

Commodities and Capitalism

Spring 2021

ANT 237

Tuesday & Thursday – 11:35 – 12:50

1 credit

This course will take place online synchronously.

Sessions will be recorded and significant aspects of class will be asynchronous to ensure ease of access for everyone.

Instructor's information

Dr. Michael Polson

Email (Outlook):

Course meeting Zoom link:

Personal zoom room (this is where all office hours will take place):

Office hours:

Tuesday 1:30-2:30

Thursday: 2:30-3:30

If these times do not work, please contact me to make an appointment at another time.

More about me: www.michaelpolson.com

What is this course about?

In their travel across varied social settings, commodities mediate social relationships, adorn daily life, and are imbued with meanings that emerge from - and exceed - capitalist logics. In other words, commodities make worlds, capitalist and more-than-capitalist. This course will introduce students to multiple ways of understanding and studying commodities, largely through examination of ethnographic work on how commodities are produced, mobilized and regarded. Topics addressed includes how commodification relates to nature, labor, bodies, consumption, culture, money, gifts and other matters.

This course is broken into several units to give students a circumspect understanding of the numerous ways commodities (and capitalism broadly) have been understood.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of the course, you will be able to:

- 1) Grasp key debates, concepts, and orientations in the study of commodities in capitalist societies.

- 2) Learn to use and apply these debates, concepts, and orientations to a variety of topics addressed in class.
- 3) Adapt and wield the concepts in self-designed projects analyzing particular aspects of how commodities shape our selves, our relations, and our world.

This course fulfills the requirement for Social-Scientific Thought (SSRQ). It can also be credited toward fulfillment of the Anthropology major and minor.

What required texts, materials, and technologies will I need?

The two required books for this course are:

- Sidney Mintz. *Sweetness and Power: The place of sugar in modern history*. Penguin, 1986.
- Anna Tsing *The Mushroom at the End of the World*. Princeton University Press, 2015.

I intend to put all other readings online as accessible PDFs or hyperlinks.

Students should also have access to the following technologies, available from [Davidson T&I](#). Please contact them for assistance and resources to get access and training. Other platforms and programs may be used:

Zoom

Hypothes.is

Google Chrome

Google Drive (docs, spreadsheets, slides etc.)

We will determine a communication and posting forum collectively (Slack, Facebook private group, Moodle etc.)

Course format

Generally, the course will include:

- One to three course readings and/or materials per class (see below).
- A weekly or biweekly synthesis.
- Synchronous sessions that consist of:
 - a brief check-in on logistics;
 - parking lot for questions/issues;
 - a rotating synopsis and small group facilitated discussion from designated groups;
 - large group convening.
- For those attending asynchronously, a period (prior to next class) to respond to reading and discussion questions/class videos. (See "Participation" below).
- A final book synopsis and analysis.

Requirements and Grading

Grading is broken down as follows:

1) **Social Reading Groups– 20% of final grade**

During the semester we will all participate in a collective reading group through the Hypothes.is platform. Every class period, you should post 3 comments or responses to others. At least one post must be an original comment (not just a response to others). *These must be done 90 minutes before class*. In generating comments and responses, focus on the following elements:

- identifying the article's core argument;

- identifying critical supporting evidence for that argument and/or key concepts;
- pose a question about unclear/confusing elements;
- pose a broader question that the reading brings up;
- make a connection/comparison/contrast to other pieces we have read.

Evaluations for Reading Group

- This element is graded on the basis of completion (not qualitative grading).
- You may miss up to 3 classes worth of posts (9 posts) with no grade penalty.
- At the end of the semester, this means you should have posted *at least 45 responses*. More responses will reflect well on your participation grade (below).

2) **Presentation & Discussion Leadership – 20% of final grade (4% x 5 sessions)**

During most class periods, you (as part of a revolving 2-person group) will give a brief 3-4 slide presentation on the day's reading and lead a discussion. When more than one reading is assigned, choose the first reading listed or do both/all. I recommend meeting with your small group to discuss the reading and generate the presentation. People attending asynchronously should be actively engaged with their partner. The presentation should be done on Google Slides and should be set to "Share" with users at Davidson. You should post the slides to the appropriate place on Moodle. The slides should do the following:

- 1) Identify the core argument.
- 2) Explain how the author builds that argument. What evidence, concepts and logical progression does the author use to build that argument?
- 3) 2-3 answerable and/or provocative questions that derive from the reading, Hypothes.is comments, current events, your reflections, etc. Feel free to use outside materials that can be reviewed quickly for discussion purposes.

