UNIVERSITÀ
DEGLI STUDI DI MILANO-BICOCCA

COURSE SYLLABUS

Area Studies: South America

2526-1-F0102R013

Course title

Anthropology of South America

Topics and course structure

The course analyzes the social construction of the categories of “land/territory,” “ethnicity/race,” and “nature/environment” in Brazil, with a particular focus on the Amazon region, but also drawing connections with other contexts in North and South America. The political role that these concepts play in the identity and territorial claims of indigenous peoples and quilombos (predominantly rural communities of African slave descendants) will be discussed, as well as their role and meaning in the cosmologies of these groups.

**The course consists of three main thematic areas. **

1. The **first part **of the course will provide a historical overview of the area, with particular attention to the colonial era in order to understand the origins of the so-called “indigenous question.” The specificity of Brazilian anthropology and indigenous ethnology will also be analyzed, with an in-depth study of the contribution of Lévi-Strauss, which will be revisited in the third part of the course.

2. In the **second part**, the role of slavery and the concept of race in the construction of Brazilian society will be analyzed, discussing how the so-called “racial question” took shape (on the one hand, the policies of “whitening”; on the other, the ideology of racial democracy and miscegenation). We will then see how this has intertwined with the territorial claims of communities of African slave descendants (quilombolas) and with the issue of socio-environmental justice.

3. In the **third part**, starting from an anthropological deconstruction of the nature-culture dichotomy, we will show how the sense of belonging to a territory is closely linked to specific local cosmologies that imply

contextually variable ways of conceiving the relationship between the human and non-human worlds. These themes will be discussed starting from the perspectivism of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, in dialogue with the ontologies of Philppe Descola and the most recent multispecies approaches.

Objectives

1. Knowledge and understanding

- ACQUIRE solid and systematic knowledge of South America, with a specific focus on Brazil. In particular, students will acquire specific skills on both the ethno-racial and territorial issues that characterise the Brazilian context and on the cosmological specificities of indigenous and Afro-descendant communities, especially in the Amazon region, paying particular attention to their implications in the critique of the nature-culture dichotomy.
- IDENTIFY the historical, theoretical and methodological specificities of the South American context, with particular attention to the case of Brazil. A brief overview of the pre-Columbian era will be provided, followed by a more in-depth look at the colonial period, with particular attention to both the colonisers' contact with the indigenous world and the phenomenon of slavery, analysed through the lens of Brazilian anthropology.
- UNDERSTAND the specific characteristics of the South American area (cultural and linguistic) and its relevant research topics.
  Students will learn to critically reflect on the social, ethnic, racial, territorial and environmental categorisations specific to the Brazilian context, comparing them with those of other areas of the continent.
  2. Applied knowledge and understanding
- ARTICULATE the dialogue between scientific literature and research in an innovative way with specific references to the South American area.
- EFFECTIVELY identify critical issues and design interventions using the skills acquired.
- TRANSMIT specific knowledge that facilitates coexistence, mediation and the development of socially, economically and culturally productive environments.
  3. Independence of judgement
- UNDERSTAND the complexity of cultural processes, welcoming and valuing different points of view and overcoming stereotypes and prejudices.
- EVALUATE the consequences of one's actions and decisions, adopting a reflective and responsible attitude.
  4. Communication skills
- EXPRESS ideas, knowledge and arguments clearly.
- FORMULATE well-founded judgements, integrating information from different and reliable sources.
  5. Learning skills
- DEVELOP and refine one's own learning methods, independently identifying and constructing objects and topics of study.

Methodologies

The course makes use of a variety of methodologies: lectures, class discussions on materials such as texts, slides, audiovisual documents provided by the lecturer; if possibile, participation of researchers presenting their research in areas of interest to the course.

All lectures are intended to promote student participation. However, as a general rule, 38 hours of the course will be devoted to classical lectures (DE), while 18 will be devoted to predominantly interactive teaching.

All lessons are held in person. Lessons will be in Italian.

Online and offline teaching materials

Additional teaching materials to the scheduled texts (background articles, documents, films) will be made available on the course page.

