PEOPLES AND CULTURES OF THE AMAZON (2012)
Dr. Eric B. Ross

Wednesday, 6:10-8pm

COURSE DESCRIPTION
The essential aim of this course is to explore, theoretically, empirically, historically and philosophically, the extent, the nature and the sources of cultural variation across the vast Amazon Basin. Special emphasis will be placed upon the relationship between environmental resource variability and cultural practices and beliefs. In the course of this exploration, however, we will also consider the salient features and implications of both mainstream anthropological perspectives on cultural interpretation generally and the nature of some key debates, both about Amazon cultures per se and about the contribution of Amazonian research to wider anthropological concerns and discourse. These will range from the very nature of culture and the character of human nature itself, to the role of war and conflict in human societies, to the fate of the Amazon in the face of contemporary regional and global development. In the process, one of the on-going themes of the course will be to look at Amazonian societies, not in order to romanticize the determinants of human life-ways or cultural patterns, but, on the contrary, to demystify them

COURSE ASSESSMENT: One term paper of c. 3000 words in length. Each student will come up with their own topic and finalize it after discussion with the course instructor (this is mandatory). The paper will be due on the first day of exam week. (Extensions are permitted, if I’m adequately forewarned.)

RECOMMENDED CLASSIC READINGS: No specific books are required for the course, but there are certain works which I highly recommend, many of which can be purchased for ridiculously low prices on (as it happens) Amazon. These include: Siskind, Janet-To Hunt in the Morning Chagnon, Napoleon-Yanomamo Harner, Michael- Jivaro Wagley, Charles –Amazon Town Lyons, Patricia- Native South Americans Allan Holmberg, Nomads of the Long Bow David Maybury-Lewis, Akwe-Shavante Jules Henry, 1941 Jungle People: A Kaingang Tribe of the Highlands of Brazil Yolanda and Robert Murphy, Women of the Forest Irving Goldman, The Cubeo: Indians of the Northwest Amazon Charles Wagley, Welcome of Tears: The Tapirape Indians of Central Brazil William Smole, The Yanoama Indians: A Cultural Geography,
1 Jan 18: Amazon Studies as an Empirical and Intellectual Project: 
Introduction and Overview
This introductory class will sketch an overview of the course and give students an 
idea of its aims and objectives. In particular, it will explore the varying implications 
of different interpretations of Amazon cultural variability, as a contribution to 
fruitful discussion and debate about wider anthropological issues and problems.

Cowell, Adrian 1970 *The Tribe That Hides from Man*  
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HhAvuPlhdNA

2. Jan 25: The Ecological Architecture: Renewability and Sustainability
This section provides a general overview of the ecological features of the Neotropics 
and of the broader pattern of human adaptations.

*Reading*
Gomez-Pompa, A., C. Vasquez-Yanesd and S. Guevara 1972 *The Tropical Forest: A 
Nonrenewable Resource.* *Science* 177 (1 Sept.):762-765

Myers, Thomas, P. 1992 *Agricultural Limitations of the Amazon in Theory and 

Sponsel, Leslie 1986 *Amazon Ecology and Adaptation.* *Annual Review of 

Tootal, Albert and Sir Richard Francis Burton 1874 *The Captivity of Hans Stade of 
Hesse in A.D. 1547-1555 Among the Wild Tribes of Eastern Brazil.* London: The 
Hakluyt Society. 
http://books.google.com/ebooks/reader?id=7QUVAAAQAIAJ&printsec=frontcover 
&output=reader

3. Feb. 1: Agricultural Adaptations: Pre-Columbian and Contemporary Modes 
of Food Production
Provides insight into the ecological limitations on Amazonian horticulture and 
explores some of the core dynamics of neotropical food production.

*Reading:
DeBoer, Warren R. 1981 *Buffer Zones in the Cultural Ecology of Aboriginal 

Denevan, William *The Pristine Myth: The Landscape of the Americas in 1492.*  
http://jan.ucc.nau.edu/~alcoze/for398/class/pristinemyth.htm

__________________ 1998 Comments on prehistoric agriculture in Amazonia. *Culture 
& Agriculture* 20: 54-59.


**4. Feb. 8:**

**Toward the Making of the Contemporary Amazon: The Colonial Encounter.**

Despite the long-held view, now fortunately in decline, that Amazonian societies could be looked upon in cultural terms, without significant reference to historical context, few parts of the Basin were untouched, directly or indirectly, by the ascendency of European colonialists. In this session, you will be introduced to certain aspects of the legacy of that historical background and explore the many facets of transition from Amerindian to peasant livelihood.

*Reading:*


Markham, Clements (Translator and Editor) 1859 *Expeditions into the Valley of the Amazons, 1539, 1540, 1639*. London: Hakluyt Society. 
[http://books.google.co.uk/ebooks/reader?id=lQFjAAAAMAAJ&printsec=frontcover&output=reader](http://books.google.co.uk/ebooks/reader?id=lQFjAAAAMAAJ&printsec=frontcover&output=reader)


**5. Feb 15: Where is Human Nature? Debates on Amazon Warfare**

This section explores the extent to which the study of Amazon societies may contribute to some major conceptual issues in anthropology and, more broadly, in contemporary social policy, by helping to illuminate what is often called “human nature.”
5. **Feb. 22: Hunting and its Evolutionary Impact and Implications**

Much of the critical variation in Amazonian societies hinges on the interplay of horticulture and hunting. In this section, primary attention will be given to the latter, with special attention to the influence of hunting on other aspects of cultural behavior, from warfare to settlement size and stability to sexual relations.

