

## **ECON 371: Comparative Economic Systems**

An online course from the Department of Economics University  
of Massachusetts Amherst

### **Course Description**

Three (3) credit hours

This course introduces students to comparative economic systems using the methods of economic anthropology. The course is broken down into topics and readings are selected to be interesting, representative, relatively easy-to-read, yet theoretical and challenging. We will cover a great deal of material, but remember this course cannot do it all. Many aspects of economics and political economy are left out of the course materials due to time constraints. The course is designed to give students a general knowledge of economic anthropology, political economy, and comparative economic systems. Also this course is designed to allow students to begin to analyze critically their own economy and relations of exchange and thus to apply their knowledge and critical insights into positive social change and engagement.

The course is broken down by modules and topic. The course readings are due on the dates indicated. You must complete the course readings if you wish to be successful in this course. You must write and submit the assigned discussions each week. Your instructor will grade your discussion post and comment on another post each week.

The goal of the course is to compare economic systems. An economic system is a part of culture. If culture is defined as a system of signs/symbols and meanings that humans use to define reality then an economic system is a cultural construct used to define economic realities, but culture is also a set of strategies for success or survival. If this is true then, economic systems are a set of cultural strategies for success and survival. These economic strategies take the form of cultural institutions, a set of rules that are used to guide behavior. An institution is a set of rules about what you should or shouldn't do. This is not the same as an organization, just as culture is not a group of people and should not be confused with a group, a tribe, a chiefdom, nation or state. Culture is something in the mind, like a political or economic system. An economic system should not be confused with an economy, what people actually do, but rather an economic system is what people should do or shouldn't do. An economic system, simply put, is a set of formal or informal rules for conducting production, distribution, and consumption, a set of guidelines for success or survival. This means that some of the typical methods used for studying economics do not apply to the study economic systems. This is often enough the hardest thing for students of economics to understand. An economic system is not an economy; it is not a form of observable and quantifiable data or economic behavior, but instead must be inferred from what people say about economic systems or what people do in their economic interactions. If this seems confusing please ask for more explanations, because understanding the anthropological

definition of culture helps you to understand economic systems which are a part of culture, not something separate from it.

### **Is this course for you?**

Given the fast-paced nature of online courses, deadlines for this course will be strictly enforced. Failure to meet scheduled requirements may put you at serious risk of failing the course – a significant waste of time, energy, and money.

This course requires a basic understanding of internet browsing, email, and word processing. With these, you should have little trouble learning how to use UMassOnline – the learning management system used for the course. The online discussion component of the course provides the opportunity to develop your ideas in collaboration with others.

Each module of the course includes one or more readings, written presentation, and videos, demanding substantial effort over the term. This course involves a lot of written work. You will be required each week to post responses to discussion questions, to comment on others' responses, to submit homework, and to prepare a final paper. Discussion questions must be completed in a timely manner if you are to receive full credit. Note that the discussions will close once the window for them has passed. If you have a heavy work schedule, this class may not be for you.

If you have a documented learning disability, please contact the course instructor during the first week of class about accommodation.

That's it for technical details – read below for information on readings, information on how you will be evaluated, and a class schedule. Good luck! Your instructor is here to help; you may email the instructor directly or post to the troubleshooting discussion board with any questions about the course – logistical, substantive, or otherwise.

### **Summary of Course Requirements and Grading System**

Students will complete several different types of assignments, including:

- Reading and viewing assigned materials.
- Participating in every group discussion by posting and by responding substantively to at least one of your classmates' posts. In each Discussion, students should **post** at least one statement addressing the discussion question and **respond substantively** to at least one other student's post. The grade for each discussion depends on posting, responding, and the quality of the content.
- Submitting homework assignments by the deadline. You must respond to the reading questions each week with 2 pages in single-spaced, 12 point, Times New Roman font. Follow AAA style ([http://www.aaanet.org/publications/style\\_guide.pdf](http://www.aaanet.org/publications/style_guide.pdf)). Late work will be penalized (and beyond a certain point, not accepted). All assignments are open-book -- you will have access to readings and your own notes.

- Completing a term paper or final paper.

The following table summarizes the grading system for the course.

