

# LDST 306: Sex, Leadership, and the Evolution of Human Societies

## FALL 2025

**TIME:** Mon/Wed 9:00-10:15am  
**LOCATION:** Jepson 102  
**WEBSITE:** <https://blackboard.richmond.edu>

**INSTRUCTOR:** Dr. Chris von Rueden  
**EMAIL:** [cvonrued@richmond.edu](mailto:cvonrued@richmond.edu)  
**OFFICE:** Jepson Hall 235  
**OFFICE HOURS:** Mon 12:30-1:30pm, Wed 1:30-2:30pm, or by appointment on Zoom at a different time

**ZOOM:** <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/84575502410?pwd=K2E3N2NnZGxVaHpOaU9TVnArbStlQT094wLYKJ> (password)

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### **Course Description:**

In this course, we will study how biological and cultural evolution broadly shaped human societies. More specifically, students will (1) investigate why human societies differ from other animal societies: Why do we form families? Why are we so cooperative? Why are we so violent? Why are we religious? Students will also (2) investigate why leadership and political organization vary across human societies: Are there any human societies that lack leadership? Are there societies in which, on average, women wield more power than men? Why are some human societies more hierarchical than others? The goal of the course is not only to expose students to the diversity of political organization in humans and other animals but also to stimulate them to think critically about the ultimate causes of human social behavior in general.

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### **Course Format:**

Most classes will consist of a mix of presentation and discussion, which will build off assigned readings. **Readings must be completed BEFORE the day they are listed** (see Class Schedule and Assignments section below). Readings are available on Blackboard or in links provided. Readings include several chapters from the following two books (though it is not required you get copies of them):

- Boyer, P. (2018). *Minds Make Societies*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Turchin, P. (2015). *Ultrasociety: How 10,000 Years of War Made Humans the Greatest Cooperators on Earth*. Chaplin, CT: Beresta Books.

**Before most class periods, you must also complete a quiz (on Blackboard)** on the readings assigned for that class day. During classtime, I strongly encourage you to comment, ask a question, or provoke discussion at any time. My presentation slides will be available on Blackboard after I present them. I ask that you not leave during class-time unless you are in physical discomfort. **Use the bathrooms before you arrive to class.**

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### **How you will be graded:**

#### **1. Quizzes (20% of grade)**

By the start of most class periods (see Class Schedule and Assignments section), you will take a short quiz (on Blackboard) on the readings assigned for that class day. Quizzes are open-book and can be completed with the assistance of other students currently in the class. Quizzes become available online at the end of the previous class. The quizzes will consist of multiple choice or short answer questions. You will have 30 minutes to complete each quiz, and you **must complete each quiz in one sitting**. You are not able to attempt the same quiz more than once. At the end of the semester, **you may drop your 2 lowest quiz grades**. Missed quizzes (for any reason) count towards the 2 you may drop.

#### **2. Discussion (10% of grade)**

Your discussion grade will depend on you attending class, attending classes on time, participating in discussions on most class days, showing knowledge of the assigned readings via your participation in discussion, not leaving to use the bathroom during class, and presenting on readings when scheduled to do so. **You may miss 3 classes (for any reason, including illness) without a penalty.**

Students will present on readings according to their presentation number (see bolded numbers following most readings in the Class Schedule and Assignments section). Sign up for your presentation number here:

[https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1zLlNhndix7akoxGm6QCbt18MgO2y2TsQila\\_GNB2Jmk/edit?usp=sharing](https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1zLlNhndix7akoxGm6QCbt18MgO2y2TsQila_GNB2Jmk/edit?usp=sharing)

Some class days you will read more than one article, but you are only to present on the article after which your number is listed. **If your number is listed first, you are to:**

- briefly identify and explain the main points of the reading

- prepare a question to ask class members, that asks for clarification on some aspect of the reading or address something unexplained by the reading

If your number is listed second, you are to:

- compare and contrast the reading with material you've previously encountered in class
- prepare a question to ask class members, that connects the reading to current issues or events

Each presentation should last between 5-10 minutes, including your leading of discussion surrounding your prepared questions. Also, use online presentation software (**paste your presentation link to the presentation sign-up google doc before the start of class, and make sure you make the link publicly available**). You can contact me before you are due to present if you want guidance, but don't feel like you need to be an expert.

In general, reading presentations will be graded on a three-point scale: didn't complete (0); minimal effort or incomplete (1); thoughtful and completed requirements (2).