**Reading:**


6. **Feb. 29: Food Taboos: Culture or Strategy?**

The subject, the significance and the explanation of food taboos sums up many of the challenges of anthropology in the Amazon and, indeed, poses many salient questions
for the discipline as a whole about the very nature of cultural variability. This session offers an opportunity for students not only to explore differences in dietary preferences and avoidance in the Neotropics, but to consider the implications of contrasting explanatory paradigms, principally that of human or cultural ecology which posits a strategic material relationship between taboos and survival and that of symbolic, structuralist or semiotic perspectives which argue for diet as a system of meaning independent of material reality.

Reading:


7. March 7: Squaring the Circle: Measuring Livelihoods
Analysis of anthropological data in terms of a number of finite questions assumes methods of data collection that are theoretically informed and capable of yielding testable and comparative generalization. Having said that, data collection in the Amazon presents special challenges. In this session, students will explore the nature of those challenges and the potential and limits of alternative lines of field inquiry as a means of resolving certain problems of culture and development.

Reading:


SPRING BREAK

8 March 21: Naturalists, Explorers and Indigenous: Non-Anthropological Voices

It would be as unrealistic as it is unnecessary to limit our knowledge of the Amazon peoples to what is known through recent anthropological research. There is, in fact, a voluminous literature, dating from the mid-19th century, which embraces work by European naturalists, European and North American explorers and even, more recently, outsiders who have, rarely, been adopted into indigenous society. All of
these accounts add immeasurably to our cumulative understanding of the nature of the Amazonian world, in its human and non-human dimensions. Through a discussion of such material, students will acquire not only an appreciation of the opportunities that such resources provide, but a sense of the intellectual challenge they present to integrate such disparate sources into a coherent and theoretically lucid picture.

**Reading:**


PBS Lost in the Amazon [A British documentary about the explorer Colonel Percy Fawcett, who disappeared in the Brazilian Amazon in 1925, while searching for what he called the Lost City of Z] [http://www.pbs.org/wnet/secrets/episodes/lost-in-the-amazon-watch-the-full-episode/829/](http://www.pbs.org/wnet/secrets/episodes/lost-in-the-amazon-watch-the-full-episode/829/)

**9 March 28: Investing in Destruction: The World Bank, and the Development of the Amazon.**

This session focuses on how and why the World Bank and the other Bretton Woods institutions have played a major role in the implementation of Western development strategies, favoring the immediate interests of multinational capital over the long-term needs of local communities and their livelihood-focused patterns of resource use. Students will appreciate the nature of the protracted conflict between development, as defined in Western discourse, and strategies of local autonomy.

**Film: Banking on Disaster (Adrian Cowell)**

**Reading:**


Kaimowitz, D. et al nd *Hamburger Connection Fuels Amazon Deforestation*. Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR).


The emphasis in this session will be, not so much as on individual detail as on trying to construct a broader picture of contemporary social and environmental trends and patterns associated with extractive industries, from the days of the rubber boom to more recent multinational projects. Students will, in the end, be able to situate local and regional trends within a broader historical and global context, integrating anthropological insight with a world-system perspective, striving toward theoretical generalization.

**Film: Crude (Joe Berlinger)**

*Reading:*


S. Brian Burkhalter & Robert Murphy, 1989 Tappers and Sappers: Rubber, Gold
and Money among the Mundurucu. *American Ethnologist* 16(1):100-116


[http://www.archive.org/stream/putumayodevilspa00hardrich#page/n7/mode/2up](http://www.archive.org/stream/putumayodevilspa00hardrich#page/n7/mode/2up)

11. April 11: The Force and Fate of Development in Amazonia

A major factor in the recent development of Amazonia, in terms of its environmental resources and indigenous peoples, has been the expansion of commercial interests, including especially ranching and cash crop production. This session compares and contrasts the characteristic impacts of these different activities and helps to situate the Amazon within the context of the changing world economy. But, at the same time, it must be realized that not all of the people who exploit the Amazon are
profiting from its destruction; some, such as charcoal makers, are themselves the human victims of a larger system. These virtual slave workers make the charcoal that is needed to produce the pig iron that is exported to the United States, where it is a strategic ingredient of the steel industry that is essential to automobile manufacturing. Of equal concern, as a long-standing and recurrent feature of development in the Amazon has been the exploitative, if not genocidal treatment of indigenous peoples. Though this was perhaps at its worst in the days of the rubber boom, there is no doubt that it continues.

Reading:


Smith, Michael and David Voreacos 2007 BRAZIL: Enslaved Workers Make Charcoal Used to Make Basic Steel Ingredient. *CorpWatch* [http://www.corpwatch.org/article.php?id=14328](http://www.corpwatch.org/article.php?id=14328)

Film: *The Charcoal People* (Nigel Noble)

13 April 18: Discussion of Papers

From the arrival of Europeans in the 16\textsuperscript{TH} century, there has been conflict between indigenous groups and outsiders and new forms of hostility among Amerindian communities, under the influence of outside, chiefly market, forces. Today, indigenous communities increasingly struggle to create a sustainable livelihood in the face of environmental destruction by powerful commercial interests. This final session explores the different strategies of resistance and liberation from global
market hegemony that are bringing new forms and purposes of resource use to the fore. Students will appreciate that these new developments are not unique to the Third World, but are occurring throughout what is now known as “the Global South.”

**Readings:**