Evaluation for Discussion/Presentation

- This element is based on completion of the elements above.
- Group assignments only work when we all actively participate! Please do your share. With each presentation, ask yourself: Have I done as much as my partner(s)? If not, step it up! Please talk to me if problems arise.

3) **Synthesis & Commodity Considerations – 32% (8 x 4% each or 4 x 8% each)**

Instead of a midterm or longer papers, you will keep a Synthesis Journal. Every week (or every other week, depending on class preference), you will write a 1.5-2p (or 3-4p, if biweekly) synthesis of the readings for the previous period. To "synthesize" means to assemble and make sense of ideas. Your analysis, then, should ponder how the readings speak to and diverge from one another, what questions they pose for further inquiry, and how they speak to the themes and progression of the course. I may, at times, give you prompts or external resources to consider in writing these syntheses. To begin with you should pick a commodity – defined plainly here as a thing that is useful, exchanged, and produced by humans in some way – and this will serve as your "heuristic" to think through course material. A heuristic is an example, or case, that allows you to think through broader issues. After the synthesis section, you should apply your synthetic analysis to your chosen commodity. How do the readings instruct you to view the commodity? What becomes visible?

Process & Evaluation for Syntheses

- Synthesis Journal entries are due every Friday (or every other Friday) at 11PM.
- Every entry period, one of your classmates (in same rotation as presentations) will review and comment on your entry by 8PM Monday night. These can be marginal annotations or a written response at the end.
 - o It's polite to give a brief response to your reviewer!
- You should use this response and your reading of one other response to assign yourself a grade. In grading yourself, you should consider:
 - o How much effort you put into synthesizing the material;
 - o Whether there were any major blind spots or misconceptions in your analysis; and
 - o How much you are improving from previous entries.
- You may miss two syntheses (if we do a weekly response) OR one synthesis if we do every other week.

4) **Participation – 8% of final grade** (*synchronous/asynchronous*)

For students attending class online synchronously, I will be assessing participation. This does not necessarily mean talking a lot, but rather, making timely and insightful contributions and giving active attention during class time. As much as possible, please leave camera on.

For students attending asynchronously, generate and share a Google doc with the professor. This doc will contain responses to the readings and/or class period. Responses are due by 11:59pm of the next day and should be sent via Moodle (e.g. Wednesday at 11:59PM for a Tuesday class). Responses should be 250 words max. You will:

- EITHER respond to questions or discussions that emerged during class (with a note on how they relate to the reading)
- OR respond to directly to the reading by identifying the core argument, detailing how that argument develops, note key concepts that result, and offer at least one reflection on the reading (e.g. its relevance, problems, questions it raises)

You are allowed up to 3 unexcused “absences” (either synchronously or asynchronously). After that, you should make up for missed classes by following the directions for “asynchronous” attendance above.

NOTE: All class sessions will be recorded and posted on Moodle. If for some reason, class recordings are not available, please post a reading response (“OR” option above).

5) **Final Project – 20%** (*synchronous/asynchronous*)

In lieu of a final exam, you will write a book review of Anna Tsing's *Mushroom at the End of the World*. I am happy to hold reading groups during the semester and/or you should feel free to read this with your classmates. I will post a rubric for the final paper as well as a scaffolded outline of the components and format it should follow.

[What are the course policies?](#)

Communications

I am available by email. I will make every effort to reply to you within 36 hours. If you don't hear from me after that period, please follow up!

I am available for office hours (Tuesday 1:30-2:30 and Thursday 2:30-3:30). I encourage you to sign up for slots for these hours—to discuss ideas, review papers and grades, talk about class, and so on. I would love to talk to each of you individually at least once (but it's not mandatory). I am also available to meet outside of my set office hours if they do not work for you. Just get in touch with some proposed times.

Also, please visit the Moodle site often for updates. I will be posting updates and announcements there. When they are particularly urgent, I will send those announcements via email.

An Invitation: Student Support in Times of Covid-19

This is a unique time we are living through. All of us are dealing with different life circumstances. I am here to support you in any way I can, though I will not always have the skills or capacities to do so. I am more than happy to have flexibility around modifications to help you benefit from and complete the course, should you need them. Please do not hesitate to bring your concerns to me!

