**ANTH 381, Special Topic 2: The Anthropology of Institutions**

**Fall 2020**
Mon, Wed, 4:05 - 5:25
Online, via Zoom

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1. **Course Description**

   How can one study complex bureaucratic organizations by using the methods of anthropology? This course is intended to familiarize students with the theory and practice associated with the extension of ethnographic inquiry into formal organizations, such as prisons, hospitals, corporations, NGOs (including online activists), and global multilateral organizations like the United Nations. In recent decades, institutions have become sites of some of the most innovative research in anthropology, with implications that carry over into the methods and perspectives of other social sciences and legal scholarship. It is precisely because ethnographers pay close attention to the serendipitous and ‘ordinary’ over the long term that they have been able to offer fresh insight into the essential qualities of institutions and the systems of power that these institutions have developed and embody.

   In approaching this subject matter, we will briefly cover the history of institutional ethnography and move on to questions of contemporary method, beginning with the challenge of establishing a regime of access in conditions of bureaucratic hierarchy, privileged access to online platforms, systemic secrecy, and control of knowledge. We will read and discuss ethnographic cases studies that describe the methodological challenges posed by various kinds of bureaucratic entity and the distinct ethnographic insights that have been the reward for addressing them. The anthropological literature we will cover questions the monolithic representations of organizations, as produced by their legal mandates, their online self-representation, and by the outside perspectives that focus only on the content of their documents and public statements. By exploring a variety of ways that ethnographic methods have been applied to complex organizations, we will ultimately arrive at a better understanding of power, privilege, and knowledge in the contemporary world.

2. **Requirements**

   Students will be required to complete the following two assignments:

   - Ethnographic report 60% due
   - Take-home final 40% Available. xx. Due xx.

   Both assignments will be made available, submitted, and evaluated via MyCourses.
a. Ethnographic report. For this assignment, students are asked to conduct and report on their own foray into institutional ethnography. The exercise consists of making two or more visits to the same venue to make observations, writing field notes for each visit, and reporting on the process of investigation and discovery. Questions that you might address are: What obstacles, if any, did you encounter in gaining access to the venue? What were the reactions of others, if any, to your presence? What difference(s) did you find between your first and second (and, if applicable, subsequent) visits in terms of what you observed? Your choice of venue will of course have to follow the limits of Covid closures and safety requirements. You may, if you wish, choose to do an online investigation, addressing the same questions as above, but adding something about what you might not be seeing or properly understanding from your online vantage point. (This is speculative, I know, because if you can’t see it, you can’t report on it, but all the same it might be worth thinking about.) Your paper based on this exercise is not a research assignment, although you may add references if you choose. Rather, it should be a report of the process of research. You are not expected to do a complete ethnography, so loose ends and empty spaces, particularly those properly acknowledged and commented on, are welcome. The ethnographic assignment will be assessed in part with reference to the quality your ethnographic observations. (How to achieve this will be discussed in class meetings.)

The completed paper should be no more than ten pages, double spaced, 12 Times New Roman font, default margins, etc.

b. Take home final exam. The take home (or do-at-home) final will consist of six or seven questions, on which you will be asked to answer your choice of two in essay-style responses. Your responses should make reference to and cite course material and (if you choose) lectures. You may also go beyond the assigned and recommended readings, though this is not a requirement of the assignment.

Written assignments will be evaluated according to the following criteria: style (grammar, spelling, etc.), clarity of exposition (including word choice), organization (including structure and paragraphing), understanding of the material, and original critical engagement with the material.

All assignments must be successfully completed to receive course credit. Exams submitted after the submission deadline without either prior arrangement with the instructor or a documented excuse will be penalized at a rate of 10% of the assignment’s value per day. Exams will be submitted on MyCourses. Faxed or e-mailed copies of exams will not be accepted without prior arrangement with the instructor and a documented excuse.

3. Course Activity

Class time will consist of two meetings (Mon, Wed, 4:05 - 5:25) via Zoom each week. During this time, I will present lectures and we will discuss the readings and video material assigned for the course. All lectures presented during our online meetings will later be recorded and posted to MyCourses. Other class activities will not be recorded. During the class meetings, we will also organize “breakout groups” in which you can grapple with specific questions and problems in
small groups. Finally, I will also use our class time to keep you up to date on the progress of the course and explain the assignments in more complete detail.

4. Readings

Readings will consist of 30 – 90 pages of assigned reading per week. Readings form the basis of the lectures, discussion, and exams. Each week’s assignment should be completed prior to the class meetings. Recommended readings are intended as suggestions for further exploration, and may be useful (though not necessary) for exam preparation.

The following book will be available for sale at Paragraph Books, 2220 McGill College Avenue:


All other readings will be made available on MyCourses. Some films and podcasts will also be assigned as part of preparation for class. Films, podcasts, and recommended and assigned readings may be changed during the course to accommodate new discoveries, although the general topics and amount of class preparation will remain much the same week to week.

5. Schedule of Classes and Topics

Week 1, Sept 2: Introduction.  
(No reading assignment.)

Week 2, Sept 7, 9: An Example We’re All Too Familiar With (or Are We?): The University.


Recommended:


Week 3, Sept 14, 16: Postcolonialism and “Studying Up.”


Week 4, Sept 21, 23: Elites and the Method of Para-Ethnography.

Deeb, Hadi and George Marcus. 2011. “In the Green Room: An Experiment in Ethnographic


**Week 5, Sept 28, 30: Online Ethnography**


**Week 6, Oct 5, 7: Prison Ethnographies.**


**Week 7, Oct 14: The Ethnography of Judicial Process I.**


Guest speaker: Rine Vieth.

**Week 8, Oct 19, 21: The Ethnography of Judicial Process II.**


Recommended:


Week 10, Nov 2, 4: NGOs: Climate Activism and the Anthropology of Development.


Guest speaker: Adam Fleischmann.

Week 11, Nov 9, 11: The Corporate World


Guest speaker: Prof. Sarah Federman.

Week 12, Nov 16, 18: The Anthropology of the State


Week 12, Nov 23, 25: Tech Activism: Open Source Tools (and Their Application).


Bellingcat podcast, BellingChat Episode 3 - Hunting the The Salisbury Poisonings Suspects:
https://www.bellingcat.com/resources/podcasts/2020/06/16/bellingchat-episode-3-hunting-the-the-salisbury-poisonings-suspects/

Week 13, Nov 30, Dec 2: Topic TBA.

Thursday, Dec 3: Conclusion and Exam Preparation.