

Culture and Economics

Econ 895-001 / 496-001
Spring 2021
Thursday, 7:20 – 10:00 pm
Exploratory Hall L004

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COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course explores the origins, evolutionary foundations and cultural variation of human behavior and examines the downstream impacts on political institutions and economic prosperity. We'll take a broad interdisciplinary approach: we'll study historical and comparative approaches to understand cross-societal variation in culture and institutions; we'll study behavioral and experimental economics to get a better understanding of cultural determinants of economic decision making; we'll study approaches to culture provided by neighboring disciplines such as cultural evolution, evolutionary biology and anthropology. Questions that we'll address include: What factors promote liberty and free markets? Why did representative governments, impartial laws and impersonal markets first develop and proliferate in medieval Europe? Has culture shaped humans' genetic evolution? What is the role of kinship, social norms, trust for economic outcomes? What can explain the success of humans as a species?

The class will consist of a mixture of lectures, discussions and student presentations. The objective of the course is to familiarize you with the theory of cultural evolution and relate this to core questions in the field of economics. In addition, graduate students are encouraged and guided to develop their own research ideas that could form the basis of a chapter in their dissertation or a published scientific article. There will be students' presentation at the end of the semester and a final paper.

EVALUATION

Attendance & class participation:	10%
Reaction papers:	20%
Midterm:	30%
In-class presentation	20%
Final Paper	20%

The **midterm** is a two-hour written exam held on Thursday March 25 at 7:20 (during class time). The questions will test the materials covered up and including Week 8 (March 18). Some questions on the exams may be different for graduate and undergraduate students. Graduate students are expected to show more in-depth understanding of the material.

Reaction papers. Starting in Week 2 and until the student presentations start, I will ask you to submit a written reaction paper on the readings for each week. It can contain comprehension questions, questions for discussion, personal reflections (What surprised you? Where do you disagree?), key take-aways, or ideas for new research projects. The reaction paper should be *no* longer than one page (double spaced, font-size of 12). Please send your reaction paper via email by 9 pm one day *prior* to class. The first one is due no later than Wed. Feb 3, 9 pm; the last one no later than Wed. April 7, 9 pm.

Each student will give an **in-class presentation either** on April 15, April 22, or April 29. This can either be on a specific research paper (I can make suggestions but am open for your suggestions), or on a research

proposal (The research proposal is preferably for graduate students, though undergraduates have this option as well). Each student will give a presentation of about 15 to 20 min followed by a group discussion of 10 minutes. For the presentation, I advise to send me your abstract of 500 words way ahead of time (no later than 10 days before your presentation), and slides no later than one week before your presentation.

There will be a **final paper** to be handed in no later than 3rd of May, 12 pm. For every day the final paper is late I will deduct a letter grade (i.e. from A- to B+). This final paper is either a research proposal or a review essay and will be a write-up of the presentation. While I do not give any recommendation regarding length for graduate students, the final paper for undergraduate students should be no longer than 3 to 5 pages.

Students will be evaluated on class **participation and attendance**. An important component of this course is the class discussion of assigned academic articles. I'll expect that students will have read the readings assignments and have handed in the reaction papers. This will allow everyone to engage in meaningful discussion during class. I will take attendance lists.

OFFICE HOURS

There will be no in-person office hours. I encourage you to contact me via e-mail.

COURSE MATERIAL

We'll heavily rely on:

Joseph Henrich (2017) "The Secret of our Success", Princeton. Below I'll use the abbreviation SoS.

TENTATIVE SCHEDULE

Here you'll see a tentative outline of the course. I will add considerably more (mostly voluntary) reading material. Apart from an introduction to culture and economics the idea is that you'll become up to speed with this rapidly developing area of economic research.

Week	Date	Topics and Assignments
1	Jan 28	Introduction <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review of Syllabus and major topics. Discussion of grading and requirements. • How has culture traditional been viewed in economics? • How is culture defined? What is cultural evolution? <p><i>Readings:</i> SoS, Chapter 1 Guiso, L., Sapienza P. and L. Zingales. 2006. Does Culture Affect Economic Outcomes? The Journal of Economic Perspectives 20, Nr. 2 2006 Henrich, J., Heine, S., Norenzayan, A. 2010. "The Weirdest People in the World?" Behavioral and Brain Sciences 33(2-3):61-83</p>
2	Feb 04	The Origins of a Cultural Species: Intelligence vs Culture <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What makes humans as a species so successful? Intelligence? Culture? • How cultural evolution shaped our psychology for cultural learning, genes and physiology <p><i>Reading:</i> SoS Ch. 2, 3, 4, 5, 6</p>
3	Feb 11	Human Behavior and Psychology: cultural learners <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We'll learn about human propensity for conformity and over imitation • We'll learn about prestige and dominance <p><i>Reading:</i> SoS Ch. 7 & 8, tba</p>
4	Feb 18	Human Behavior and Norms <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We'll learn about human norm following

