

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.

Cours 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

with James Robinson:

<https://voxdev.org/topic/institutions-political-economy/political-economy-and-development>

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 researched. 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”.
 - Comaroff, Jean and John Comaroff (2011) “Figuring Democracy: An Anthropological Take on African Political Modernities,” in their *Theory from the South*, Paradigm Publishers.
 - Bledsoe, Caroline H. (1992) “The cultural transformation of western education in Sierra Leone,” *Africa*, 62(2), 182-202.
 - Ferguson, James (1994) *The Anti-Politics Machine: Development, Depoliticization, and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho*, University of Minnesota Press.
- Nathan Nunn
 - Nisbett, Richard E. 2003. *The Geography of Thought: How Asians and Westerns Think Differently... and Why*. New York: Free Press.
 - Nisbett, Richard E. and Dov Cohen. 1996. *Culture of Honor: The Psychology of Violence in the South*, Westview Press.
 - 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.
 - Chinoy, Sahil, Nathan Nunn, Sandra Sequeira, and Stefanie Stantcheva. 2022 “Zero-Sum Thinking and the Roots of U.S. Political Divides,” NBER working paper.
 - Ash, Elliot, Daniel L. Chen, and Suresh Naidu. 2020. “Ideas Have Consequences: The Impact of Law and Economics on American Justice,” 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
 - (*) Le Rossignol, Etienne, Sara Lowes, Nathan Nunn. “The Consequences of Traditional Religion in Contemporary Africa,” NBER Working paper.
 - “On the Importance of African Traditional Religion for Economic Behavior,” Lewis Dunia Butinda, Aimable Amani Lameke, Nathan Nunn, Max Posch and Raúl Sánchez de la Sierra, NBER Working Paper 31430.
 - Olupona, Jacob K. 2014. *African Religions: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- James Robinson
 - “God Insures those Who Pay? Formal Insurance and Religious Offerings in Ghana,” Emmanuelle Auriol, Julie Lassébie, Amma Panin, Eva Raiber, Paul Seabright, *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, Volume 135, Issue 4, November 2020, 1799–1848.
 - “Praying for Rain,” José-Antonio Espín-Sánchez, Salvador Gil-Guirado and Nicholas Ryan, NBER Working Paper 31411.
 - Carter, Robert E. (2013) *The Kyoto School: An Introduction*, State University of New York. Chapter 1.
 - Gautama (2011) “Nayāya sūtra,” in Deepak Sarma ed. *Classical Indian Philosophy: A Reader*, Columbia University Press.
- Jacob Moscona
 - (o) Bray, Tamara L. “An archaeological perspective on the Andean concept of camaquen: thinking through late pre-Columbian ofrendas and huacas.” *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 19.3 (2009): 357–366.
 - (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
 - “On the Origins of the State: Stationary Bandits and Taxation in Eastern Congo,” Raúl Sánchez de la Sierra, *Journal of Political Economy*, Volume 128, Number 1, January 2020, 32-74.

- “The Origin of the State: Land Productivity or Appropriability?” Joram Mayshar, Omer Moav, and Luigi Pascali, *Journal of Political Economy*, Volume 130, Number 4, April 2022, 1091-1144.
- (*) “The galactic polity in Southeast Asia,” Stanley J. Tambiah, *Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, Volume 3, Number 3, Winter 2013.
- A. Azfar Moin and Alan Strathern (Eds.) (2022) “Sacred Kingship in World History: Between Immanence and Transcendence,” Columbia University Press. Chapter 1. by
- Sara Lowes, Eduardo Montero, Nathan Nunn, James A. Robinson (2023) “Bokoko: Supernatural Power and Political Authority in the DRC”.

