

The Archaeology of Capitalism

Prof. Christopher N. Matthews

Course Description

Capitalism has been the focus of a great deal of social thinking and activity since the 18th-century. Understanding capitalism as both an economic and a cultural phenomenon has shed light on its inner workings as a system as well as guided strong criticisms of its effects on social reproduction, equality, and the sense of human nature, spirit, and subjectivity. Its significance has recently also been taken up as a focus for archaeological investigation. Archaeologies of colonialism, American and other modern state formations, urban growth, industrialization, and consumption have contributed important insights into the structures and experiences of capitalism. Critical thinking within the discipline has also posed the question of whether there can be an archaeology outside of capitalism and what role capitalism plays in defining the role of CRM or public archaeology as an industry.

This course examines the archaeological approach to capitalism in theory and practice. The goal of the course is to both understand and historicize capitalism by examining how everyday lives were abruptly transformed by its emergence and elaboration. The course begins with a review of some of the principle theories that frame capitalism as a social and cultural problem. We then turn to explore the methods of historical archaeology, the findings and interpretations of the archaeological records of capitalism in various locales, and the history of archaeology within and against capitalism since the 19th-century. This course provides an overview of the application of critical theory in archaeology and a survey of methods and finds relevant to understanding material lives in the recent past.

Readings

There are three required books for the course listed below. In addition there is a series of experts and articles that are listed in the course schedule which will be made available on e-reserve. Two additional books are listed which are recommended as initial sources for the final research project.

Books

The Origins of Capitalism, Ellen Meiskins Wood, Monthly Review Press, 1999.

In Small Things Forgotten: An Archaeology of Early American Life, Expanded and Revised edition, James Deetz, Anchor Books, 1996.

The Archaeology of Gender: Separating the Spheres in Early America, Diana diZerega Wall, Plenum Press, 1994.

Recommended for final project

Lines that Divide: Historical Archaeologies of Race, Class, and Gender, James Delle, Stephen A. Mrozowski, and Robert Paynter, eds., University of Tennessee Press, 2000.

I, Too Am America: Archaeological Studies of African-American Life, Theresa Singleton, ed., University of Virginia Press, 1999.

Assignments and Assessment

Participation (30%)

This class requires your participation. Class meetings will be structured around discussions of the assigned reading. While I will generally cover the main points that I feel need to be explored, you are expected to prepare at least 5 discussion questions for each class meeting based on the reading due for the day or that continue from the previous meeting discussions. You will turn in these questions at each meeting.

Midterm Writing Assignments (30%)

There are three 5-page essay assignments due over the course of the first 10 weeks of the course. These are specific topics of investigation that draw directly from the readings and class discussions. Essays will be graded based on content, writing, and documentation. See the class schedule for assignment details.

Final project (40%)

A final 10-15 page independent research project is due at the end of the class. This project will be self-designed with the instructor's assistance and approval. This project is an investigation of a particular archaeological examination of capitalism that expands on what is covered in class. It may be a review of archaeology in an area we have not covered (e.g., the American West or international settings) or a relevant topic such as industrialization or post-emancipation farming that was not the main focus of the class material. These papers may be based on secondary research, however, the identification and analysis of primary documentary or artifactual material is encouraged. Successful papers will make clear and cogent connects between the class material and the examples you explore from other sources. You are expected to explain the historical and archaeological research in detail and build an argument that critically evaluates how the data support the interpretations of capitalism you cite.

Class Schedule

Part 1. Theorizing Capitalism in History (Weeks 1-2)

Conceptualizing the archaeology of capitalism requires a critical review of the principle thinking that helps explain not only its structure as a system for production and social organization, but also its emergence from a "pre-capitalist" fore-bearer. We will examine this history and theory by exploring the work of Marx and Weber and reading from a accessible history of Capitalism by Ellen Meiskins Wood.

Readings: Marx, Karl, *Capital*, Volume 1, Parts 1-3.
Weber, Max, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Part 1.
Wood, entire

Assignment: Prepare a 5 page essay that applies Wood's critique that most histories of capitalism lose touch with specificity of capitalist origins in favor of appealing to universals to the work of Marx and Weber.

Part 2. Approaching Capitalism with Archaeology (Week 3)

To explore how the archaeological record provides a distinct perspective on capitalism we will briefly consider the methodological basis of historical archaeology. This discussion examines especially the intersections between the study of documents, artifacts, and archaeological sites that affords archaeologists a unique standpoint for understanding the past.

Readings: Deetz, Chapter 1
Shanks, Michael and Christopher Tilley, *Re-Constructing Archaeology*, Chapters 5-6

Part 3. The Archaeology of Capitalist Origins (Weeks 4-6)

Providing access to the material lives of undocumented and under-documented “common” people over a long period of time, the archaeological investigation of households from the early modern period in England and America shows very specific ways that the productive life, social relations, and ideas of capitalism replaced traditional “medieval” ways of life.

Readings: Deetz, Chapters 2-6
Johnson, Matthew, *An Archaeology of Capitalism*, Chs. 6-8

Assignment: Use one artifact category from Deetz or Johnson to track the individualization of everyday material experience during the medieval-Georgian transition.