### 3. Midterm Exam (20% of grade)

The midterm exam will consist of multiple choice and short answer questions having you compare and contrast material we've read and discussed.

### 4. Group Projects (25% of grade)

You will be divided into **groups of five or six** to complete two separate projects:

#### a. What would a hunter-gatherer do? (5% of grade)

On select weeks (see Class Schedule and Assignments section), you will engage in activities with your group members more akin to the lifestyles of traditional societies.

- **Knowledge of local flora/fauna.** Sometime during the week, your group must together walk the length of the eco-corridor on campus and identify 5 tree species, 15 non-tree plant species, and 10 animal species. Also, send me a photo of you all doing so.
- **Sleep cycles timed to the sun.** For 5 or 6 days (depending on group size), at least one group member must go to bed by 10pm and wake by 6am each day.
- **50k or 60k steps/day.** For 5 or 6 days (depending on group size), your group must collectively complete 50k or 60k steps each day.

- **Collective religious ritual.** Sometime during the week, your group must attend and participate together in a religious ritual. Also, send me a photo of you all doing so.
- **No ultra-processed foods.** For 5 days, each group member won't eat:
  - Sweetened Beverages: Soft drinks, energy drinks, and sweetened fruit punches.
  - Packaged Snacks: Potato chips, pretzels, crackers, and other sweet or savory snacks.
  - Sweets & Desserts: Candy bars, ice cream, pudding, pastries, cake, cookies, and other confectionery.
  - Mass-Produced Baked Goods: Commercially produced packaged breads, tortillas, bagels, croissants, and biscuits.
  - Sugary Breakfast Foods: Sweetened cereals, flavored yogurts, and energy bars.
  - Processed Meats: Hot dogs, bacon, sausages, deli meats
  - Convenience Foods: Instant soups, instant noodles, ready-made meals like frozen pizzas and TV dinners, and baking mixes.
  - Spreads and Sauces: Margarines, instant sauces, and certain packaged cheese spreads.
  - Fast Food: Hamburgers, French fries, fried chicken, chicken nuggets, onion rings, pizza
- **No cell phone or social media.** For 5 or 6 days (depending on group size), at least one group member must not use a cell phone or social media all day.

b. **Comparison of a traditional society to the modern U.S.** (20% of grade)

During the second half of the semester, you will work with your group members to create a presentation comparing the modern United States with a smaller-scale society (prior to integration with Western, market-based societies). Each group will choose one of the following societies:

- Hadza (foragers, Tanzania)
- Batek (foragers, Malaysia)
- Tiwi (foragers, Australia)
- Inuit (foragers, Alaska/Canada)
- Agta (foragers, Philippines)
- Puebloans (horticulturalists, United States)
- Yanomami (horticulturalists, Brazil/Venezuela)
- Enga (horticulturalists, New Guinea)
- Maasai (pastoralists, Kenya)
- Himba (pastoralists, Namibia)
- Mosuo (agriculturalists, China)
- Vikings (agriculturalists, Northern Europe)

Based on your research and guided by theory we've discussed in class, each group member will focus on **one** of the following points of comparison:

- food production and diet
- sharing and distribution of wealth
- gender and leadership
- how serious conflicts are resolved
- role of religion in daily life and in politics
- relationship with other societies

More than just a description of the similarities/differences between the two societies, each group member's contribution to the presentation should make clear arguments about **WHY** the societies are similar or different. The presentation must include information from **at least two readings from class** and **at least three readings not from the class reading list**. Wikipedia and non-scholarly websites are not valid bibliographic sources. The presentation will be **graded based on the following criteria**:

- level of detail
- logical and well-organized transitions between topics
- thoughtfulness of your explanations (why the societies are similar or different)
- accurate use of theory from class
- accurate use of sources on your chosen society
- extra credit: sing a traditional song from your society

Each group will deliver their presentation on either Dec. 1 or 3 (in class), using presentation software. Presentations should last **30 minutes** and be **structured into four sections**:

- (1) Introduction, in which you introduce your chosen small-scale society
- (2) Topical sections, in which group members present one-by-one on their particular topic of comparison
- (3) Conclusion, in which you discuss what lessons your comparisons may have for our own lives
- (4) References, in which you list your cited articles (in-text citations and the reference list should be in APA format: <https://www.mendeley.com/guides/apa-citation-guide>)

An additional assignment will accompany your presentation: a review of your other group members' contributions.

## 5. Final Exam (25% of grade)

The final exam will consist of multiple choice and short answer questions having you compare and contrast material we've read and discussed. The final exam is cumulative but will emphasize the latter half of the course.

