



Bachelor's courses Faculty of Social Sciences

VU University Amsterdam - Student- & Onderwijszaken - Exchange programme Vrije Universiteit - 2019-2020

Challenges of the 21st Century

Course code	S_C21C ()
Period	Period 4
Credits	6.0
Language of tuition	English
Faculty	Faculty of Social Sciences
Coordinator	dr. E. van Roekel
Examinator	dr. E. van Roekel
Teaching staff	prof. dr. J.T. Sunier, prof. D. Dalakoglou, dr. E. van Roekel
Teaching method(s)	Lecture
Level	200

Course objective

The aim of the courses is to make student familiar with the anthropological discipline, its key issues, the various conceptual approaches, the theoretical discussions and contemporary efforts to understand a contemporary world in turmoil. Basic concepts such as culture, socialisation, resistance, embodiment, and power, and how they developed throughout the history of the discipline and how they are applied in understanding and explaining contemporary societal issues. There are six central themes or recurring issues that will be revisited implicitly and explicitly in all three courses within the cluster. These themes are: 1) the nature of cultures, 2) the individual and society, 3) beliefs and belonging, 4) structure and agency, 5) the body and materiality, and 6) language and categorisations. Anthropologists have time and again addressed these six themes in different ways and under different circumstances. They constitute the basis for theoretical disagreements, methodological reflections, but also for assessing contemporary societal issues. They should however in no way be treated as disciplinary straightjackets. Far from that, the themes only help us to draw some lines in the enormous complexity of human activities and human lifeworlds. Students obtain knowledge and insights in the specific ways in which anthropology addresses contemporary topical issues and urgent societal problems.

Learning outcomes:

Knowledge and understanding. The student has acquired knowledge and understanding of:

- (1) how key anthropological concepts can be applied in order to address, assess and analyze various contemporary societal issues. The six perennial themes in anthropology will be the guideline.
- (2) the specific problem definitions, conceptual frameworks and paradigmatic approaches typical for anthropology.

Application. The student has acquired the competences to:

- (3) show how anthropologists can contribute to the explanation and possible solution of pressing societal issues. They learn about

Attitude. The student demonstrates:

- (4) the ability to critically observe and analyse urgent societal problems from an anthropological perspective and consider the contingencies and limits of their own cultural routines.

Course content

Each era faces societal challenges that keep politicians, the public and academia busy. Our 21st century is no exception. Contemporary anthropologists nowadays assess urgent issues and formulate questions to understand their significance and consequence, such as new forms of urbanisation and mobility, far-reaching technological and digital developments, ongoing destructions of habitats due to large-scale economic activity, the over-use of natural resources and transnational violent conflicts, which forces people to migrate or turn to local strategies that adapt or contest these processes of accelerated change. These pressing socio-political developments in some parts of the world are complex issues that pose a challenge for local, national and international governmental bodies. Behind the technical administrative challenges there are the much more fundamental questions about who the real victims are and who benefits from crises and emergencies. Knowledge and its application in policies all depend on the perspective we take in assessing these urgent issues. The task for anthropologists - in and outside academia - is to demonstrate that there simply is no universal definition of what a contemporary challenge or problem is and that governance is always a deeply political practice and full of competing interests. Anthropology may be not unique in recognising a multitude of perspectives, but it definitely is the most outspoken discipline in exposing diversity. It climate change and global warming, the refugee crisis, urbanisation and economic transformation, the role of religion in global affairs, social movements against poverty, exclusion or diversity in society; all these urgent societal issues have winners and losers.

Form of tuition

Lectures, guest lectures, viewing and analysing documentaries and other audio-visual illustrations, text analysis, class debates.

Type of assessment

Mid-term exam and take-home exam

Course reading

To be announced in the course manual (see CANVAS).

Recommended background knowledge

Active participation in "Core Themes in Anthropology" and "History and Theory of Anthropology".

Target group

First-year bachelor students in Cultural Anthropology and Development Sociology. Also open as an elective course for Exchange Students.

Remarks

This course is the last of series of three courses: Core Themes in Anthropology; b) History and Theory in Anthropology; and c) Challenges of the 21st Century. In these three courses, the focus of anthropology will be introduced, explained and discussed.