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

- Nathan

- (*) Brian Beach, W. Walker Hanlon “Culture and the Historical Fertility Transition,” *Review of Economic Studies*, Volume 90, Issue 4, July 2023, Pages 1669–1700.
- McGavock, Tamara. 2023. “More than a Village: Why Endogenous Living Arrangements Affect 40% of Non-Orphaned Children in Sub-Saharan Africa,” Working paper.
- Galor, Oded and David Weil. 2000. “Population, Technology, and Growth: From Malthusian Stagnation to the Demographic Transition and Beyond,” *American Economic Review*, 89 (2): 806–828.
- Young, Alwyn. 2005. “The Gift of Dying: The Tragedy of Aids and the Welfare of Future African Generations,” *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 120 (2): 423–466.
- Chad Jones. 2022. “The End of Economic Growth? Unintended Consequences of a Declining Population,” *American Economic Review*, 112(11): 3489–3527.
- Henrich, Joseph. 2004. “Demography and Cultural Evolution: How Adaptive Cultural Processes can Produce Maladaptive Losses – The Tasmanian Case,” *American Antiquity*, 69 (2): 197–214.

- James

- “Contradictions in Nigeria’s fertility transition: The burdens and benefits of having people,” Daniel Jordan Smith, *Population and Development Review*, 30 (2), 221–238.
- “The Cultural Context of High Fertility in sub-Saharan Africa,” John C. Caldwell, Pat Caldwell, *Population and Development Review*, Vol. 13, No. 3 (Sep., 1987), pp. 409-437.

- Jacob ???
 - (o) Weismantel, Mary. 2004. “Moche sex pots: reproduction and temporality in ancient South America.” *American Anthropologist*, 106 (3): 495–505.
 - Malinowski’s *Sexual Life of Savages* is good, but maybe too dated?.

5 Feb 7: Social Structure (Jacob, James)

- Jacob
 - (*) Moscona, Jacob, Nathan Nunn, and James A. Robinson. 2020. “Segmentary Lineage Organization and Conflict in Sub-Saharan Africa,” *Econometrica* 88 (5): 1999–2036.
 - (o) Moscona, Jacob, and Awa Ambra Seck. “Age Set vs. Kin: Culture and Financial Ties in East Africa.” *American Economic Review*. Forthcoming.
 - (o) d’Altroy, Terence N. *The Incas*. Vol. 13. John Wiley & Sons, 2014. Pages 33–45, 392–401.
- James
 - Carlos Molina, James A. Robinson, Pablo Selaya (2023) “The Return of Pachamama: Social Structure and Power in Bolivia” Unpublished.

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

- Nathan
 - (*) Enke, Benjamin. 2019. “Kinship, Cooperation, and the Evolution of Moral Systems,” *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 134(2): 953–1019.
 - Nisbett, Richard E. 2003. *The Geography of Thought: How Asians and Westerners Think Differently... and Why*. New York: Free Press.
 - Nisbett, Richard E. and Dov Cohen. 1996. *Culture of Honor: The Psychology of Violence in the South*, Westview Press.
 - Chinoy, Sahil, Nathan Nunn, Sandra Sequeira, Stefanie Stantcheva. 2023. “Zero-Sum Thinking and the Roots of U.S. Political Divides,” NBER Working Paper.
 - Carvalho, Jean-Paul, Augustin Bergeron, Joseph Henrich, Nathan Nunn, and Jonathan Weigel. 2023. “Zero-Sum Thinking, the Evolution of Effort Suppressing Beliefs and Economic Development,” NBER Working Paper.

- James
 - (*) Leopoldo Fergusson, José-Alberto Guerra and James A. Robinson. 2023 “Anti-Social Norms: Evidence from Colombia,” We will have a paper by January.
 - Baggini, Julian. 2018. *How the World Thinks: A Global History of Philosophy*, Granta, Chapter 27, pp. 323–336.

7 Feb 21: No regular class

8 Feb 28: Technology, Innovation, and Society (Jacob)

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):

(*) Moscona, Jacob and Sastry, Karthik “Inappropriate Technology: Evidence from Global Agriculture.” Working Paper. (2023)

(o) Suri, Tavneet. “Selection and comparative advantage in technology adoption.” *Econometrica* 79.1 (2011): 159-209.

