

Occupy the Field: Global Finance, Inequality, Social Movement

ANTH V3897, Mondays 6-8pm

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Course Description

Occupy the Field is a field-based course about Occupy Wall Street and the Occupy Movement more broadly. The course offers training in ethnographic research methods alongside a critical exploration of the conjunctural issues in the Occupy movement: Wall Street, finance capital, and inequality; political strategies, property and public space, and the question of anarchy; and genealogies of the contemporary moment in global social movements. **Class requirements will be divided between seminar at Columbia and fieldwork in and around the Occupy movement. In addition to scheduled seminar, this class will meet off-campus several times, and students will be expected to be involved in ongoing OWS projects outside of class,** to be developed in close conversation with the instructor. While the syllabus draws extensively on ethnographic and anthropological work, it is also broadly interdisciplinary, incorporating texts and approaches from sociology, political theory, economics, history, and primary source material from OWS and beyond. The class will also incorporate guest lecturers from Columbia and the wider intellectual and activist community. Dissenting voices of all kinds are encouraged in this class, and one need not have a particular orientation toward OWS to participate. The class is about rigorous and creative intellectual inquiry, not movement-building or political conversion.



Course Structure

The Occupy movement offers not only an ideal site to think through and practice ethnographic research methods, but also a historical moment in which to consider some of the most pressing theoretical and political issues of our time, including financialization, inequality, and practices of citizenship. To these ends—methodological and theoretical—coursework is divided: readings are issue-driven and theoretical, whereas writing assignments and final projects are ethnographic and methodological. The objective in this combination is to put rigorous theoretical frames into conversation with on-the-ground research. While methods readings (Malinowski, Clifford, Hall, Gupta, Haraway) are inserted throughout the course, the syllabus' contention is that fieldwork is best learned experientially, and is most productive in conversation with trenchant theoretical frameworks.

The Field

This course requires a commitment to fieldwork outside of scheduled seminar time. We will familiarize ourselves with the movement and the processes of fieldwork as a class, and then develop intersecting research questions and interests as individuals or small groups. Using the public atrium of 60 Wall Street as our initial field-base, we will familiarize ourselves with the everyday practices of the Occupy movement. The atrium of 60 Wall Street is the current nerve center for the logistics and planning of OWS: working groups hold their meetings here, trainings and teach-ins are held here, and people generally use the space to locate one another,

network, etc. Students will process their fieldwork experiences through weekly field memos, in which they practice both ethnographic writing, and putting fieldwork experiences into dialog with course materials. We will spend class time at Columbia both discussing readings and discussing the evolution of our field projects, so that as a team we can get a broad sense of where the movement is now, and work out the inevitable difficulties of "the field" - how do I get an interview? What happens when meetings are cancelled?

Field Projects

As the semester continues and students hone individual research projects, the nature of the field will change according to the evolving fieldwork needs of course participants. Under close supervision of the instructor, the content and methods of fieldwork will be determined by students' individual or group projects. Potential methods include participant-observation, interviewing, media analysis, and archival research. For instance, some students may choose to get involved in one of the many working groups that run day to day operations in the Occupy Movement. These groups all have regular and open meetings, list serves, participate in General Assembly and Spokes Council meetings. Therefore, the substance of research for students who choose to get involved in these groups would include attending meetings, conducting interviews with members of the groups, or collating histories of the group's work. In another example, students may choose to dedicate their fieldwork to the proliferating document life of the OWS movement. This would involve collecting and analyzing documents distributed at various actions and spaces, engaging in media analysis, and working closely with the Archive Working Group and the NYU Tamiment archive. These students might also interview various media-makers.

Human Subjects

While students will not be formally required to seek IRB approval for their projects, the history and ethics of research with human subjects will be a concern of this class. We will discuss the central role of disclosure, consent, anonymity, and the variable vulnerabilities of potential human subjects. Students will be guided to the Morningside IRB online tutorial to familiarize themselves with the official protocols of research with human subjects, and we will discuss the ethical and historical issues presented in the online training in class.