Category	Details	Weight in Grade
Discussion	5, each worth 4 points; in each discussion you must write one post and respond to at least one.	20%
Homework	5, each worth 6 points.	30%
Term paper	This final paper is due on the last day of class.	50%

### Grades

Grades will be assigned according to the following schedule.

Lower-Bound Grade Cut-offs (no rounding)

A	A-	B+	B	B-	C+	C	C-	D	F
93	90	87	83	80	77	73	70	60	--

### Academic Honesty

The purpose of this course is to learn about economic systems. Cheating does not help you learn the material, it is not fair to other students, and it will not be tolerated. While academic dishonesty covers a range of activities, more serious and blatant forms of cheating may result in a failure in the course, or expulsion from school. It is cheating to copy someone else's words without quoting (plagiarism) and changing only a few words is not enough to make them "your own words." It is also cheating for two people to jointly do exams, or turn in the same writing without identifying it as a joint effort. You are responsible for knowing and understanding the university guidelines on academic honesty, which is available at [http://www.umass.edu/dean\\_students/codeofconduct/acadhonesty/](http://www.umass.edu/dean_students/codeofconduct/acadhonesty/).

### Required Textbook:

Wolf, Eric. [1982]. *Europe and the People without History*. Berkeley: UC Press. Available from <http://www.amazon.com/Europe-People-Without-History-Preface/dp/0520048989> or your local bookseller. You must have a copy of this book to take the course; there are copies available online for little more than the cost of shipping.

Other readings: PDF's linked below or reader available for download from course site.

### **Week 1: Introduction to Economic Anthropology: Read:**

Sahlins, Marshall. [1966]. *The Original Affluent Society*. Stone Age Economics.

Jared Diamond. [1997]. *From Egalitarianism to Kleptocracy. Gun, Germs, and Steel*. New York: Norton. p.265-292.

Jared Diamond. [2005]. *Maya Collapse. Collapse: Why Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*. New York: Viking. p. 157-176.

Berger, John. [1972]. *Ways of Seeing*. London: Penguin/BBC. p. 129-155.

Ong, Aihwa. [1988]. *The Production of Possession: Spirits and the Multinational Corporation in Malaysia*. *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 15, No. 1, p. 28-42.

Sampson, Steven. [1985]. *The Informal Sector in Eastern Europe*. *Telos*. N.66. p. 44-66.

Cohen, Mark Nathan. 2013[1998] *Dangerous Assumptions of American Culture*.p.207-221.

### **Recommended:**

Cohen, Mark Nathan. 2013[nd] *The Emergence of Health and Social Inequalities in the Archaeological Record*. p. 249-271.

**Homework 1.** Write two (2) single-spaced pages on the following questions: What is an economic system? How do we compare and evaluate different economic systems? What causes cultural and economic systems to change? What are the problems of civilizations and tributary modes of production? What are the problems of conflicting political, cultural, and economic systems? What are some contradictions of a capitalism economic system? How does Sampson's

study of the informal sector in Eastern Europe complicate our understanding of “economic systems?”

## **Week 2: Comparative Economics and History:**

### **Read:**

Wolf, Eric. [1982]. *Europe and the People without History*. Berkeley: UC Press. p. 1-100.

Lappe, Frances Moore and Joseph Collins [1977]. *Why People Can't Feed Themselves? Food First: Beyond the Myth of Scarcity*, New York: Random House.

### **Recommended:**

Zinn, Howard. [1980] *Columbus, the Indians and Human Progress. A People's History of the United States*. New York: Harper. p.1-22. [4-22].

E.E. Evans-Pritchard. [1940]. *The Nuer*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. p.15-90.

Taussig, Michael. [1980] *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America*. Chapel Hill: University of N. Carolina Press.

Graeber, David. [2006] *Turning Modes of Production Inside Out or Why Capitalism is a Transformation of Slavery*. *Critique of Anthropology*. V26 N1 p.61-85.

**Homework 2.** Write two (2) single-spaced pages on the following questions. What is Eric Wolf's critique of political science, economics, sociology, and the idea of comparative economic systems? What is the importance of geography, history, and colonialism on our understanding of economic systems? How does Eric Wolf compare and evaluate different economic systems? What are modes of production? What is Wolf's theory of cultural, political, and economic change? How do Lappe and Collins compare and evaluate different economic systems? What are the problems of colonialism?