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?!’):

(*) Rogers, Everett M. Diffusion of innovations. Simon and Schuster, 2010. Chapter 6.

(*) Foster, George. M. Traditional Cultures: and the Impact of Technological Change. Harper, 1962. Introduction and Chapters 1–6.

(*) Lansing, J. Stephen. Priests and programmers: technologies of power in the engineered landscape of Bali. Princeton University Press, 2009.

(o) Acemoglu, Daron, and Fabrizio Zilibotti. “Productivity differences.” *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 116.2 (2001): 563-606.

(o) Caselli, Francesco, and Wilbur John Coleman. “The world technology frontier.” *American Economic Review* 96.3 (2006): 499-522.

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?

Gershenkron, Alexander (1962) *Economic Backwardness in Historical Perspective*, Harvard University Press. Chapter 1.

Leander Heldring and James A. Robinson (2023) “Clan Identity and Policy Implementation in Rwanda,” Unpublished.

Distance from the frontier. JEEA.

Lane, Nathan. “Manufacturing revolutions: Industrial policy and industrialization in South Korea.” Working paper. Forthcoming, *Quarterly Journal of Economics*.

Baer, Werner. “Import substitution and industrialization in Latin America: Experiences and interpretations.” *Latin American Research Review* 7.1 (1972): 95-122.

Development policy and adventures and misadventures in the tropics

(*) Ashraf, Nava, et al. “Bride price and female education.” *Journal of Political Economy* 128.2 (2020): 591-641.

(o) Godoy, Ricardo, Dean Karlan, and Jonathan Zinman. Randomization for causality, ethnography for mechanisms: Illiquid savings for liquor in an autarkic society.? Working Paper (2021).

(o) Grandin, Greg. *Fordlandia: the rise and fall of Henry Ford’s forgotten jungle city*. Macmillan, 2009. Introduction.

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

- Nathan
 - Fearon, James. 1995. “Rationalist Explanations for War,” *International Organization*, 49 (3): 379-414.
 - Guarnieri, Eleonora, and Ana Tur-Prats. 2023. “Cultural distance and conflict-related sexual violence,” *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 138 (3): 1817–1861.
 - Cao, Yiming, Ben Enke, Armin Falk, Paola Giuliano, and Nathan Nunn. 2023. “Herding, Warfare, and a Culture of Honor,” NBER working paper.

- Nisbett, Richard E. and Dov Cohen. 1996. *Culture of Honor: The Psychology of Violence in the South*, Westview Press.
 - Ager, Philipp, Leonardo Bursztyn, Lukas Leucht, and Joachim Voth. 2022. “Killer Incentives: Rivalry, Performance, and Risk-Taking among German Fighter Pilots, 1939-45,” *Review of Economic Studies*, 89 (5): 2257–2292.
 - Cage, Julia, Anna Dagherret, Pauline Grosjean, and Saumitra Jha. forthcoming. “Heroes and Villains: The Effects of Combat Heroism on Autocratic Values and Nazi Collaboration in France.” *American Economic Review*.
 - Jha, Saumitra and Steven Wilkinson. 2023. “Revolutionary Contagion,” Stanford GSB Research Paper 4084.
 - Ottinger, Sebastian and Lukas Rosenberger. 2023. “The American Origins of the French Revolution,” Working paper.
 - Dippel, Christian and Stephan Hebllich. 2021. “Leadership in Social Movements: Evidence from the “Forty-Eighters” in the Civil War,” *American Economic Review*, 111 (2): 472–505.
- James
 - McGovern, Michael. 2011. “Popular Development Economics—An Anthropologist among the Mandarins,” *Perspectives on Politics*, 9(2): 345-355.
 - “The Forging of a Rebel,” Gauthier Marchais, Christian M. Mugaruka, Raúl Sánchez de la Sierra and David Qihang Wu, NBER Working Paper No. 28714.
 - Marchais, Gauthier, Christian Mastaki Mugaruka, Raul Sanchez de la Sierra, and David Qihang Wu. 2022. “The Prosocial Determinants of Violent Collective Action: Evidence from Participation in Militias in Eastern Congo,” Working paper.
 - Kelly, Raymond C. 1985. *The Nuer Conquest: The Structure and Development of an Expansionist System*, University of Michigan Press.
 - Gambetta, Diego and Steffen Hertog. 2017. *Engineers of Jihad: The Curious Connection between Violent Extremism and Education*, Princeton University Press.

