

ANTH 3601

# Contemporary theory and anthropology

A guide to the seminar



Alice Neel, *Investigation of Poverty at the Russel Sage Foundation*, 1933 (Neel 1933).

**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 3601: Contemporary theory and anthropology*, a third-year (and pre-honours) seminar on recent debates in anthropology. This class will have a substantially different focus than what is described in the Handbook, although still serves the same function as a broad inquiry into the nature of anthropology as a discipline and its contributions to the social sciences. 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 9, 2018.)



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# The weekly plan

Week	Dates	Readings and topics
1	February 24	<b>Introduction to the class.</b> Read Wade (2010a) and Wade (2010b)
2	March 3	<b>Symbolic anthropology.</b> Read Geertz (1973), chapters 1–2.
3	March 10	<b>The articulation of local and global scales.</b> Read Wolf (1982), introduction and chapter 6. (Ortner 1984 is recommended as background.)
4	March 17	<b>The structure of the conjuncture.</b> Read Sahlins (1981).
5	March 24	<b>Structure and history.</b> Continue reading Sahlins (1981).
6	March 31	<b>Historical anthropology.</b> Read Comaroff (1987) and Comaroff and Comaroff (1989). (Comaroff and Comaroff 1990 is recommended.)
7	April 7	<b>Beyond the horizon.</b> Read Malkki (1992), Gupta and Ferguson (1992), and Ferguson and Gupta (2002).
8	April 14	<b>Anthropology for a global era.</b> Read Trouillot ([2003] 2016), chapters 1 and 5.
0	April 19–26	<b>Midterm break.</b>
9	April 28	<b>Conjunctures revisited.</b> Read Friedman (1994), Englund and Leach (2000), and Bashkow (2004; and see also Bashkow 2000).
10	May 5	<b>Postcapitalist perspectives on the global order.</b> Read Tsing (2009), Gibson-Graham (2014), and Bear et al. (2015). (Elyachar 2010 is recommended.)
11	May 12	<b>An anthropology of ethical agency.</b> Read Laidlaw (2002) and Lambek (2010).
12	May 19	<b>Anthropology after global capitalism.</b> Read Robbins (2013a), Robbins (2013b), and Ortner (2016).
13	May 26	<b>The possibility of flourishing: New research on HIV-positive women in Papua New Guinea.</b> Read Wardlow (2017) and Wardlow (2018).
14	June 2	<b>Reading period.</b>

## Assessments at-a-glance

Assessment	Length	Worth	Due
Weekly writing assignments	100–200 words	15%	Before class starting Week 2.
Debate brief	1500 words	25%	April 18 at 4:00 p.m.
Essay	3000 words	40%	June 7 at noon.
In-class presentation	500 words	10%	As assigned.
Seminar participation	n.a.	10%	Weekly in seminar.

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# About this seminar

Welcome to *Contemporary theory and anthropology*, a senior seminar that surveys the present state of cultural anthropology. This class was developed to serve as a required capstone to an anthropology major, and is a requirement for honours. It is now an in-depth exploration of several current debates within the field about the nature of anthropology, and its main goal is to help you discover what you believe is valuable in anthropology, and what defines it as a discipline. As anthropology majors, you are all becoming acquainted with anthropology as a discipline and a way of thinking. In this class, we talk explicitly about what that means and where each of us stands as thinkers within the discipline of anthropology.

The organization of scholarly inquiry into disciplines is more than simple specialization. What people in one discipline study—in anthropology, for example, human societies, social behavior, ways of life, and ways of thinking—might also be studied by many other disciplines. Scholars working within one discipline, however, speak in a common language and participate in a conversation among themselves about a shared set of questions. They approach their object of study with a particular perspective which is informed by the history of debates within the field on these shared questions. Their disciplinary perspective is moreover linked to a particular methodology which leads them to collect certain kinds of empirical information. In anthropology in particular, disciplinary knowledge is also strongly linked to the practice of writing ethnography as a distinctive genre of description, analysis, and interpretation. But in the end disciplines are all branches of the same single body of knowledge, and disciplines each make distinct yet also complementary contributions to larger debates across many fields.

This division of labor among disciplines is a product of the institutional and social history of scholarship, and in some ways could be said to be a historical accident. As we will discuss in this class, there is nothing inherent or necessary about the boundaries

of disciplinary fields. For instance, the discipline of ethnology is found in many European universities but not in American universities, which might instead have departments of anthropology, sociology, and folklore. Anthropologists in Western academic institutions tend to research so-called foreign cultures (usually within postcolonial societies), but when anthropology has established itself within China and Brazil, for instance, it has been practiced as a study of minority and indigenous cultures within these societies. The disciplinarity of knowledge is always changing depending on the larger context. In order to contribute to greater understanding on the questions that really matter, we have to be aware of the limits of a discipline and understand how particular ways of seeing relate to other perspectives.

As a discipline, anthropology has historically been very eclectic. Anthropologists are more willing to cross boundaries between fields and draw on perspectives outside of the canons of anthropology. Marshall Sahlins, Jean Comaroff, and John Comaroff, for example, are equally at home in both anthropology and history (and indeed John Comaroff is a historian by training). Mary Douglas, whose work we will not read in this class, began her career as a social anthropologist who studied African societies, but today is one of the most widely read cultural sociologists and probably best known for her work on bureaucracy as a social form. Perhaps for that reason, then, identifying anthropology as a discipline is very tricky and possibly futile. It is always been an open question what counts as anthropological knowledge (and anthropologists like it that way).

This creates a big problem for us as anthropologists: who cares about anthropology? If there aren't really any distinctive perspectives that define anthropological knowledge, why should anyone listen to anthropologists? Anthropology's eclecticism and its lack of a single, clearly defined paradigm gives practitioners in the field a great deal of freedom, but it comes with the obligation to be able to defend one's perspective and its rele-

vance to other fields and to scholars at large. I believe that this is actually a strength of anthropology. Anthropologists aren't allowed to take anything for granted about how they choose to see the world, and so we also have the sharpest and most critical insights into the nature of knowledge. We exist to keep other disciplines on their toes.

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What this means for us, though, is that we have a lot to discuss, and each of you, as students of anthropology can each make your own contribution to everyone's understanding of what is valuable about anthropology as a discipline. There are no right answers in this class. Each one of you has as your job to develop your own relationship to anthropology and its history, and to say why you adopt your stance on anthropology. For that reason, this class is organized as a seminar in which each person takes a turn leading the discussion. 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.

I will not give any lectures in this class, although I can take the floor and give a brief overview of background information relevant to understanding a particular topic or reading.<sup>1</sup> My job in the seminar is to facilitate an open discussion in which everyone makes a contribution and is heard. Each week we will come together to help each other understand a set of

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

readings better. Each week's readings represent the work of one important scholar who is making a contribution to a debate about how to answer deep questions about the nature of human societies and their diversity. Our job is to find out all the different ways that these ideas can be interpreted, and to continue the debate that we will see among the authors. This means we all have to contribute something to the discussion each week, so that we discover as many different perspectives as possible.

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 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.

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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 the nature of anthropology. Your first major assignment is an essay of 1500 words in which you take a side in one of the central debates in cultural anthropology of the last 50 years. This will be due before the midsemester break. Your other major assignment is to write an essay discussing the work of one of the authors we have read in class. This will be due at the end of the semester.



Alice Neel, *9th Avenue El*, 1935 (Neel 1935).

# 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](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.



Life Insurance Corporation Housing in Ahmedabad, Gujarat. Designed in 1973 by Balkrishna Doshi (see "Balkrishna Doshi" 2018).