Student Safety

This course is designed both to maximize student exposure to the daily life of the Occupy movement, and to minimize exposure to potentially volatile or unsafe situations. Best practices in fieldwork always prioritize the safety of both the researcher and her interlocutors. We will not participate in any direct actions as a class, and we will meet only in spaces where public assembly is legally sanctioned. Hence, as with the IRB above, safety and prudent decision-making in ever-changing field contexts will be part of the curriculum. As a class, we will have scrupulous contingency plans in place for each field visit, including buddy-systems, phone trees, and meeting places determined in advance. As a regular participant in the Occupy movement, however, I can say with absolute certainty that there is *no foreseeable risk* in teaching this as a field-based class. On the contrary, the risks of disengaged scholarship seem more profound.

Requirements

Prerequisites: This course is intended for juniors, seniors, and graduate students. Some training in social sciences is preferred but not required.

Attendance and Participation: As a field-course *and* seminar, attendance and participation in this class will be central to your grade. This means attending class, keeping up with reading and writing assignments, and cultivating your individual or group projects continuously as the semester goes on. In the seminar space and in the field we will be working as a research team, with multiple interests and approaches to the OWS movement complementing one another. Class attendance is crucial to continuously present your ongoing fieldwork and evolving research interests to other members of the team.

Reading: Each week you will be responsible for the readings listed on the syllabus. **The reading load is designed to be balanced with field commitments, which means it is lighter than many other classes.** This also means that close-reading of the assigned texts is essential. Participation in seminar that reflects close and creative reading will be factored into your overall participation grade.

Response Papers: This course requires a two-page response each week. These will be divided between field memos (explained in the introductory class) and reading responses. The reading responses should demonstrate close and creative engagement with the assigned texts, make connections with other texts, and pose questions for discussion. The field memos allow us to experiment with ethnographic writing and prepare for the final paper or project. These responses will count toward your overall participation grade but will not be individually returned and graded.

Project Narratives: In weeks 6 and 10 you will be required to submit a five-page, double spaced project narrative. Each short paper will combine preliminary research and ethnographic writing with concepts and questions from the course texts. The week 10 narrative will also serve as your final-project proposal. You will not be required to hand in response papers in these weeks.

Final Project: I will accept a range of final projects in this course. Each student or group of students is required to clear their final project proposals with me by week 9 or before. Sample projects include:

- 15-page, single authored research/ethnography paper
- Group project in multi-media presentation and written analysis, presented at OWS site.
- Extended participant-observation collaborative work with other OWS participants, including production of relevant materials and outcomes, presented at OWS site.

Grades:

Attendance & Participation: 40%

Project Narratives: 30%

Final Project: 30%

Weeks 1 – 6: Wall Street and the Daily Life of Finance Capital

In the seemingly endless wake of the 2008 financial crisis, precarity and instability have come to characterize our economic and social lives in new ways. These readings explore the history and present of capitalism in crisis, Wall Street and the culture of finance, and the relationships between financial dominance and contemporary forms of inequality and disenfranchisement around the world. Subthemes include the relationships between debt, race, work, and property ownership in contemporary capitalism. The democratization of economic analysis is a key goal in this part of the course. These readings aim to help us unpack the technocratic language often used to represent “the economy,” which obscures our understanding of financial inequality more than it reveals.

Introduction

Week 1: fieldwork; ethnographic writing; (un)mapping the field; popular accounts of the financial crisis
(Students are not required to read these articles in advance of the first class. We will discuss them in class).

Krugman, Paul. 2009. “How Did Economists Get it So Wrong?” *New York Times Magazine*.
Lewis, Michael. 2008. “The End.” Portfolio.com
Lewis, Michael. 2009. “Wall Street on the Tundra.” Vanity Fair.
Stiglitz, Joseph. “Capitalist Fools.” Vanity Fair. January 2009.

Anthropology, Critical Theory, Crisis

Week 2: (reading response due)

THEORY:

Besterman and Gusterson. *The Insecure American* (Introduction)
Ortner, Sherry “On Neoliberalism.” *Anthropology of This Century*
Robbins, Richard “Anthropologizing Economics”
Stiglitz, Joseph. 2010. “The Mortgage Scam” in *Freefall*.

METHOD:

Gupta and Ferguson. “The Field as Site, Method and Location in Anthropology”
Malinowski, B. “Introduction: The Subject, Method, and Scope of this Inquiry”
Marcus and Fischer. *Anthropology as Cultural Critique*. Introduction and Chapter 1.

