

Anth B303: History of Anthropological Theory (writing attentive)

Fall 2026 Fridays 9:00 – 12:00

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Office hours: In person, Fridays 12:00-1:00; or email to set up a Zoom appointment

This course provides a topically organized, roughly chronological survey of the development of anthropological thought from the late nineteenth century to the close of the twentieth. We will encounter major issues and debates that have historically shaped the field: the relationship between the individual and the social; societal cohesion and conflict; systems of value and exchange; human difference and cultural universals; materialist and idealist explanations; and power and the production of knowledge, among others.

Each thinker we read was working within a specific social and historical moment — often one shaped by colonialism, slavery, war, capitalism, or nation-building — and taking that context seriously is part of taking their arguments seriously. But context is only one piece of what we're after. For each theorist, we'll also ask what analytical power their ideas actually have, what methodology they propose, and what they contributed to the arguments that came after them. My hope is that you'll leave this course able to treat these thinkers as people making live, contestable arguments — not as figures to be sorted into simple categories of "right" or "wrong" by the standards of any one moment, including our own.

TEXTS

The following book is available for purchase at the Bryn Mawr College bookshop.

- Ong, Aihwa. 2010. *Spirits of Resistance and Capitalist Discipline: Factory Women in Malaysia*. 2nd ed. State University of New York Press, Albany.

All other readings will be available on Moodle.

ACCESSIBILITY

If you have a disability, whether apparent or non-apparent, please do not hesitate to contact us to discuss the ways in which we can facilitate your learning and participation in this course. While students need to arrange academic accommodations through Access Services (see below), we are committed to maintaining an inclusive learning environment beyond what is mandated by law. If during the course of the semester you find any of the course materials to be challenging (e.g., choice of font, font colors, pdfs not accessible to assistive devices, choice of topic), please let us know so we can rectify that and come up with an alternative, if needed.

Bryn Mawr College is committed to providing equal access to students with a documented disability. Students needing academic accommodations for a disability must first speak with Access Services. Students can email accessservices@brynmawr.edu to request an appointment to begin this confidential process. If eligible for accommodations as per Access Services, students should notify the professors as early in the semester as possible to share their verification form and make appropriate arrangements. Please note that accommodations are not retroactive and require advance notice to implement. More information can be obtained at the Access Services website. (<http://www.brynmawr.edu/access-services/>)

Any student who has a disability-related need to record this class must first be found eligible to do so by Access Services and must share this eligibility with us, the instructors. Class members need to be aware that this class may be audio recorded.

More information can be obtained at the respective Tri-Co Access Services websites:

- Bryn Mawr: <http://www.brynmawr.edu/access-services/>
- Haverford: <https://www.haverford.edu/access-and-disability-services/>
- Swarthmore: <https://www.swarthmore.edu/office-academic-success/welcome-to-student-disability-services>

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

Students are encouraged to discuss course content (both readings and written assignments) with their classmates. However, all written work must be completed individually and represent the individual student's thoughts and ideas. Academic dishonesty (e.g., misrepresenting someone else's work as one's own) can result in 0 for the assignment or for the course, as well as other institutional consequences in keeping with the Bryn Mawr College Honor Code (see <http://sga.blogs.brynmawr.edu/honor-board/honor-code/> and <http://sga.blogs.brynmawr.edu/honor-board/>). Students with questions or concerns about academic integrity should contact the course instructors.

Social Media: Please do your part to make the classroom a productive space for discussion, where both students and faculty can freely exchange ideas and voice opinions on a range of topics without fear of being disparaged in public or online. Do not post comments on class lecture/discussion, the professor, or other students on social media.

