

Global History: New Anthropological Perspectives

HUMA 2634

3 credits

Instructor Name: Giulio Ongaro

Email: hmongaro@ust.hk

Class Schedule: Wednesdays 9:30AM – 11:20AM (Room 2502)

Tutorial Schedule: T1: Wednesdays 6PM – 6:50PM (Room 4579)

T2: Thursdays 12PM – 12:50PM (Room G009B, CYT Bldg)

Office Hours: Wednesdays 2PM – 4PMpm (Room 2354). By appointment.

Course Description

This course takes on the broad sweep of human history from an anthropological perspective, shedding light on the vast cultural, social, and political diversity of human experience. Popular accounts of global history depict human society evolving stepwise in a unilinear fashion: egalitarian hunter-gatherers gave way to hierarchical agricultural societies, followed by the rise of cities and, later, the establishment of states. New archaeological and anthropological discoveries are now challenging this picture: the trajectory of human history, it turns out, has been far more diverse and unpredictable than previously imagined. The course delves into anthropological phenomena that showcase this diversity, such as hunter-gatherers' seasonality, "play agriculture" in Amazonia, egalitarian cities, urban revolutions in Mesoamerica, and stranger-kings across the Pacific. These case studies, analyzed through modern anthropological theory, reveal the deep role that the collective imagination has played in shaping our history. They not only illuminate the past but also offer insights into the possibilities for humanity's future.

The course structure consists of a two-hour lecture and a one-hour tutorial each week. The primary course textbook is *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity* (2021) by David Graeber and David Wengrow. Each tutorial will focus on discussing one chapter of this book.

Intended Learning Outcomes (ILOs)

By the end of this course, students should be able to:

1. Acquire comprehensive knowledge of the latest anthropological debates surrounding the grand narratives of global history.
2. Acquire knowledge of the major historical shifts and transitions in global history, as well as the variability of human social organization across the world.
3. Acquire comprehensive knowledge of recent archaeological discoveries that have contributed to revising the grand narratives of human history.
4. Employ specific anthropological case studies to construct theoretical arguments on themes related to global history and philosophy of history.
5. Develop critical thinking skills, particularly in relation to the debate between historical determinism and human agency.

Assessment and Grading

This course will be assessed using criterion-referencing and grades will not be assigned using a curve. Detailed rubrics for each assignment are provided below, outlining the criteria used for evaluation.

Assessments:

Assessment Task	Contribution to Overall Course grade (%)	Due date
Attendance (lecture and tutorial)	10%	N/A
Mid-term essay (1500-2500 words)	25%	Week 7 (submission date TBC)
Final exam	65%	University's exam period (exam date TBC)

* NOTE: Late mid-term essays will be penalized, with a daily deduction of 5%.

Assessment marks for the final exam will be released within two weeks of the due date.

Mapping of Course ILOs to Assessment Tasks

Assessed Task	Mapped ILOs	Explanation
Mid-term essay	ILO1, ILO2, ILO3, ILO4, ILO5	<p>Students will be required to answer one question, provided in Week 3, in an essay of 1,500–2,500 words. A strong response will demonstrate knowledge of the latest anthropological debates on the grand narratives of global history (ILO1), an understanding of major historical shifts, transitions, and the variability of human social organization worldwide (ILO2), and awareness of recent archaeological discoveries that challenge and revise traditional narratives of human history (ILO3).</p> <p>Special emphasis will be placed on how effectively students incorporate specific anthropological case studies from the course—or beyond the reading list—into their argument (ILO4). The question will relate (even if</p>

		indirectly) to debates on determinism and human agency in the philosophy of global history (ILO5).
Final exam	ILO1, ILO2, ILO3, ILO4, ILO5	<p>The exam will include a set of multiple-choice questions to assess general knowledge of the course topics and a few open-ended questions to evaluate argumentative skills.</p> <p>The multiple-choice questions will test students' knowledge of the major shifts and transitions in global history (ILO2), recent archaeological discoveries related to these shifts (ILO3), and the anthropological debates surrounding them (ILO1), which will be explored in the lectures and in <i>The Dawn of Everything</i>.</p> <p>The open-ended questions will focus on students' ability to use ethnographic case studies of their choice to construct arguments addressing, among other things, the debate on agency and determinism in human history (ILO4, ILO5).</p>

Grading rubric for mid-term essay

Grades	Short Description	Elaboration on subject grading description
A 90-100	Excellent	Demonstrates a deep understanding of the topic in question, with insightful and original analysis, and integration of relevant theories. An original essay that shows strong research skills and the effective use of a wide range of sources that go beyond the syllabus and the lectures. The essay is persuasively argued, coherent and well-organized.
B 80-90	Good	Shows a solid grasp of the topic. Research is well-executed, using a variety of sources. The essay is organized with clear arguments, addressing relevant anthropological theories. Writing is mostly coherent, with few errors.

