

Welcome to *The anthropology of mind and experience*, a seminar covering several important cultural theories of meaning. This class is one of two required coursework units for anthropology honours students. In many respects, this class and *Theorising the state in everyday life* are meant to lay the foundation for your independent research in anthropology as honours students and, if you so choose, as doctoral students. I have based this class on my own disciplinary training in anthropology, and so it probably reflects both the schools of thought to which I was exposed as a student and my interests. Yet this selection of topics is only meant to be a starting point. At this stage of your education, you have the responsibility to develop your own perspective on anthropology as a discipline, and to learn as much as you can about the history of debates within the field. As you develop as anthropologists, you will have to state for yourself where you fit within these debates.

Anthropology is arguably the most general of the social sciences. It claims as its intellectual domain everything that pertains to human life, thought, and experience. As a part of this, it has also always argued that diversity is a defining characteristic of humanity. There is no one single way of being human, and if there is any essence to humans it is their plasticity. This is a paradox. Anthropological inquiry often begins with a critique of universal theories of psychology and behavior, and yet has an ambition to make universal claims of its own. Cultural anthropology is founded on a doctrine of cultural relativism, yet this principle that explanation of cultural variations must be seen from within cultures as systems is itself predicated on a universal theory of humans as *zōon koinonikon* (communal, gregarious, social animals).

What this means is that anthropology has always sat exactly at the boundary between nature and culture. No matter which school or paradigm happens to be in vogue, every kind of inquiry in anthropol-

ogy will exhibit two opposed tendencies. On the one hand, it will have the desire for finding particular explanations of particular cases by placing them in a larger context. On the other hand, it will also the goal of finding a general theory about the nature of the context which we believe is necessary to understand the particular. This seminar will explore how different scholars have approached the nature–culture boundary in two dimensions: universal–particular and innate–acquired.

In recent years, the paradoxical nature of anthropological inquiry has been compounded. No longer can one assume that any human community exists in isolation from others, and that all people participate in and are influenced by many different kinds of social forces at many different levels. This also applies equally to anthropologists as observers. It is already axiomatic that any anthropologist is a product of her own culture, and thus must make her own observations of difference relative to her own background. Now we recognize that anthropologists and the people they study are coeval, in the words of Johannes Fabian (1983). Although they see themselves and the world through different lenses, they are part of the same world and its history.

Therefore, anthropologists cannot assume that there are any truly detached, external positions from which to be ethnographic observers. For that reason, anthropologists have now turned to a critique of the ontological premises on which anthropology's concept of cultural difference is founded, particularly the dualism of nature and culture. They look outside of anthropology for other models, and many see anthropological knowledge as part of a feedback loop that not only connects the observer to the observed, but implicates each in the lives and experiences of the other. This new paradox is what we will examine the second half of the class. By the end of the semester, you will be versed in some

of the most profound controversies in the history of anthropology, and be able to see the connections among the different positions taken by past scholars.

Like many classes at the postgraduate level, this class is organized as a seminar, and thus centers on an open discussion among students. I provide guidance to the discussion. I will not, however, give any lectures in this class.¹ Each week we will come together to help each other understand a set of readings better. Each week's readings represent the work of one important scholar whose ideas have influenced the development of anthropology. Our job in this class is to enter into this kind of discussion, and thus become part of this scholarly community ourselves. Every week, we will know if we have done a good job if:

- (1) students have done most of the talking, and
- (2) everyone in the class has had a chance to ask questions and contribute their ideas.

Your participation in discussion is, in that sense, something you do for your fellow students. By offering your views, especially to people who disagree with you, you help them to reflect critically on their own reasoning. Likewise, when you seek out the perspectives of other people, you are able to become aware of your own thought processes. This is ultimately what you will take away from this class: an understanding of your own perspective, rather than familiarity with the ideas of major theories.

Many students are unfamiliar or uncomfortable with speaking in public, or with participating in a class discussion. Discussion is important to this class—and it is a part of your grade—but I am not assuming that it will come easy to everyone. What I expect is that each person try their best, and keep trying. What you can expect from me and from your fellow students is

¹And since there are no lectures, there are also no lecture recordings for this class either.

that we will all help make the class comfortable and welcoming to everyone's participation. One way we can achieve this is by using various formats for class discussion, including small work groups, discussion with a partner, and in-class writing. If your active verbal class participation is not possible, you can also talk to me about other ways you can participate in class.

To help each student prepare for their participation in class discussion, each week you will submit a short reflection on an open question about the week's topic. While each of these are graded, they are not meant to be tests and the questions do not have a single right answer. You receive points for doing a good, thorough job of reflecting on your own ideas and elaborating them in

a paragraph or two. If you write in complete sentences and show that you have put some effort into developing your thinking (for example, by citing relevant information in the week's reading and including a correct reference), you will be doing well. You have space to go out on a limb and say something that you are not entirely sure about.

To make sure that everyone has a chance to take the floor, students will take turns leading the discussion each week. Each student will sign up to get the ball rolling on the discussion with a five-minute presentation, and then ask questions for the class to discuss for the first part of class. Students do not have to prepare a lengthy presentation or act as a lecturer. A good presentation will simply consist of one's own views of

what is important, interesting, and worthy of discussion in a particular reading. The purpose of the presentation is to prepare the ground for discussion and the discovery of different points of view.

Our discussions in class will also help prepare you to develop arguments about cultural theory and its application to ethnographic analysis. Your first major assignment is an essay of 1500 words in which you compare two of the major theories of culture we have read. This will be due before the midsemester break. Your other major assignment is to write an essay discussing the connections between your thesis topic and the history of debates about nature and culture. This will be due at the end of the semester.



Premabhai Hall in Ahmedabad, Gujarat. Designed by Balkrishna Doshi in 1956 (see "Balkrishna Doshi" 2018).

Useful links

USYD anthropology department
<http://sydney.edu.au/arts/anthropology>

Information on our department, including staff contacts, major requirements, honours information, new classes, and events.

USYD Canvas LMS portal
<http://canvas.sydney.edu.au>

Gateway to your class Canvas sites, including this class (where you will submit all of your work).

Ryan Schram's Anthrocylopaedia
<http://anthro.rschram.org>

Ryan's site for teaching resources, notes on anthropology, and outlines for his lectures in ANTH 1002.

USYD Faculty of Arts student programs
http://sydney.edu.au/arts/student_programs

Information on advice and mentoring for undergraduate students.

Sapiens
<http://sapiens.org>

A web magazine of anthropology for a general audience, produced by the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research.

Cultural Anthropology
<https://culanth.org/>

The web site of a leading journal of cultural anthropology, including several interesting multimedia supplements, a blog, and links to social media feeds.

Durrie Bouscaren on Twitter
<https://twitter.com/durrieb>

Anthropology meets journalism! US National Public Radio journalist who has used a major fellowship to report on life in Papua New Guinea. Check out her Twitter for her latest stories and her ethnographically-minded colleagues' "long-listens" on underreported, complex topics.



Lee George Quinones, *Howard the Duck*, 1988 (Quinones 1988).