

ANTH 150

EXPLORING ANTHROPOLOGY: ANTHROPOLOGY OF MONEY

INSTRUCTOR: DR. DAROMIR RUDNYCKYJ

COURSE DESCRIPTION AND OBJECTIVES

We use money so frequently that, without it, life seems almost unimaginable. Many of the relationships we have with other people on a daily basis (bus drivers, baristas, cashiers, and even friends and family) and most of the work we do, involves exchanges of money. Yet, we almost never stop to think about what money is or how it works. But how does it work? How is it possible to walk into the Bibliocafé and exchange some shiny, stamped metal objects, brightly coloured pieces of paper (or nowadays ornately-designed polymer sheets) for a cup of coffee, or better yet, food? What gives this metal, paper, and plastic such power? Why can't we use something else we might be carrying around to perform the same transaction? If, in the 1700s, one could walk into the Fort Albany HBC post on the western shore of James Bay and exchange a beaver pelt for either a brass kettle, a blanket, eight knives, or a gallon of brandy, why can't one go into The Bay today and use beaver pelts to buy a feather duvet, knife set, or bottle of liquor?

This lecture course explores the human practices that make money possible. It seeks to show how the monetary system we use today and take for granted as universal is in fact the specific inheritance of a series of essentially random historical events that began in ancient times. We will critically reflect on the use of money in contemporary Canada by comparing and contrasting it to examples of money and money-like systems that have existed in other times and cultures. We will seek to better understand the complex relationship between money and society and anthropological arguments about the social nature of money. We will further seek to understand how money is changing today and what the implications of these changes are for economic development, addressing inequality, and political power. In so doing, we will critically evaluate money in the many forms it has taken historically, from gold, grain, beads, and shells to paper, plastic, points, airmiles, computer code, and bitcoin. We will further consider the implications of the move toward cashlessness that has accelerated in the wake of the coronavirus covid-19 pandemic.

SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

- Understand how anthropological approaches are useful in uncovering the cultural assumptions embedded in everyday economic activities and the use of money.
- Develop skills to critically analyze how the role money plays in society, culture, and politics.
- Develop the ability to understand ideas and behaviours in specific cultural and social contexts.
- Learn to recognize that social creations, such as money, are not natural outcomes of some pre-given order but are instead deeply shaped by history and culture.
- Develop critical thinking and reading skills.