## **Week 3: Colonialism and Mercantilism:**

### **Read:**

Wolf, Eric. [1982]. *Europe and the People without History*. Berkeley: UC Press. p. 101-194.

Mauss, Marcel. [1966]. *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*. NY: Norton. p.1-45

**Recommended:**

Hyde, Lewis. [1979]. *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property*. London: Vintage.

**Homework 3.** Write two (2) single-spaced pages on the following questions. Why do people abandon subsistence gathering, hunting, and agriculture in the Spanish New World? Why does the Atlantic Slave Trade replace Native American labor in New Spain? According to Wolf, why do people abandon their subsistence activities in favor of commodity trading, such as in the fur trade? Why do people engage in gift giving? What is the impact of Potlatch and the fur trade on Native Americans?

**Week 4: Slavery, Colonialism, and Capitalism: Read**

Wolf, Eric. [1982]. *Europe and the People without History*. Berkeley: UC Press. p. 195-295.

Marx, Karl and Fredrick Engels. [1848]. *Manifesto of the Communist Party*. Marxists Internet Archive (marxists.org).

**Recommended:**

Weber, Max [1930] *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. London: Routledge. p.47-92.

Mintz, Sidney. [1978] *Was the Plantation Slave a Proletarian?* Review. V2N1 Summer. p.81-98.

Polanyi, Karl. [1944]. *The Great Transformation*. Boston: Beacon.

Zinn, Howard. [1980] *A People's History of the United States*. New York: Harper. p.23-58. [22-55].

Smith, Adam. [1776]. *Of the Division of Labour*. *Wealth of Nations*. New York: Bantam. p.9-21 [10-17].

**Homework 4.** Write two (2) single-spaced pages on the following questions. According to Wolf, why does Capitalism develop? How do we compare and evaluate the difference between slavery as a mode of production and capitalism as a mode of production? What are some contradictions or conflicts lead to political economic change? What are the analytically useful aspects of Marx and Engels' Communist Manifesto; what are contradictions?

## **Week 5: The Crisis of Capitalism and Socialism**

### **Read**

Wolf, Eric. [1982]. Europe and the People without History. Berkeley: UC Press. p. 296-391.

Verdery, Katherine. [1996]. What Was Socialism, and What Comes Next? Princeton: Princeton University Press. p. 19-57.

**Watch:** Pandora's Box: Episode 1. The Engineers' Plot:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h3gwyHNo7MI>

### **Recommended:**

Harvey, David. [1989]. The Condition of Postmodernity. London:Blackwell. p.119-179.

Bakan, Joel. [2004] The Corporation: The Pathological Pursuit of Profit and Power. New York: Free Press.

Ledeneva, Alena [1998]. Blat Exchange: Between Gift and Commodity. Russia's Economy of Favours: Blat, Networking and Informal Exchange. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p.139-174.

Konai, Janos. [2000] What the Change of System From Socialism to Capitalism Does and Does Not Mean. Journal of Economic Perspectives. V14N1 Winter 2000 p.27-42.

Humphery, Caroline and Stephen Hugh-Jones. [1992] Introduction: Barter, Exchange, and Value. Barter, Exchange, and Value: An Anthropological Approach. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p.1-20.

**Homework 5.** Write two (2) single-spaced pages on the following questions. What are the problems of Capitalism and Socialism? Why did Socialism in Eastern Europe fall? Are Capitalism and Socialism mutually exclusive and incompatible?

**Week 6: Final Paper.** Your final paper is due on the last day of class.

Write a 15 page paper, double spaced, on some theme developed in the course readings or missing from the course materials, such as: the relationship between poverty and health,

capitalism and socialism, informal economics, colonialism, gift exchange, agriculture, advertizing, etc.

Include an introduction and conclusion, endnotes, and references. Endnotes should begin on page 16 and references should begin on page 17 alphabetized by author.

Be sure to type 15 pages double-spaced using 12 point, Times New Roman font in the AAA style [http: //www.aaanet.org/publications/style\\_guide.pdf](http://www.aaanet.org/publications/style_guide.pdf).