C 70-80	Satisfactory	Demonstrates a basic understanding of the topic, with limited analysis and minimal integration of theories. Research is adequate but may rely on fewer sources. The essay has some organization, but arguments may be unclear.
D 60-70	Marginal Pass	Shows little understanding of the topic, with inadequate analysis and poor integration of theories. Research is insufficient, with limited use of sources. The essay lacks organization, and arguments that invoke anthropological topics are unclear. Writing is incoherent, with many errors
F 0-60	Fail	Demonstrates no meaningful understanding of the topic. Lacks analysis, coherence, and use of relevant theories. Research is minimal or irrelevant, with disorganized or unsupported arguments. Writing is barely readable, failing to meet basic academic standards.

NOTE: While this counts as a general grading rubric, please refer to the more specific instructions on the mid-term essay that will be uploaded on Canvas over the first few weeks of the course.

Late submission will also be penalized, with a daily deduction of 5%. Note that unless there are exceptional circumstances, requests for extensions will not be entertained.

Grade rubric for final exam

The final exam consists of two sections: **Multiple-Choice Questions (50%)** and **Open-Ended Questions (50%)**. The final mark is calculated as the sum of the two section marks, each weighted at 50% of the total. The grading rubrics below outline how marks are assigned for each section.

Multiple-Choice Questions (50%)

Grade	Short Description	Percentage of correct answers
A	Excellent	90-100 %
B	Good	80 – 89%
C	Satisfactory	70 - 79%
D	Marginal Pass	60 – 69%
F	Fail	0 – 59%

Open-Ended Questions (50%)

Grades	Short Description	Elaboration on subject grading description
A 90-100	Excellent	Demonstrates a deep understanding of the topic in question, with insightful and original analysis, and integration of relevant theories. Original answers that show strong research skills and the effective use of a wide range of sources that go beyond the syllabus and the lectures. The answers are persuasively argued, coherent and well-organized.
B 80-90	Good	Shows a solid grasp of the topic. The answers are well-executed, using a variety of sources. They are organized and

		with clear arguments. Writing is mostly coherent, with few errors.
C 70-80	Satisfactory	Demonstrates a basic understanding of the topic, with limited analysis and minimal integration of theories. The answers are adequate but may rely on fewer sources in support of the arguments therein. There is some organization, but arguments may be unclear.
D 60-70	Marginal Pass	Shows little understanding of the topic, with inadequate analysis and poor integration of theories. Limited use of sources. The answers lack organization, and arguments are unclear. Writing is incoherent, with many errors
F 0-60	Fail	Demonstrates no meaningful understanding of the topic. Lacks analysis, coherence, and use of relevant theories. Answers are disorganized and with unsupported arguments. Writing is barely readable, failing to meet basic academic standards.

NOTE: While this counts as a general grading rubric, please refer to the more specific instructions on the final exam that will be uploaded on Canvas after week 7.

Course AI Policy

The use of AI to prepare the mid-term essays is strongly discouraged because the assignments require students to draw connections across specific case-studies and theories, and to demonstrate independent thinking. Simply put, the more an essay relies on AI, the less original it will be. Using AI to fix grammar and syntax is fine. However, expressing thoughts in your own way, rather than relying on run-of-the-mill AI generated text, will make your writing more interesting.

Communication and Feedback

Assessment marks for mid-term essays will be communicated via Canvas within 2-3 weeks of submission. Students who have further questions about the feedback including marks should consult the instructor within five working days after the feedback is received. Feedback will include indication of factual flaws, argumentative weaknesses, areas of potential improvement, and suggestions on how to expand the ideas presented.

Required Texts and Materials

Throughout the course, students are required to read the entirety of *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity* (2021) by David Graeber and David Wengrow, which is freely available on Canvas. One chapter of the book will be discussed during each tutorial. Both this book and the secondary readings listed for each week—useful for preparing the mid-term essay and the final exam—are accessible on Canvas.