Part 4. The Material Ideology of Capitalism (Weeks 7-8)

Building on Deetz, several scholars have argued that his observations outline the creation of a culture thoroughly invested in capitalist sensibilities. The strongest among these voices has been Mark Leone who has explicitly tied Georgian culture the construction of a dominant ideology that not only legitimized capitalism but also the political interests of the colonial leaders who led the American Revolution.

Readings: Leone, Mark P. “The Georgian Order as the Order of Merchant Capitalism in Annapolis, Maryland”
Leone, Mark P. and Paul A. Shackel, “Forks, Clocks, and Power”

Part 5. Capitalist Elaborations: The Modern Metropolis (Weeks 9-10)

After the Revolution, American capitalism blossomed in the late 18th and early 19th century. At its center was the transformation of colonial merchant towns into urban-industrial metropolises, of which New York City is the most paramount. By the turn of the 20th-century New York City could claim to be the not only the economic capital of the United States but potentially the capitalist center of the world. Archaeologist investigating the creation of modern New York City has defined key material elaborations of capitalist culture related especially to the construction of gender and class.

Dina diZerega Wall's study encapsulates these in an investigation of modern domesticity.

Reading: Wall, entire book
The Five Points Archaeological Project,
<http://r2.gsa.gov/fivept/fphome.htm>

Assignment: Using the Five Points Archaeology website explore the adoption of modern/capitalist domestic practices by the working class in 19th century New York.

Part 6. The Resistance to Capitalism: Culture, Difference, Critique (Weeks 11-12)

As Leone has shown one of the ways of developing a culture for capitalism was the construction of an affiliation across classes that was based in a shared opposition to a perceived other. This other was defined by race, thus Native Americans and Africans in America served both as a labor force and a key cultural symbol for whites in capitalism. This structure of difference, however, enabled racial minorities to develop independent communities based in a culture of critique aimed at the foundations of capitalist culture that supported their marginality. Their anti-capitalist practices thus not only sustained minority communities, but revealed ways of living outside of capitalism that threatened its stability.

Readings: Deetz, Chs. 7-8
Ferguson, Leland, *The Cross is a Magic Sign: Marks on Eighteenth-Century Bowls from South Carolina*. I, Too
Epperson, Terrence, *The Contested Commons: Archaeologies of Race, Repression, and Resistance in New York City*. *Archs of Cap*
Matthews, Christopher: *Political Economy and Race: Comparative Archaeologies of Annapolis and New Orleans in the 18th century*.

Part 7. Archaeology Within and Against Capitalism (Weeks 13-14)

New discoveries of the way that marginal groups have challenged capitalism may be paired with the way these same groups have resisted archaeology. The resistance by Native Americans ultimately resulted in NAGPRA, legislation that gives significant control over the archeological record of prehistoric Native America to living descendents. A similar movement by descendent African-American communities has also gained momentum. Tracing the history of archaeology shows that its conception of past cultures stems from the heart of the capitalist rationalization of the self. To conceive of an archaeology outside of capitalism, therefore, archaeologists must gain a better understanding of the way marginal groups organize to critique the dominant culture.

Readings: Zimmerman, Larry, "Made Radical By My Own: An Archaeologist Learns to Understand Reburial." In R. Layton (ed.), *Conflict in the Archaeology of Living Traditions*. Unwin Hyman: London. pp. 60-67.

Perry, Warren and Michael Blakey, "Archaeology as Community Service", *North American Dialogue*, v.2, no. 1, 1997.

The African Burial Ground Website,

http://www.africanburialground.gov/ABG_Main.htm

Matthews, Christopher, *The Location of Archaeology*, To be published in *The Public Meanings of the Archaeological Past*, Queztil E. Castaneda and Christopher N. Matthews, eds., AltaMira Press, forthcoming

McGuire, Randall and Mark Walker, *Class Confrontations in Archaeology*, *Historical Archaeology* 33(1): 159-183.

Bibliography

Deetz, James, F. *In Small Things Forgotten: An Archaeology of Early American Life*, Expanded and Revised edition. Anchor Books, 1996.

Delle, James Stephen A. Mrozowski, and Robert Paynter, eds., *Lines that Divide: Historical Archaeologies of Race, Class, and Gender*, University of Tennessee Press, 2000.

Johnson, Matthew, *An Archaeology of Capitalism*, Chs. 6-8

Singleton, Theresa, ed., *I. Too Am America: Archaeological Studies of African-American Life*, University of Virginia Press, 1999.

Wall, Diane diZerega, *The Archaeology of Gender: Separating the Spheres in Early America*, Plenum Press, 1994.

Wood, Ellen Meiskins. *The Origins of Capitalism*, Wood, Monthly Review Press, 1999.

Marx, Karl, *Capital*, Volume 1, Parts 1-3.

Weber, Max, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Part 1.

Shanks, Michael and Christopher Tilley, *Re-Constructing Archaeology*, Chapters 5-6

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