Comparing Societies
Winter/Spring 2024

Syllabus. Version: November 10, 2023

Day / Time: Wednesdays at 12:30-3:30pm PT; 2:30-5:30pm CT; 3:30-6:30pm EST.

Locations: UBC: ALRD (Allard) B101; Chicago: Keller 2054.

Course Numbers: UBC: Econ 590; Chicago: PPHA41150.

Instructors: Nathan Nunn (UBC), James A. Robinson (Chicago), and Jacob Moscona (Harvard & MIT)

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Teaching Fellows:

Course Description
The course will study the cultural, social, and institutional foundations of contemporary and historical societies around the world. Particular attention will be paid to factors that are typically taken for granted and presumed universal within the economics discipline. (Within the discipline a fairly small set of things are presumed to be diverse and a large set presumed to be universal.) These include perceptions of reality (including birth, death, the afterlife, the spiritual world, nature, and the environment), moral frameworks (including views about right/wrong, fairness, equality, and community membership), objectives and definitions of success, paths to success, and societal equilibria. We will consider how these differences then affect and are affected by resulting cultural values, social structures, and formal political and legal institutions.

Typically within economics, the aim is to identify universal facts and relationships. The class will focus on differences and deviations from what we typically view as universals. As such, the independent research of the class will ask students to dive deeply into one society (in a way, emulating traditional ethnographic research) rather than to study many societies but in less depth.

The course is targeted to advanced (second- or third-year) Ph.D. students working in the fields of economic development, political economy, cultural economics, and/or economic history.

For a sense of what this course is about, you may want to watch this 30-minute interview
Requirements

Enrolled students are required to complete the following assignments.

1. **Reading summary for each class (25%)**: Prior to each lecture, students are required to write a short summary of one of the required readings.

   You are free to use whatever format you like for the summaries, but they should address the following: (i) Provide an overview of what you learned from the reading or, if you didn’t learn anything, why you felt you didn’t learn anything from it. (ii) Explain what you liked and did not like about the reading. (iii) Explain what you did not understand about the reading and/or describe any questions that came to your mind that the paper didn’t address.

2. **Class participation (25%)**: Students are expected to participate in class discussions. At a minimum, your goal should be to ask any questions that you raised in your reading summary during the class at the appropriate time.

3. **Class presentation (25%)**: Each student will provide a short presentation of one society that they have research. The presentation should be descriptive but with particular attention paid on what aspects of the society are different from other societies discussed in class. The presentations will take place during the second half of the semester.

4. **Four page write up (25%)**: Students are asked to write up the findings from the research they undertook for their presentation. The write up should incorporate questions, comments, and feedback received during the presentation. These are due at the end of the semester.
Outline and reading list

1 Jan 10: What we each think this course is about

- James Robinson
  - Malinowski, Bronislaw (1922) *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, Chapter XXII: a summary statement of “the meaning of the kula”.

- Nathan Nunn
  - Carvalho, Jean-Paul, Augustin Bergeron, Joseph Henrich, Nathan Nunn, and Jonathan Weigel. 2022 “Zero-Sum Thinking, the Evolution of Effort Suppressing Beliefs, and Economic Development,” NBER working paper.

- Jacob Moscona
  - Flynn, Joel P., and Karthik Sastry. “The macroeconomics of narratives.” I think the interesting parts of this paper (admittedly by friends of mine?) are the measurement tools they develop for tracking narratives and narrative changes?
  - “Narratives about the Macroeconomy” Chris Roth et al. “We provide evidence on narratives about the macroeconomy—the stories people tell to explain macroeconomic phenomena—in the context of a historic surge in inflation.”
  - Ethnographic Survey of Africa
  - Folklore
2 Jan 17: Religion (Nathan, Jacob, James)

- Nathan

- James Robinson

- Jacob Moscona
  - (o) Urton, Gary. Inca myths. University of Texas Press, 1999. Especially Chapter 1 (“The Settings of Inca Myths in Space and Time”) and Chapter 4 (“Origin Myths and the Inca State”). This could also go with State formation, especially Chapter 4.
  - (o) Stephen Lansing’s Bali water temples.

3 Jan 24: State formation (James)

- James


4 Jan 31: Children and Fertility (Nathan & James, Jacob??)

• Nathan


• James


• Jacob ???
  – Malinowski’s Sexual Life of Savages is good, but maybe too dated?.

5 Feb 7: Social Structure (Jacob, James)

• Jacob

• James

6 Feb 14: Morality & Mental Models of the World (Nathan, James, or Jacob??)

• Nathan
Economists tend to think of technological progress as a linear process, in which the most transformative technological knowledge is easily transmittable and broadly applicable. However, there is growing evidence that technology and its impact are highly ‘context specific’ — it may be appropriate for some contexts but not others. Therefore, where innovation takes place and the types of technologies that get developed (or that are taken seriously in the modern world) could determine what technology does and who it benefits.

First, a concrete example focusing on agriculture (and maybe medicine as well):


Second, a broader discussion of what it means for technology to be ‘appropriate’ and all the ways that technology and its benefits are embedded in societal context (stated differently, ‘Appropriate to what?!’):


Would be good to also have something on non-Western technology – Lansing counts but isn’t perfect

9 March 6: Appropriate policy (James and Jacob)

• Jacob
A motivational quote from Simon Kuznets? 1971 Nobel lecture:

[A] substantial economic advance in the less developed countries may require modifications in the available stock of material technology, and probably even greater innovations in political and social structure. It will not be a matter of merely borrowing existing tools, material and social; or of directly applying past patterns of growth, merely allowing for the difference in parameters.

Have we learned anything since 1971?

The divergent impacts of industrial policy?


Distance from the frontier. JEEA.


Development policy and adventures and misadventures in the tropics


10 March 13: Participating in Conflict (James and Nathan)

- Nathan


James


11 March 20: The costs and benefits of groups: On the optimal amounts of diversity (Jacob) James maybe away??

Jacob


12 March 27: Are rich countries better at everything? The importance of objective functions (Nathan, James)

- Nathan


- James

13 April 3: How much is universal? How to do research in a diverse world and/or Conclusions (Jacob, Nathan, and James)

- Nathan

- Jacob?

- James
  - James Slides: What I learned doing Fieldwork

14 April 10: Student presentations (add extra classes if needed)