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American Money

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MW 10.30-11.45am
2 Arrow Street, Room 420

Money is famously difficult to talk about: too awkward, too divisive, too complicated, too abstract, too personal. In this course, we look at how contemporary American writers, philosophers and filmmakers have chosen to talk about money, and how these conversations involve questions of class, justice, work, race and gender. In the first unit of the course, students will watch the 2015 film *The Big Short* and read a sociological analysis of Wall Street culture in order to explore how the film portrays the values and practices of the financial industry. Unit Two focuses on arguments made by contemporary philosophers and journalists about how individuals and governments should spend their money in order to reflect their values and create a just and healthy world: readings will include Ta-Nehisi Coates's article "The Case for Reparations", Silvia Federici's manifesto "Wages Against Housework" and Michael Sandel's "What Money Shouldn't Buy". We will ask questions such as: What is money? How do we decide what monetary value to place upon love, or a nation's racist history, or body parts—and is there anything that should not have a price put on it? How does money interact with race, class and gender in the United States, and how does it mediate our personal relationships? The final unit of the course presents students with a selection of recent films that raise questions about the relationship between money, work and gender. Focusing on one of the suggested films, students will undertake their own research to make an original argument in conversation with the work of other scholars.

Schedule of assignments

The course is divided into three units. In addition to all assigned reading/viewing and any class preparation (e.g. reading excerpts, providing feedback for workshop, etc.), each unit will require you to complete:

- 1-2 response papers
- An essay draft
- 1 essay revision (i.e. your final paper for that unit)

Unit breakdown

Unit 1: Representing Wall Street

In this unit, we'll watch the film *The Big Short* (2015), which tells the story of the 2008 financial crash through the experience of several individuals who saw it coming. Through close analysis of the film and through the development of analytical questions or problems, you will write a paper that makes an argument about the film's depiction of Wall Street and the financial industry. Your argument may be inspired by or engage with anthropologist Karen Ho's study of Wall Street culture, which we will discuss in class together.

Unit 2: What is money good for?

In the second unit, we will read three argumentative, non-fiction texts that make a case for how money should be used in order to express or enact our values (Michael Sandel's "What Money Shouldn't Buy", Ta-Nehisi Coates's article "The Case for Reparations" and Silvia Federici's manifesto "Wages Against Housework"). All three texts grapple with the question of what happens when you do or don't put a price on things. The assignment for this unit asks you to write a comparative analysis on two of these three texts, in order to evaluate the reasons for and potential outcomes of putting a price on experiences, labour or goods not typically assigned a monetary value.

Unit 3: Money, work and gender

In our final unit, you will choose from a selection of films that engage with the relationship between money, work and gender. Together, we will read two critical texts that can help us to interpret these films/TV shows: Karl Marx's theory of alienation and Arlie Russell Hochschild's work on emotional labour. You'll develop a research topic about your chosen film and engage in research using the resources of Harvard Library: you might choose to examine how historically or sociologically accurate the work is, how it has been received by audiences, or what theories about work, race and gender can tell us about your chosen film's depiction of money. Whatever your topic, you will learn how to use multiple sources in an essay and enter into conversation with the work of other scholars.

Grade breakdown

Unit 1 Final Paper: 20%

Unit 2 Final Paper: 25%

Unit 3 Annotated bibliography and prospectus 10%

Unit 3 Final Paper: 35%

The remaining 10% of your grade reflects your thoughtful completion of response papers, your cover letters, your participation in class discussion and in workshops, and your preparation for class and for your draft conferences. Please note that your essay drafts are not graded.