AI use: you should not use generative AI, LLMs, chatbots etc., for written assignments in this course, unless explicitly stated otherwise. The goals of the work assigned here are for you to develop and further hone your own skills and abilities, and not to outsource them to AI. While AI may be helpful in some contexts, your written work in this class will not be assessed relative to some hypothetical, AI-enhanced standard. Furthermore, for the most part, AI is not actually good at things you're being asked to do. Even if one were to ask it to "do research", the sources an AI generates, besides potential hallucinations, are simply those that are statistically likely to contain something to do with the prompt given, but may not actually claim what AI states they do, nor be an appropriate source material. You learn and become a scholar by doing your own reading, thinking, writing, and discussing.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS & ASSESSMENT

<u>Component</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
Participation & Attendance	25%
Short Essay	10%
"Return to Ong" writing (4 rounds)	40%
Final Paper	25%

Participation & Attendance (25%)

This is a discussion-based seminar, structured like a graduate school-level theory seminar. There is no formal lecture. You should read every assigned reading closely before coming to class. At the same time, we can do every reading closely and still miss important meanings and historical connections. Thus, this class is designed to discuss these readings and scholars intensively, seriously, and fairly, with both a critical edge and intellectual openness. No scholar is ever done learning and listening, not even a seasoned professor!

Anthropological and social theory is not a body of facts to memorize alone in your dorm room – it is an ongoing argument, and I need YOU to join it, not just observe quietly from the sidelines. So, attendance and in-class participation together account for 25% of your grade. Thus, we expect each other to show up, show up prepared, show up ready to discuss. If you are sick, have a religious observance, or an emergency, etc., please reach out to me and let me know and we'll work something out.

Talk, every one of you, every week! I don't expect polished performances; we just want to hear from you and have your contribution be part of our learning. And this is important: not knowing something is a completely appropriate thing to say out loud. For example, "I honestly don't understand what Geertz is claiming here" or "I don't get why this mattered to

anyone.” These are not weaker contributions than a confident interpretation – it is often a more useful one, because many of us in the room will be feeling the same thing.

What I strongly encourage against is any instinct to reach for a quick, confident verdict on a thinker before really sitting with what they are actually saying and claiming, and why they thought their work was important. These were/are people making live, contestable arguments and they deserve real hearing, not an up/down vote for or against whatever perspective and objective you feel most obvious right now. So, slow down, let this history ferment, feel okay to feel unsure or uneasy, and try not to judge our authors or other speakers in our class who are reading and discussing these scholars *on their own terms*, all the while doing so with the willingness to learn and grow from doing this work.

All this is exactly the kind of participation I’m looking for.

Short Essay (10%) – due October 21 by the end of the day

A 3-page essay cultivating ideas that challenged you from our readings in Weeks 2-4 (Durkheim/Mauss, Week 2; Marx, Week 3; or Race, Week 4). You have the option to focus on a single week’s reading or to draw connections across those weeks. This essay is about reading closely and thinking hard, even if your interests don’t align directly to our assigned authors.

- Oct 5: Upload to Moodle by the end of the day on Monday a full draft and bring a printed draft to class on Oct 9 for peer review. This session is peer-feedback only, as I won’t be commenting much on those drafts myself. You will be using your classmate’s reactions (with any I might make) to guide your revision.
- Oct 21: Upload a final revised version by the end of day Wednesday.

“Return to Ong Writing” (40%) – 4 due dates (10% each)

For our first meeting following Fall Break, you will have read the entirety of Aihwa Ong’s ethnography, *Spirits of Resistance and Capitalist Discipline: Factory Women in Malaysia*. Then, you will return to Ong’s book throughout the remainder of the semester – each time writing roughly one page applying that week’s theoretical framework directly to her ethnography. You will consider things like, What does this lens let you see in Ong’s material that you couldn’t see in last week’s lens? What does it force you to leave out? The four 1-page essays will be due by class time on the following days:

- Oct 30 (Materialism) – full grade
- Nov 6 (Power) – completion grade. Turn in an essay that engages seriously; I’ll be reading for effort and seriousness rather than writing detailed comments.
- Nov 20 (Gender) – full grade
- Dec 4 (Decolonization) – completion grade

Final Paper (25%) – due by 5 pm on Dec 10, uploaded to Moodle

A 5–6 page paper using one or more theoretical frameworks from this semester to build a sustained analysis of Aihwa Ong's *Spirits of Resistance and Capitalist Discipline*. This paper is the capstone of your "Return to Ong" writing across the semester — rather than a new one-page check-in, it asks you to take your strongest reading of Ong so far and develop it into a real, extended argument. You might deepen a single week's lens, put two lenses in direct tension with each other, or make a case for why one framework explains Ong's material better than the others. Whatever the shape, this paper needs a genuine thesis — not just a survey of what different theorists would say about the book.