Academic Integrity

Students are expected to adhere to the university's academic integrity policy. Students are expected to uphold HKUST's Academic Honor Code and to maintain the highest standards of academic integrity. The University has zero tolerance of academic misconduct. Please refer to [Academic](#)

[Integrity | HKUST – Academic Registry](#) for the University’s definition of plagiarism and ways to avoid cheating and plagiarism.

Course outline and readings

Week 1

Introduction: the power of origin myths

Origin myths across the world are not merely stories about the past; they also serve as blueprints for shaping a society’s present and envisioning its future. In this introductory week, the course examines the main origin story that has shaped the modern era—one rooted in the ideas of progress and social evolution. This narrative proposes that society evolved linearly, starting with small bands of hunter-gatherers, transitioning to more complex and hierarchical agricultural societies, and eventually giving rise to cities and states. Embedded in this story are notions of inevitability and historical determinism—ideas that have recently been challenged by new anthropological evidence. The course will explore the stakes of this debate and lay the foundation for the key themes that will guide us throughout.

Required reading: Graeber, D., & Wengrow, D. (2021). *The dawn of everything: A new history of humanity*. (Chapter 1)

Week 2

The worlds of hunter-gatherers (1)

For about 98% of its history, humanity lived by hunting and gathering. This week, the course will take a broad look at hunter-gatherer studies, with a focus on sub-Saharan Africa. It asks whether hunter-gatherer societies that have been studied by anthropologists in the 20th century are truly representative of the distant past or whether they have been shaped by more recent socio-political changes. It also explores issues of exchange and egalitarianism, classic topics in the field.

Required Reading: Graeber, D., & Wengrow, D. (2021). *The dawn of everything: A new history of humanity*. (Chapter 2)

Week 3

The worlds of hunter-gatherers (2)

Digging deeper into the past, the course examines recent archaeological findings on hunter-gatherer societies, focusing on North America and Paleolithic Africa, which showcase a dramatic diversity of hunter-gatherers’ worlds. Questioning earlier portrayals of foragers living in ‘tiny egalitarian bands’, it looks at examples of hierarchical societies, seasonal variation in political organization, and at large social networks that could span continents.

Required Reading: Graeber, D., & Wengrow, D. (2021). *The dawn of everything: A new history of humanity*. (Chapter 3)

Week 4

Sex, gender, and violence: the early threads

The distant past has often served as a vast canvas for projecting the collective fantasies of the present. Few topics are more subject to such projections than ideas about gender and violence in so-called "primitive" societies. Was primitive society egalitarian and governed by women, as Engels suggested? Or was it characterized by violence and patriarchal rule, as some evolutionary psychologists propose? This lecture examines the available evidence to shed light on these questions, striving, as much as possible, to separate myth from reality. It also delves into the intricate connections between violence and gender—connections that will be explored in greater depth later in the course.

Required reading: Graeber, D., & Wengrow, D. (2021). *The dawn of everything: A new history of humanity*. (Chapter 4)

Week 5

Cultural differentiation

This week examines how societies come to define themselves in contrast to one another, a process that intensified during the Mesolithic. Bringing this theme into more recent times, the lecture focuses on notable examples of cultural differentiation, such as the contrasts between Sparta and Athens, or between the Kwakiutl of the Northwestern coast of America and the Yurok of California. It will also consider the history of the Akha highlanders of Southeast Asia (where I conducted ethnographic research), whose culture of egalitarianism, animism, and orality can only be understood in opposition to the hierarchical societies of the lowlands. The lecture assesses Marcel Mauss's idea that "societies live by borrowing from each other but define themselves rather by the refusal of borrowing than by its acceptance."

Required reading: Graeber, D., & Wengrow, D. (2021). *The dawn of everything: A new history of humanity*. (Chapter 5)

Week 6

The agricultural revolution?

Did the beginning of agriculture mark a profound shift in human social organization, leading to inevitable hierarchy and militarization? This narrative, primarily derived from the study of ancient Mesopotamia, has been challenged by more recent archaeological discoveries, which reveal that the transition to agriculture was not a one-size-fits-all process. As a point of contrast, the lecture examines 'play farming' in Amazonia, where societies transitioned in and out of agriculture without ecological factors being a major determinant of social organization. It aims to reassess the influence that 'modes of production' have on social dynamics and to consider their effects on the spectrum between egalitarianism and hierarchy.

