Once described as the 'least known continent', Amazonia has become an important and thriving region in contemporary anthropology, shaping a number of recent discussions and debates. This course will introduce students to selected themes in the anthropology of Amazonia. It will provide a grounding in the ethnographic literature of the region while seeking to engage with current theoretical debates, highlighting their potential importance to the discipline of anthropology. Topics to be covered include environmental and cultural histories, the aesthetics of everyday life; sexuality, gender and the body; language and power; illness and healing; cosmology and the shamanic experience; indigenous social movements; and social transformations. Both lectures and classes will give particular emphasis to indigenous thought and the ways in which Amazonian peoples today are engaging creatively with a range of new challenges and opportunities as well as threats to their environment and way of life. Students will be encouraged to reflect on the broader relationship between ethnography and theory, to challenge common stereotypes of Amazonia and its inhabitants, and to explore ways in which the region has inscribed itself on the imagination of anthropologists and laypersons alike.

The course is organised into weekly topics and readings for each week will be available on Moodle. It is expected that you will have completed all the essential readings prior to the relevant class. Delving into the further readings will be invaluable for the essay and for the final exam, and you are strongly encouraged to do so wherever possible.

Films

Films form part of the essential readings in some weeks. These have been selected to complement the course material, and to help you gain a visual sense of the region. Some time will be dedicated in classes to discussing the film, its content and its relation to the readings. You are encouraged to treat these films as you would any ethnographic text: to read them carefully and critically, and to draw on them as appropriate in the take home exam.

ASSESSMENT

A take-home examination at the end of Michaelmas Term will account for 100% of the total mark. Guidance will be provided in class.
Week 1. Amazonia Reimagined

Since the earliest accounts of European explorers, the Amazon has been imagined as the quintessentially exotic and ‘uncivilized’ location, often associated with notions of natural abundance, untamed wilderness, and savage tribes. Recent archaeological discoveries compel us substantially to rethink this view, as they point to a very different image of pre-conquest Amazonia, with a deep history and complexity.

Essential Reading:


Film: Unnatural Histories: Amazon (BBC, 2011).
Watch on YouTube here: https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLxI5v3q4K2isIT49CQjsqHfNArGGB3gwb

Further Reading:


Week 2. The Social Body

The body and its fabrication lies at the very core of indigenous Amazonian sociality. In this lecture we ask: in what sense is the human body “social”? Why has it received such attention in the region? How, exactly, are bodies thought to be made and unmade?
**Essential Reading:**


**Further Readings:**


**Week 3. The Art of Everyday Living**

What does it mean to live well? How do Amazonian ideas of the good life embody distinctive and recognizable ethics and aesthetics? The art of everyday living typically builds on the creation of persons and of kin through acts of care and nurture, as much as on key values of trust, compassion and personal autonomy. Yet conviviality is not easy, and the ideal of the ‘community’ is all too easily prone to collapse.

**Essential Reading:**


Further Reading:


Week 4. Economies of Desire

Amazonian subsistence economies, involving the production and circulation of substances like meat and manioc beer, are closely intertwined with relations between the sexes. In some classic analyses this amounts to a distinctive ‘political economy of persons’. Yet circulating desires of one kind or another continue to structure peoples’ engagements with markets, settler societies and the state – even as these can lead to profound changes in gender ideologies. But is anthropological fieldwork itself ultimately a sort of reciprocal seduction along the colonial frontier?

Essential Reading:


Film: *The Mehinacu*. 1974. 52 minutes. Watch online here: https://search.alexanderstreet.com.gate2.library.lse.ac.uk/view/work/bibliographic_entity?Cvideo_o_work%7C2196056?account_id=9630&usage_group_id=107925

Further Reading:


**Week 5. Life in a Perspectival Cosmos**

Amazonian social life routinely crosses species boundaries to include manifold nonhumans. The theory of perspectivism constitutes a powerful framework for explaining this propensity, and it has driven what has since become known in anthropology as the ‘ontological turn’. This lecture will explore the power and theoretical purchase of perspectivism, as well as some important limitations and critiques.

**Required Readings:**


**Further Reading:**


**Week 6. Reading Week**

No lecture or classes this week.

**Week 7. Sickness and the Shamanic Experience**

Shamanism is a quintessential feature of Western Amazonian societies, and reflects widespread ideas about health and illness, as well as the possibilities for sustaining relationships with the spirit world. Shamanic practice also embodies the powerful legacies of colonialism and the transforming nature of interethnic relations. In this lecture we ask: what is it like to be a shaman? And is shamanism today merely a relic of vanishing forest cultures, or a creative response to trauma which continues to reinvent itself?

**Essential Reading:**


Film: The Shaman and His Apprentice. BBC, 1989. Watch online: https://video-alexanderstreet-com.gate3.library.lse.ac.uk/watch/the-shaman-and-his-apprentice

**Further Reading:**

Week 8. Extractive Frontiers

Extractive relations have historically shaped Amazonia as a region: from the Spanish search for El Dorado to the nineteenth-century rubber boom and to neoextractivism. In this lecture we explore the cultural, technological and ecological differences that help explain the diversity of indigenous attitudes towards resource extraction. Why do some Amazonian communities resist resource extraction and how do they participate in global environmentalist struggles? Why has extractivism become a crucial sphere of exchange for other communities? And how do ideologies of Good Living expose or legitimise extractivist activities?

Essential Readings


Week 9. Societies For or Against the State?

Pierre Clastres famously proposed that Amazonian societies are ‘against the State’. What did he mean, and how has his work shaped subsequent attempts to understand the nature of political power? How are ideals of leadership changing, and what should we make of what appears to be an active desire for the state in many indigenous communities?

Essential Readings:


Further Readings

Week 10. Redefining Indigeneity

Indigenous identity has undergone something of a revival over the past three or four decades. In contrast to the prejudice and abuse experienced by many Amazonian people historically, indigeneity has in many places become an expression of pride, resilience and resistance. Yet it can also carry a cost, in form of a pressure to conform to foreign ideals of authenticity. This can in turn lead to the extreme marginalization of those indigenous peoples who fail to conform.

Required Readings:


Further Reading:


**Week 11. Language and Interculturality**

Amazonian peoples have long shown themselves to be adept at incorporating novelty and alterity in order to transform themselves. Prominent examples include religious beliefs and practices, styles of dress, and ways of speaking and singing. But what if the new elements alter the terms on which they were incorporated in the first place, forever disrupting the pattern of transformation? How is the relationship between language, culture and identity changing, as indigenous groups face new struggles to maintain their way of life?

**Essential Reading:**


**Further Reading:**