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**Notes:**

1. **COVID-19/Flu:** If you have any symptoms that may indicate COVID-19 or flu (e.g. cough, aches, unusual fatigue) do not come to class that day and get tested for COVID-19. I will help you make up the material you missed.
  2. **Generative AI:** The Honor Code prohibits the use of any unauthorized assistance on assignments. For this course, the use of generative artificial intelligence tools (such as but not limited to ChatGPT, Bard, DALL-E, AlphaCode, Stable Diffusion, Synthesia, Cohere Generate) is considered unauthorized assistance, and using them in connection with any assignment that you submit to me **will be an Honor Code violation**. This includes the use of generative AI for any stage of the assignment from conception to completion.
  3. **Plagiarism/Cheating/Honor System:** Per the Honor System, you pledge with each assignment you submit that you "have neither received nor given unauthorized assistance". This means that no student is to use, rely on or turn in work that was paid-for, copied, excessively summarized without citation, created in collaboration (without permission), or is otherwise not the original work of the student for the specific assignment (without explicit permission). For this course, unauthorized assistance **also includes use of AI at any stage of an assignment, or consultation of tests or quizzes provided by students from past classes**.  
<https://studentdevelopment.richmond.edu/student-handbook/honor/index.html>
  4. **Electronic Devices:** laptop computers and phones are in general **not allowed** during classtime (excepting a disability accommodation requiring use of a laptop computer to take notes). You may use a tablet if it is kept flat on your desk/table, for purposes of notetaking or to refer to notes when presenting. However, students should bring a laptop to class to take the midterm and final exams.
  5. **Awarding of Credit:** To be successful in this course, a student should expect to devote 10-14 hours each week, including class time and time spent on course-related activities.  
[registrar.richmond.edu/services/policies/academic-credit.html](https://registrar.richmond.edu/services/policies/academic-credit.html)
  6. **Religious Accommodation:** Students should notify me within the first two weeks of classes if they will need accommodations for religious observance.  
[registrar.richmond.edu/planning/religiousobs.html](https://registrar.richmond.edu/planning/religiousobs.html)
  7. **Disability Accommodation:** Students who are approved for academic accommodations must: 1) Submit their Disability Accommodation Notice (DAN) to me via the Disability Services Student Portal, and 2) Talk with me to create an accommodation implementation plan within the first two weeks of classes.  
<https://disability.richmond.edu/>
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## **Campus Resources:**

If you experience difficulties in this course, do not hesitate to consult with me. There are also other resources that can support you in your efforts to meet course requirements.

**Weinstein Learning Center** (<https://wlc.richmond.edu/>):

- **Academic Skills Coaching** Meet with a professional staff member who will collaborate with you to assess and develop your academic and life skills (e.g., critical reading and thinking, information conceptualization, concentration, test preparation, time management, stress management, and more).
- **Content Tutoring** Peer consultants offer assistance in specific courses and subject areas. They are available for appointments (in-person and virtual) and drop-in sessions. See schedules at [wlc.richmond.edu](https://wlc.richmond.edu/) for supported courses and drop-in times.
- **English Language Learning** Attend one-on-one or group consultations, workshops, and other services focused on English, academic, and/or intercultural skills.
- **Quantitative and Programming Resources** Peer consultants and professional staff offer workshops or one-on-one appointments to build quantitative and programming skills and provide statistical assistance for research projects.
- **Speech and Communication** Prepare and practice for academic presentations, speaking engagements, and other occasions of public expression. Peer consultants offer recording, playback, and coaching for both individual and group presentations. Students can expect recommendations regarding clarity, organization, style, and delivery.
- **Technology Learning** Visit our student lab dedicated to supporting digital media projects. Services include camera checkout, video/audio recording assistance, use of virtual reality equipment, poster printing, 3D printing and modeling, and consultation services on a variety of software.
- **Writing** Assists student writers at all levels of experience, across all majors. Meet with peer consultants who can offer feedback on written work and suggest pre-writing, drafting, and revision strategies.