“The great issue is not raising taxes on the rich or achieving a better regulation of banks. It’s economic democracy: the right of ordinary people to make macro-decisions about social, interest rates, capital flows, job creation, and global warming. If the debate isn’t about economic power, it’s irrelevant” ~ Mike Davis, *LA Review of Books*, 2011

Week 3: (reading response due)

THEORY:

Bryan and Rafferty “Deriving Capital’s (and Labour’s) Future” in *The Crisis This Time*
George, Susan. “How the Poor Develop the Rich.” *The Post-Development Reader*.
Guyer, Jane. “Confusion and Silence: Public Rhetoric in the Monetarist Crisis, from Nigeria to the US.”
Rugh and Massey “Racial Segregation and the American Foreclosure Crisis.”

METHOD:

Clifford, J. “Notes on (Field)notes” in Fieldnotes: *The Makings of Anthropology*.
Rosaldo, R. “The Erosion of Classical Norms.” in *Culture and Truth, The Remaking of Social Analysis*. Beacon Press.
Haraway, D. “Situated Knowledges” in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*

On Wall Street

Week 4: (field memo due)

Ho, Karen *Liquidated: An Ethnography of Wall Street* (Introduction – Chapter 3)

Week 5: (reading response due)

Ho, Karen *Liquidated: An Ethnography of Wall Street* (Chapter 4 – End)

Markets, Economics, Economies

Week 6: (project narrative I due)

Donham, Donald *History, Power, Ideology* (Introduction)

Mitchell, Timothy *The Rule of Experts* (Intro and Part III, Fixing the Economy)

Gibson-Graham, J.K. *The End of Capitalism as we Knew It* (Intro and Ch. 1)

Week 7: (field memo due)

Graeber, D. *Debt: the First 5000 Years* (Chs 1, 2, 5, 11, 12)

Weeks 8-13 Tactical Philosophies: Political Movements, Political Means

If the first suite of readings focused on understanding Occupy Wall Street's central grievances, the second set looks at the daily life of OWS in the broader context of tactical philosophies in social movements. How do the daily operations of social movements—strikes, marches, the question of violence, the use of streets and public spaces—relate to the injustices those movements target? Is “occupation” a tactic or a solution? We are accustomed to thinking of “informal settlements” that reclaim land for basic needs in the global south. Can Occupy be productively thought of in the same way? These readings situate OWS in social movement thinking across space and time, and highlight the philosophical and tactical questions of anarchy and anarchist organizing in particular.

Occupation, Direct Action & Other Tactics

Week 8: (reading response due)

AlSayyad, Nezar “Design and History of Tahrir Square”

Harvey, David *The Right to the City*

Lanford and Rocha “Cutting the Wire: the landless movement in Brazil”

Peterson, Marina “Patrolling the Plaza”

Sassen, Saskia “The Global Street” & “Occupying is not the same as demonstrating”

Week 9: (reading response due)

Beinin and Vairel, *Social Movements, Mobilization, and Contestation in the Middle East* (Intro and Afterword)

Edwards, Brian, “Tahrir: Ends of Circulation”

McAdam, D. 2004. “Revisiting the U.S. Civil Rights Movement”

Srinivasan and Fish “Revolutionary Tactics”

The greatest difficulty confronting groups that seek to create a new type of revolutionary organization is that of establishing new types of human relationships within the organization itself (Situationist International).

On Revolution

Week 10: (project narrative II due)

Arendt, *On Revolution* (Intro – Chapter 2)

Fanon, Frantz *The Wretched of the Earth* (Preface – “Concerning Violence”)

Luxemburg, Rosa *Collected Works* (“Rebuilding the International” and “Letters from Prison”)

Marcos, Subcomandante *The Speed of Dreams, Collected Writings 2001-2006* (selections)

The Alter Globalization Movement and the Question of Anarchy

Week 11: (field memo due)

Graeber, David. *Direct Action: an Ethnography* (Intro, Chs 1, 5, 6, 9, 10)

Lance, Mark “Fetishizing Process”

Week 12: (reading response due)

Agamben, Giorgio *State of Exception*

Butler and McHenry, *Food not Bombs: How to Feed the Hungry and Build Community*

Gelderloos, Peter “How Nonviolence Protects the State”

Goldman, Emma. *Anarchism and Other Essays* (“What it Really Stands For” and “Marriage and Love”)

Week 13: (presentations and final papers)

J.K. Gibson-Graham *Post-Capitalist Politics* (selections)