CLASS AND CULTURE
James Herron

What the course is about

This course will explore that class position and class cultures of US elites, and in particular that of professionals or “the upper middle class.” How do such elites think of themselves and their privileged positions? How are the outlooks of elites shaped by their class position, educations, and professional socialization? For instance, when he was nominated to the Supreme Court, Brett Kavanaugh was furiously indignant when members of congress asked him about his college drinking habits. According to sociologist Shamus Khan, whose ethnography of an elite private school we will read this semester, Kavanaugh’s fury can be traced in part to his elite private school education. According to Kahn, students at elite private schools are socialized to think that ordinary norms and rules do not apply to them. We’ll also look at professional work and consider the phenomenon that anthropologist David Graeber terms “bullshit jobs,” namely, the fact that according to Graeber many professionals consider their jobs to be pointless, socially worthless, and even pernicious. In order to explore Graeber’s theory further, we’ll read Karen Ho’s Liquidated, an ethnography of Wall Street bankers, which Graeber considers to be the paradigmatic bullshit job. Are such jobs in fact socially useless? And if so, why would our society have so many people engaged apparently useless work? What does this fact tell us about the social and political role of the professional classes?

In addition we’ll examine how educational institutions function to reproduce (or fail to reproduce) class privilege. To address this question, we will be read Armstrong and Hamilton's Paying for the Party, which traces the trajectories of working, middle, and upper class students at a large midwestern public university. Can such universities be understood, as the authors claim, not as meritocracies but as a means for “the conversion of class advantage into merit?” Does Harvard do the same?

The course readings are drawn mainly from the disciplines of anthropology and sociology.

Why this course is interesting (to some people, anyway)

Social class shapes our lives in powerful ways that many of us are not fully aware of. This is especially the case in the United States, where many people have a certain reluctance to think about social class at all. Students in this course therefore have an opportunity to learn about something they may not have thought much about but which is one of the basic structural forces that shapes their culture, their politics, and their sense of identity.