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

- Jacob
 - (*) Lerner, Josh et al. “Appropriate Entrepreneurship” The Rise of Chinese Venture Capital and the Developing World. Working paper.

- (*) Derex, Maxime and Robert Boyd. 2016. “Partial Connectivity Increases Cultural Accumulation within Groups.” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 113.11: 2982–2987.
- (*) Hsieh, Chang-Tai, Erik Hurst, Charles I. Jones, and Peter J. Klenow. 2019. “The Allocation of Talent and U.S. Economic Growth,” *Econometrica* 87 (5): 1439–1474.
- (o) Derex, Maxime, Charles Perreault, and Robert Boyd. 2018. “Divide and Conquer: Intermediate Levels of Population Fragmentation Maximize Cultural Accumulation.” *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences*, 373.1743: 20170062.
- (o) Einio, Elias, Josh Feng, and Xavier Jaravel. “Social Push and the Direction of Innovation.” Working Paper. (2023)

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

- Nathan

- (*) Clifford, Robert YELKÁTTE. 2019. “WSÁNEĆ (“The Emerging People”): Stories and the Re-Emergence of WSÁNEĆ Law,” In *Renewing Relationships: Indigenous Peoples and Canada*, Karen Drake and Brenda L. Gunn (eds.) pp. 83–114. Saskatoon: University of Saskatchewan.
- Barsanetti, Bruno and Alipio Ferreira. 2022. “Early Indigenous Extinctions and Modern Deforestation in the Amazon,” Working paper.
- Smith, Alexander C. et al. 2023. “Community Forest Management Led to Rapid Local Forest Gain in Nepal: A 29 Year Mixed Methods Retrospective Case Study,” *Land Use Policy*, 126: 106526.
- Deopa, Neha. 2022. “Sacred Ecology: The Environmental Impact of African Traditional Religions,” Working paper.
- Lowe, Benjamin et al. 2019. “The Neglected Role of Religion in Fisheries Management,” *Fish and Fisheries*, 20 (5): 1024–1033.
- Flannery, Kent and Joyce Marcus. 2012. *The Creation of Inequality: How Our Prehistoric Ancestors Set the Stage for Monarchy, Slavery and Empire*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

- James

- Henn, Soeren J. and James A. Robinson. 2023. “African as a Success Story,” Unpublished manuscript.

- *Śāntiparva* in Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan and Charles A. Moore eds. 2014. *A Sourcebook in Indian Philosophy*, Revised Edition, Princeton University Press.
- Morris, Ian. 2010. *Why the West Rules – For Now*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

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

- Nathan
 - Oh, Suanna. 2023. “Does Identity Affect Labor Supply?” *American Economic Review*, 113 (8): 2055–2083.
 - Breza, Emily, Supreet Kaur, and Yogita Shamdasani. 2021. “Labor Rationing,” *American Economic Review*, 111 (10): 3184–3224.
 - Breza, Emily, Supreet Kaur, and Yogita Shamdasani. 2018. “The Morale Effects of Pay Inequality,” *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 133 (2): 611–663.
- Jacob?
- James
 - James Slides: What I learned doing Fieldwork
 - Dani Rodrik (2017) *Economics Rules: Why Economics Works, When It Fails, and How To Tell The Difference*, Oxford University Press.
 - Nancy Cartwright (1999) *The Dappled World: A Study of the Boundaries of Science*, Cambridge University Press.
 - Thomas Nagel (1989) *The View from Nowhere*, Oxford University Press.

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