<i>Readings:</i> SoS Ch. 9, 10, & 11, tba		
5	Feb 25	Human Cooperation and Altruism <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We'll dive deeper in theories of human cooperation and altruism • We'll learn about ultimate and proximate explanation for human behavior • We'll learn about cross-societal experiments and its methodology <i>Readings:</i> tba Herrmann, B., et al. 2008. "Antisocial Punishment across societies" <i>Science</i> Gaechter S. and J. F. Schulz. 2016. "Intrinsic honesty and the prevalence of rule violations across societies" <i>Nature</i> , 531, 496-499.
6	Mar 04	Collective Brain: How population size and interconnectedness drive innovation <i>Readings:</i> SoS Ch. 12, tba Kremer, M. "Population Growth and Technological Change: 1,000,000 B.C. to 1990," <i>Quarterly Journal of Economics</i> . 108:3 (August 1993): 681-716
7	Mar 11	Culture, Biology and Society <i>Readings:</i> SoS Ch. 14, Ch. 17
8	Mar 18	Why history and ecology matter for economic outcomes <i>Readings:</i> tba Alesina, A., Giuliano, P., Nunn, N. 2013. "On the Origins of Gender Roles: Women and the plough" <i>The Quarterly Journal of Economics</i> , 128 (2), 469-530. Tahel, T., X. Zhang, S. Oishi, C. Shimin, D. Duan, X. Lan, and S. Kiyayama. 2014. "Large-Scale Psychological Differences Within China Explained by Rice Versus Wheat Agriculture," <i>Science</i> , 344: 603-608.
9	Mar 25	Midterm Exam
10	Apr 01	Economics of Religion – virtual guest lecture --
11	Apr 08	Culture, Institutions and the Wealth of Nations, I <i>Readings:</i> tba Acemoglu, A., Johnson, S., Robinson, J. 2001. The Colonial Origins of Comparative Development: An Empirical Investigation, <i>American Economic Review</i> , 91, 1369-1401 Glaeser, E., La Porta, R., Lopez-de-Silanes, F., Shleifer, A. 2004 "Do Institutions Cause Growth?" <i>Journal of Economic Growth</i> , 9, 271-303. Roland G. and Y. Gorodnichenko. 2017. "Culture, institutions and the wealth of nations," <i>Review of Economics and Statistics</i> , 99, 402-416. Tabellini, G. 2008. "The scope of cooperation: values and incentives". <i>Quarterly Journal of Economics</i> . 123 (3), 905-950. Schulz, J., Bahrami-Rad, D., Beauchamp, J., Henrich, J. 2019. "The Church, Intensive Kinship, and Global Psychological variation" <i>Science</i> Schulz, J. 2017. "Kin networks and Institutional Development"
12	Apr 15	Culture, Institutions and the Wealth of Nations, II / Student presentation
13	Apr 22	Student presentation
14	Apr 29	Student presentation
	May 03	Paper due

SAFE RETURN TO CAMPUS

Since we'll have an in-person course, all students are required to have completed Safe Return to Campus Training prior to visiting campus. Training is available in Blackboard (<https://mymason.gmu.edu>). Students are required to follow the university's public health and safety precautions and procedures outlined on the university Safe Return to Campus webpage (www2.gmu.edu/safe-return-plan). Similarly, all students in face to face and hybrid courses must also complete the Mason COVID Health Check daily, seven days a week. The COVID Health Check system uses a color code system and students will receive either a Green, Yellow, or Red email response. Only students who receive a "green" notification are permitted to attend

courses with a face-to-face component. If you suspect that you are sick or have been directed to self-isolate, please quarantine or get testing. Faculty are allowed to ask you to show them that you have received a Green email and are thereby permitted to be in class.

STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Disability Services at George Mason University is committed to providing equitable access to learning opportunities for all students by upholding the laws that ensure equal treatment of people with disabilities. If you are seeking accommodations for this class, please first visit <http://ds.gmu.edu/> for detailed information about the Disability Services registration process. Then please discuss your approved accommodations with me. I am glad to make accommodations for students with disabilities. Disability Services is located in Student Union Building I (SUB I), Suite 2500. Email: ods@gmu.edu | Phone: (703) 993-2474

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

It is expected that students adhere to the George Mason University Honor Code as it relates to integrity regarding coursework and grades. The Honor Code reads as follows: "To promote a stronger sense of mutual responsibility, respect, trust, and fairness among all members of the George Mason University community and with the desire for greater academic and personal achievement, we, the student members of the University Community have set forth this: Student members of the George Mason University community pledge not to cheat, plagiarize, steal and/or lie in matters related to academic work." More information about the Honor Code, including definitions of cheating, lying, and plagiarism, can be found at the Office of Academic Integrity website at <http://oai.gmu.edu>