Respect, Open Minds, Critical Minds

A prerequisite to this course is an open mind and an ability to listen to others. We will be discussing many issues, some of which likely affect people in the classroom deeply. Keep in mind: we are all products of different experiences. Sometimes unearthing the assumptions that anchor those experiences can be upsetting, inspire passions, and challenge deeply set ideas. Because of this, it is important that we collectively create a space in which different ideas and expressions can be heard, discussed, and, from time to time, change us. Please respect each other by listening and not reacting in a hurtful or rash manner. Please be aware of the kinds of space you occupy in the classroom relative to other students. If offering critique, please be constructive. If we all do this, we will find an open reception for our own thoughts.

A major part of keeping an open mind is to check assumptions about your classmates. Some may have grown up in the United States, while others have not. Some may have grown up wealthy, others poor. Some in cities, others in rural places. Some in communities of color, some in all-white surroundings. Some may be queer, or straight, or not have a sexuality at all. Some may have had the opportunity and exposure to be intensely politicized while others are being exposed to politics for the first time. You cannot know these things at a glance. Therefore, no matter where you are in your academic or political trajectory, challenge your assumptions about your classmates and what you think you might know about them.

Just as we each bring valuable (and necessarily limited) perspectives to the class, the authors of the readings do the same. Please disagree with them. That said, also understand that each author is not simply an individual but is speaking within and as the result of a larger social process of sharing, deliberating, discussing, and arguing in collective learning environments like this one.

Finally we live in a society—and are enmeshed in a language—that privileges the binary of male and female. This is despite the increasing understanding that there is a wide range of gender diversity in the world. To de-center the privileging of a male/female binary, to challenge the everyday assumptions we make about gender, and to give space for a diversity of genders in the classroom, I propose that when referring to other people we either utilize their name or, if in the third person, by “they” or “their.” We do this all the time already (“Have you seen the waiter?” “I don’t know where they went.”), so this should not be a major challenge. If it does feel like a challenge, please imagine the types of impositions binaristic he/she language has upon transgender, genderqueer, or non-binaristic people. That said, since this course is online, please feel free to clarify your pronouns in your Zoom handle (name and pronouns).

Attendance and Punctuality

Online attendance is not required. However, to receive credit for online attendance, you should be logged in and ready to go at the start of class (11:35AM). I will be signed in a few minutes early as often as possible to field any logistical questions and just to chat. Join me! If you are more than 20 minutes late (or if you have technical difficulties that make you miss more than 55 minutes of our 75 minute class), you are still welcome to join but I ask that you submit an “asynchronous” response (detailed in “Participation” under grade) to account for the day’s participation.

You are allowed to miss 3 unexcused classes with no penalty. After that you should submit an asynchronous response to class (see “Participation” grade above). I understand these are exceptional times, so please be in communication if events are keeping you from consistent attendance.

Preparation

Come to class, synchronously or asynchronously, prepared. This means:

- Read /view/listen to all the required readings included on this syllabus.
- Have the readings (and slides, if applicable) open during class periods.
- Check the Moodle site and/or your email at least by the night before class for any additional items I may want you to look over.
- Have assignments when they’re due.
- Figure out a system for taking notes during class and stick to it.
- When attending synchronously, please pay attention. You do not have to stare deeply into the screen at all times, but please be sitting upright (and comfortably), have a clear workspace (on your computer or on a physical desk), and place your phone on airplane mode (unless you need it for accessing sites/apps relevant to class).

Davidson College Honor Code

Each Davidson student is honor bound to refrain from stealing, lying about College business, and cheating on academic work. Stealing is the intentional taking of any property without right or permission. Lying is intentional misrepresentation of any form. Cheating is any practice, method, or assistance, whether explicitly forbidden or unmentioned, that involves any degree of dishonesty, fraud, or deceit. Cheating includes plagiarism, which is representing another's ideas or words as one's own. Each student is responsible for learning and observing appropriate documentation of another's work. Each Davidson student is honor bound to report immediately all violations of the Honor Code of which the student has first-hand knowledge; failure to do so is itself a violation of the Honor Code.

<http://www.davidson.edu/about/distinctly-davidson/honor-code>

Access and Disability Services Accommodations

The college welcomes requests for accommodations related to disability and will grant those that are determined to be reasonable and maintain the integrity of a program or curriculum. To make such a request or to begin a conversation about a possible request, please contact the Office of Academic Access and Disability Resources, which is located in the Center for Teaching and Learning in the E.H. Little Library: Beth Bleil, Director, bebleil@davidson.edu, 704-894-2129; or Alysén Beaty, Assistant Director, albeaty@davidson.edu, 704-894-2939. It is best to submit accommodation requests within the drop/add period; however, requests can be made at any time in the semester. Please keep in mind that accommodations are not retroactive.