Programme and references

A classic book

Lévi-Strauss C., Antropologia Strutturale. Any english edition is fine. Chapters to be studied: I. ; II. ; III. VI. ; VII ; VIII. ; IX; X ; XI; XV.
Every english edition is fine

A selection of articles/book chapters available in the ‘Required reading’ section of the course e-learning page. We recommend reading them in the order suggested below:

Blaser M., De La Cadena M., 2018, Introduction. PLURIVERSE. Proposals for a World of Many Worlds, in Blaser M., De La Cadena M., (eds.), A World of Many Worlds, Duke University Press Durham and London, pp.1-22. OBBLIGATORIE SOLO PP. 1-6

Langfur, Hal, 2014, Introduction. Recovering Brazil’s Indigenous Pasts. in Langufur H., Native Brazil. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.

Corossacz V. R., 2025, Trajectories and Subjects of Brazilian Anthropology, in D'Agostino G., Matera V. (eds.), Histories of Anthropology. Interactions Between Centers and Peripheries in the Making of Anthropological Discourses, Cham (Switzerland), Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 387-401.

Silva G. M. da, Souza B. O., 2022, Quilombos in Brazil and the Americas: Black Resistance in Historical Perspective, Agrarian South: Journal of Political Economy 11(1) 112–133.

Silva A.J. B. da, Larkins E.R., 2019, The Bolsonaro Election, Antiblackness, and Changing Race Relations in Brazil, The Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology, Vol. 24, No. 4, pp. 893–913.

A selection of chapters from the following texts:

Descola P., 2021, Oltre natura e cultura, Milano, Raffaello Cortina. CAP OBBLIGATORI: 1, 4, 5, 6.

Viveiros de Castro, 2017, Metafisiche cannibali. Elementi di antropologia post-strutturale, Verona, Ombre Corte. CAP OBBLIGATORI: 1-2-3-4; Se ci fossero difficoltà nel reperimento del testo, preparare IN ALTERNATIVA: Viveiros de Castro E., 2019, Prospettivismo cosmologico in Amazzonia e altrove, Macerata, Quodlibet. CAP OBBLIGATORI: 1 e 2.

An ethnography:

Tassan M., 2017, Amazzonia incantata. Luoghi, corpi e malattie in una comunità afro-discendente del Brasile, Roma, Cisu.

Although this course is held in Italian, for Erasmus students, course material can also be available in English, and students can take the exam in English if they wish to do so.

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Assessment methods

Type of exam
Oral exam
Assessment criteria
The choice of an oral exam is consistent with the objectives of the course, as it allows, in a dialogic situation, to assess students' knowledge of the texts and their ability to develop a reflective, analytical, and critical argumentation around the core concepts highlighted in the texts.

Each student will be asked at least one question on each of the three core topics of the course in order to verify that there are no gaps in any of the above areas.

Assessment will be graded on a scale of 30, based on the following scale:

1. Unsatisfactory (0-17)

- Insufficient preparation on the main topics covered in the course program and bibliography;
- Very limited and poorly independent ability to argue, analyze, and critically elaborate;
- Insufficient ability to connect theory and practice and to identify relevant links between the texts and the course topics;
- Incorrect presentation skills and specific vocabulary of the discipline.

2. Sufficient – More than sufficient (18-23)

- General preparation and, in some aspects, uncertain or incomplete on various topics covered in the course program and bibliography;
- Ability to argue, analyze, and critically elaborate is at times limited and not very independent;
- Difficulty in identifying relevant connections between
  texts and course topics;
- Presentation skills and specific vocabulary of the discipline are only partially correct.
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3. Fair (24-27)

- Adequate preparation on the main topics covered in the course program and bibliography, but lacking depth and/or incomplete on some more specific topics;
- Ability to argue, analyze, and critically evaluate present, but not always accurate and independent;
- Fair ability to identify relevant connections between the texts and topics covered in the course;
- Presentation skills and specific vocabulary of the discipline are mostly correct.

4. Good - Excellent (28-30/30L)

- Comprehensive and in-depth preparation on the topics covered in the course syllabus and bibliography;
- Ability to argue, analyze, and critically elaborate in an articulate and independent manner;
- Good/excellent ability to identify relevant connections between the texts and the course topics;
- Good/excellent presentation skills and mastery of the vocabulary specific to the discipline.

NB: Students with learning disabilities who intend to use compensatory tools are requested to send their P.Uo.I. at least ten days before the exam.

Office hours

On appointment by e-mail.

Programme validity

Two academic years. This year's programme can therefore be carried over to the winter session in February 2028.

Course tutors and assistants

Sustainable Development Goals

QUALITY EDUCATION | GENDER EQUALITY | PEACE, JUSTICE AND STRONG INSTITUTIONS