ANTH 303 — Weekly Schedule

Note: Topics and Readings are subject to change with advanced notice

Sept 4 — *Orientation*

- No assigned reading.

Sept 11 — *Society & Cohesion*

- Émile Durkheim, "What Is a Social Fact?" (1895)
- Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, excerpts (1912)
- Marcel Mauss, *The Gift*, excerpts (1925)

Sept 18 — *Historical Materialism*

- Karl Marx, "Introduction," *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1857)
- Karl Marx, "The Fetishism of the Commodity and its Secrets," (excerpt from Ch 1 of *Capital*, Vol. 1), (1867)

Sept 25 — *Race*

- Frederick Douglass, "The Claims of the Negro, Ethnologically Considered" (1854)
- Antenor Firmin, "Monogenism and Polygenism," Preface + Ch. 4, *The Equality of the Human Races* (1885)
- Franz Boas, "On the Limits of the Comparative Method" (1896)
- Franz Boas, "Race Problems in America" (1908)
- W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Philadelphia Negro*, selections (1899)
- W.E.B. Du Bois, "Of Our Spiritual Strivings" (1903)
- Karen Fields, "Individuality and the Intellectuals: An Imaginary Conversation between W.E.B. Du Bois and Emile Durkheim" (2002)
- American Association of Physical Anthropology's "Statement on Race and Racism" (2019)

Oct 2 — *Functionalism*

- Bronisław Malinowski, "The Subject, Method, and Scope of this Inquiry" (1922)
- Bronisław Malinowski, "The Essentials of the Kula" (1922)
- A.R. Radcliffe-Brown, *Structure and Function in Primitive Society*, excerpts (1935/1940)
- E.E. Evans-Pritchard, "Witchcraft Explains Unfortunate Events," *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* (1937)
- Dell Hymes, "On Communicative Competence" (1972)

Oct 9 — *How Humans Make Meaning*

- Claude Lévi-Strauss, "Toward the Intellect"
- Claude Lévi-Strauss, "The Structural Study of Myth" (1963/1967)
- Clifford Geertz, "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture" (1973)
- Victor Turner, "Symbols in Ndembu Ritual" (1967 – read pages 19-29)
- Victor Turner, "Liminality and Communitas" (1969)
- Mary Douglas, "External Boundaries," *Purity and Danger* (1966)

— **Fall Break; students read Ong** —

Oct 23 — *Synthesis Ethnography*

- Aihwa Ong, *Spirits of Resistance and Capitalist Discipline: Factory Women in Malaysia* (1987) — complete book

Oct 30 — *Materialism*

- Leslie White, "Energy and the Evolution of Culture" (1943)
- Marvin Harris, "The Cultural Ecology of India's Sacred Cattle" (1966)
- Sidney Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*, Introduction + Chapter 4, "Power" (1985)

Nov 6 — *Power*

- Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, excerpts (1975)
- Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power" (1982)
- Pierre Bourdieu, "Structures, Habitus, Practices" (1980)
- Lynn Meskell, "The Somatization of Archaeology: Institutions, Discourses, Corporeality" (1996)

Nov 13 — *Culture & the Individual*

- Ruth Benedict, *Patterns of Culture*, selections (1934)
- Margaret Mead, *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies*, Introduction (1935)
- Edward Sapir, "The Status of Linguistics as a Science" (1929)
- Ella Deloria, *Speaking of Indians*, excerpts (1944)

Nov 20 — Gender

- Sherry Ortner, "Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?" (1973)
- Karen Sacks, "Engels Revisited: Women, the Organization of Production, and Private Property" (1973)
- Friedrich Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, Ch. 2, "The Family," excerpts (1884)
- Ifi Amadiume, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands*, selections (1987)

Dec 4 — Can Anthropology Be Decolonized?

- Edward Said, *Orientalism*, selections (1978)
- Michel-Rolph Trouillot, "Anthropology and the Savage Slot" (2003)
- Renato Rosaldo, "Grief and a Headhunter's Rage" (1989)
- Lila Abu-Lughod, "Writing Against Culture" (1991)
- Carolyn Rouse, "An Anti-Genealogical Take on US Anthropology and Disciplinary Reform: From Anti-Racism to Decolonization" (2023)