Other resources you should keep in mind include:

Campus Police	704-894-2178 or 911
Dean of Students Office	704-894-2225
Student Health/Counseling	704-894-2300

Chaplain's Office	704-894-2423
Georgia Ringle, Health Educator	704-894-2902
Town of Davidson Police	704-892-5131

Date	Class topic/ unit name	Pre-class work for students	Assignments due
1-26	Introduction	Let's say hi!	
1-28	The gift & the commodity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Herrmann, Gretchen M. "Gift or commodity: What changes hands in the US garage sale?." <i>American ethnologist</i> 24, no. 4 (1997): 910-930. - Russ, Ann Julienne. "Love's labor paid for: gift and commodity at the threshold of death." <i>Cultural Anthropology</i> 20, no. 1 (2005): 128-155. 	
2-2	Commodities, Gifts, & Excess	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Palomera, Jaime. "Reciprocity, commodification, and poverty in the era of financialization." <i>Current Anthropology</i> 55, no. S9 (2014): S105-S115. - Strathern, Marilyn. "Gifts money cannot buy." <i>Social Anthropology</i> 20, no. 4 (2012): 397-410. - Amiel Bize, "Gleaning" (2019): https://culanth.org/fieldsights/gleaning 	
2-4	Commodity chains: Clothes & Cottonseed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Collins, Jane. "The rise of a global garment industry and the reimagination of worker solidarity." <i>Critique of Anthropology</i> 27, no. 4 (2007): 395-409. - Ramamurthy, Priti. "Rearticulating caste: the global cottonseed commodity chain and the paradox of smallholder capitalism in south India." <i>Environment and Planning A</i> 43, no. 5 (2011): 1035-1056. 	
2-9	Commodity Chains: Sugar	Mintz, Sydney <i>Sweetness & Power: Introduction, Chapter 1</i>	<i>No Hypothes.is due</i>
2-11	Commodity Chains: Production	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Sweetness & Power: Chapter 2 (Production)</i> - -WATCH (dependings on access): "Mardi Gras: Made in China": https://davidson.kanopy.com/video/mardi-gras-made-china-0 (also in Reserves) - OR Death by Design (https://deathbydesignfilm.com/) at http://docuseek2.com.ezproxy.lib.davidson.edu/v/a/a2r3/1/0/0 	<i>No Hypothes.is due</i>
2-16	Commodity Chains: Consumption	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Sweetness & Power: Chapter 3 (Consumption)</i> - READ/SKIM: Roseberry, William. "The rise of yuppie coffees and the reimagination of class in the United States." <i>American Anthropologist</i> (1996): 762-775. 	<i>No Hypothes.is due</i>
2-18	Commodity Chains: Power	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Sweetness & Power: Chapter 4 & 5 (Power; Eating and Being)</i> - Chin, Elizabeth. "Commodity Racism." <i>The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Consumption and Consumer Studies</i> (2015): 1-2. 	<i>No Hypothes.is due</i>
2-23	Marx's theory of commodities & value	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - David Harvey – "The Buying and Selling of Labour Capacity" & w/Cindy Katz "Social Reproduction – Part I" (optional Part II) http://davidharvey.org/2018/11/new-podcast-david-harveys-anti-capitalist-chronicles/ - Marxian labor theory of value – https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b2h7NWpyfkE&feature=emb_logo 	