Required reading: Graeber, D., & Wengrow, D. (2021). *The dawn of everything: A new history of humanity*. (Chapter 6)

Week 7

Extended case study - Aboriginal Australia

The discussion of the role of agriculture in history has been particularly lively in Australia, where the discovery of ancient systems of irrigation has sparked new debate over the timeline of the social transformation of indigenous Aboriginal societies and newfound appreciation for their complex social organization. The lecture will consider several aspects of the so-called 'Dark Emu debate', the evidence it draws upon, and what is at stake in it.

Required reading: Graeber, D., & Wengrow, D. (2021). *The dawn of everything: A new history of humanity*. (Chapter 7)

Week 8

The first cities

Starting from the Neolithic ‘mega-sites’ of Ukraine and the pre-Aztec metropolis of Teotihuacan in Mexico, the lecture looks at how the discovery of egalitarian cities is overthrowing the equation of early cities with kings and warrior elites. It will also look at theories on the origins of cities and consider the hypothesis that cities emerged as the contraction, in a single physical space, of already existing imagined communities.

Required reading: Graeber, D., & Wengrow, D. (2021). *The dawn of everything: A new history of humanity*. (Chapter 8)

Week 9

Collapse

From Easter Island to the fall of the Mayan civilization, this week of the course examines the main contemporary theories that account for societies’ downfalls. It explores the patterns and repercussions of collapse, focusing on the ecological determinants invoked in each case. However, it also considers instances of collapse—such as Cahokia, Teotihuacan, and Taosi—that appear to have been driven less by ecological conditions and more by collective choice and social transformation.

Required reading: Graeber, D., & Wengrow, D. (2021). *The dawn of everything: A new history of humanity*. (Chapter 9)

Week 10

Kings and the rise of states

From the Shilluk kingdom of Africa to that of Fiji in Oceania, this week explores what kingship is, both anthropologically and historically. Kings represent more than just sovereignty; their study provides a unique lens through which to examine fundamental dilemmas concerning the nature of power, meaning, and the human condition. The lecture considers how the authoritarian elements of kingship are preserved in the formation of states. From ancient Egypt to the Aztec and Inka, we see that the ‘state’ represents an amalgamation of elements of domination, exhibiting significant cross-cultural variability. This week’s lesson provides a glimpse into the diversity of authoritarian structures throughout history.

Required reading: Graeber, D., & Wengrow, D. (2021). *The dawn of everything: A new history of humanity*. (Chapter 10, pp.359-399)

Week 11

Exchange and the rise of capitalism

While it is tempting to project modern capitalist logic onto deep history, anthropologists have long recognized that the creation and distribution of goods in the past followed fundamentally different patterns. Some societies were organized around what anthropologists call ‘gift economies.’ This week, the lecture examines the most famous documented case—the Kula exchange of the Trobrianders of Papua New Guinea, studied by Malinowski—and explore what it reveals about the

role of reciprocity global economic history. Taking a long-term perspective, it then traces the major shifts that transformed gift economies into market-based systems and global capitalism, reflecting on what historians suggest has been both lost and gained in the process.

Required reading: Graeber, D., & Wengrow, D. (2021). *The dawn of everything: A new history of humanity*. (Chapter 10, pp. 400-440)

Week 12

Sex, gender, and violence: the evolving knot

Returning to the theme explored in Week 4, the lecture examines the key reasons for the persistence of patriarchy throughout more recent history, particularly in societies where it also served as a framework for greater levels of military violence and conquest. This week offers a reflection on the evolving nature of warfare and the structural violence that accompanied the rise of the state and colonialism, exploring how these developments intersect with and shape gender relations.

Required readings: Graeber, D., & Wengrow, D. (2021). *The dawn of everything: A new history of humanity*. (Chapter 11)

Week 13

Conclusion: are we stuck?

Focusing on the modern era, this lecture will take a broad perspective on the impact of the Columbian Exchange after 1492 and its implications for the rest of the world. It will reflect on how, as global powers expanded, the diversity of sociopolitical forms and the scope for social experimentation—central topics of this course—began to diminish. Given that being human, in many ways, involves the continual ability to consciously experiment with different social arrangements, we are left to ask: are we now stuck? If so, how? The lecture will examine major attempts to address this question before concluding with a reflection on the overarching themes of the course.

Required reading: Graeber, D., & Wengrow, D. (2021). *The dawn of everything: A new history of humanity*. (Chapter 12)