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Selections from CH10 – Working Day: https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch10.htm 	
2-25	Value & exploitation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Wright, Melissa W. "Introduction: Disposable women and other myths of global capitalism." <i>Disposable women and other myths of global capitalism</i>. Taylor & Francis, 2006. 1-19. - Corwin, Julia. "Between toxics and gold: devaluing informal labor in the global urban mine." <i>Capitalism Nature Socialism</i> 31, no. 4 (2020): 106-123. 	
3-2	Alienation, abstraction, and the commodity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lukács, Georg. "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat." <i>History and class consciousness: Studies in Marxist dialectics</i> (1967 [1923]): 83-222. 	No presentation group
3-4	NO CLASS	Semester Break 1	
3-9	Fictitious Commodities, Enclosures & the Basis of Commodification	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Polanyi, Karl. Chapters 3-6 ("Habitation vs. Improvement;" "Societies and Economic Systems," "Evolution of the Market Pattern," "The Self-Regulating Market and the Fictitious Commodities: Labor, Land and Money") <i>The Great Transformation</i>. Boston: Beacon, 1944. - David Harvey "Accumulation by Dispossession" at http://davidharvey.org/2018/11/new-podcast-david-harveys-anti-capitalist-chronicles/ 	
3-11	Commodification of Nature	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Kelly, Alice B., and Nancy Lee Peluso. "Frontiers of commodification: State lands and their formalization." <i>Society & Natural Resources</i> 28, no. 5 (2015): 473-495. - Li, Tania Murray. "To make live or let die? Rural dispossession and the protection of surplus populations." <i>Antipode</i> 41 (2010): 66-93. 	
3-16	Commodification of Nature	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Cilia, Laurent. "The plight of the honeybee: a socioecological analysis of large-scale beekeeping in the United States." <i>Sociologia Ruralis</i> 59, no. 4 (2019): 831-849. - Richardson, Ben. "Making a market for sustainability: The commodification of certified palm oil." <i>New Political Economy</i> 20, no. 4 (2015): 545-568. 	
3-18	Commodification of social life	Elyachar, Julia. "Phatic labor, infrastructure, and the question of empowerment in Cairo." <i>American Ethnologist</i> 37, no. 3 (2010): 452-464.	
3-23	Commodity imaginaries	Appadurai, Arjun. "Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value" <i>The social life of things: Commodities in cultural perspective</i> . Cambridge University Press, 1988.	
3-25	Commodity Biographies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Bode, Maarten. "Taking traditional knowledge to the market: the commoditization of Indian medicine." <i>Anthropology & Medicine</i> 13, no. 3 (2006): 225-236. - Walsh, Vivien, and Jordan Goodman. "From Taxol to Taxol®: The changing identities and ownership of an anti-cancer drug." <i>Medical anthropology</i> 21, no. 3-4 (2002): 307-336. 	

3-30	Commodity Society & Consumption	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Benjamin, Walter. "The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction." <i>Media and cultural studies: KeyWorks, 2nd edn, Blackwell, Malden</i> (2009): 18-40. - Adorno, Theodor W., and Anson G. Rabinbach. "Culture industry reconsidered." <i>New German Critique</i> 6 (1975): 12-19. 	
4-1	NO CLASS	<i>Read Final Book</i>	
4-6	Commodity Society & Consumption	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Chin, Elizabeth. "Introduction and at least 1 other chapter (your pick!) <i>My life with things: The consumer diaries.</i> Duke University Press, 2016. - Chin, Elizabeth. "Ethnically correct dolls: toying with the race industry." <i>American Anthropologist</i> 101, no. 2 (1999): 305-321. 	
4-8	NO CLASS	Semester Break 2	
4-13	Value Upended	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Perspectives on Jean Baudrillard's Simulacra and Simulation - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pupLQd3SRms and/or https://www.openculture.com/2020/07/an-introduction-to-jean-baudrillard.html - Foster, Robert J. "Entropy, alchemy and negative pigs: Obviating the matter of wealth." <i>History and Anthropology</i> 29, no. 3 (2018): 292-306. 	
4-15	Fetishes & Technology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Pels, Peter J. "Magical things: On fetishes, commodities, and computers." In <i>The Oxford Handbook of material culture studies.</i> 2010. - Harvey, David. "The fetish of technology: Causes and consequences." <i>Macalester International</i> 13, no. 1 (2003): 7. - WATCH Panel on Technology & Post-Capitalism – Mason, Harvey Bastani, Bell, Meadway - https://novaramedia.com/2017/09/22/technology-and-post-capitalism/ 	
4-22	Money & Debt	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Hart, Keith. "Money is always personal and impersonal." <i>Anthropology Today</i> 23, no. 5 (2007): 12. - Graeber, David. "The truth is out: money is just an IOU, and the banks are rolling in it." <i>The Guardian</i> 18 (2014). - Graeber: "What is Debt?": https://www.nakedcapitalism.com/2011/08/what-is-debt-%E2%80%93-an-interview-with-economic-anthropologist-david-graeber.html 	
4-27	Decommodification & Abolishing the Commodity Relation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Vail, John. "Decommodification and egalitarian political economy." <i>Politics & Society</i> 38, no. 3 (2010): 310-346. - The Red Nation – Communism is the Horizon, Queer Indigenous Feminism is the Way - http://therednation.org/communism-is-the-horizon-queer-indigenous-feminism-is-the-way/ 	
4-29	REVIEW		Last response: <i>Your Commodity in Retrospect</i>
5-8	Final Due		