**Boatwright Library Research Librarians:** ([library.richmond.edu/help/ask/](https://library.richmond.edu/help/ask/) or 289-8876): Research librarians help students with all steps of their research, from identifying or narrowing a topic, to locating, accessing, evaluating, and citing information resources. Librarians support students in their classes across the curriculum and provide individual appointments, class library instruction, tutorials, and [research guides](https://library.richmond.edu/help/libguides/) ([libguides.richmond.edu](https://library.richmond.edu/help/libguides/)). Students can [contact an individual librarian](https://library.richmond.edu/help/liaison-librarians.html) ([library.richmond.edu/help/liaison-librarians.html](https://library.richmond.edu/help/liaison-librarians.html)) or ask a librarian for help via email ([library@richmond.edu](mailto:library@richmond.edu)), text (804-277-9ASK), or [chat](https://library.richmond.edu/chat.html) ([library.richmond.edu/chat.html](https://library.richmond.edu/chat.html)).

**Career Services:** ([careerservices.richmond.edu](https://careerservices.richmond.edu) or 289-8547): Can assist you in exploring your interests and abilities, choosing a major or course of study, connecting with internships and jobs, and investigating graduate and professional school options. We encourage you to schedule an appointment with a career advisor early in your time at UR.

**Counseling and Psychological Services:** ([caps.richmond.edu](https://caps.richmond.edu) or 289-8119): Assists currently enrolled, full-time, degree-seeking students in improving their mental health and well-being, and in handling challenges that may impede their growth and development. Services include brief consultations, short-term counseling, skills-building classes, therapy groups, crisis intervention, psychiatric consultation, and related services.

**Disability Services:** ([disability.richmond.edu](https://disability.richmond.edu)): Students who are experiencing a barrier to access due to a disability and/or temporary condition are encouraged to apply for accommodations. Disability Services can be reached at [disability@richmond.edu](mailto:disability@richmond.edu) or 804-662-5001.

## Class Schedule and Assignments

### **PART 1: HUMAN EVOLUTION**

- Aug 25      **Introductions**
- *Reading:* Zlatkus, J. (Jan. 10, 2024). What would a hunter-gatherer do? *Living Fossils*: <https://thelivingfossils.substack.com/p/what-would-a-hunter-gatherer-do>
- Aug 27      **Ape Societies**
- *Viewing:* Episode 1 of *Chimp Empire* on Netflix <https://www.netflix.com/title/81311783>
  - *Viewing:* Episode 2 ("Rainforest Queens") of *Queens* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9c9H2bdnvPI>
- Sep 1      **Ancestral Hominids and Race**
- *Reading:* Longrich, N. (Mar. 26, 2024). Why did modern humans replace the Neanderthals? *The Conversation*. <https://theconversation.com/why-did-modern-humans-replace-the-neanderthals-the-key-might-lie-in-our-social-structures-195056>
  - *Reading:* Goodman, A. (March 13, 2020). Race is real, but it's not genetic. *Sapiens*. <https://www.sapiens.org/biology/is-race-real/>
  - *Quiz*

### **PART 2: BUILDING BLOCKS OF HUMAN SOCIETIES**

- Sep 3      **Coalitions and Group Violence**
- *Reading:* Boyer, pg. 33-65. **1, 2**
  - *Quiz*
- Knowledge of local flora/fauna week-----
- Sep 8      **Social Learning and Intelligence**
- *Reading:* Henrich, J. & Muthukrishna, M. (2023). What makes us smart? *Topics in Cognitive Science*. **3, 4**
  - *Quiz*
- Sep 10      **Social Learning and Intelligence (continued)**
- *Reading:* Boyer, pg. 66-92. **5, 6**
  - *Quiz*



-----Timing sleep cycles to the sun week-----

Sep 15      **Mating and Marriage**

- *Reading:* Boyer, pg. 125-149. **7, 8**
- *Reading:* Singh, M. (Mar 31, 2020). Is marriage over? *Aeon*:  
<https://aeon.co/essays/marriage-is-dead-long-live-marriage-how-will-we-couple-up>
- Quiz

Sep 17      **In-class game (bring laptop)**

-----50k steps/day week-----

Sep 22      **Cooperation**

- *Reading:* Boyer, pg. 163-186. **9, 10**
- *Viewing:* <http://ncase.me/trust/>
- Quiz

Sep 24      **Leadership**

- *Reading:* King, A., Johnson, D. and van Vugt, M. (2009). The origins and evolution of leadership. *Current Biology*. **11, 12**
- Quiz

-----Religious ritual week-----

Sep 29      **Gender and Leadership**

- *Reading:* von Rueden, C. (2023). Patriarchy and its origins. *The Sage Encyclopedia of Leadership Studies*. **13, 14**
- *Reading:* Boyer, pp. 150-162.

Oct 1      **Religion**

- *Reading:* Boyer, pg. 93-124. **15, 16**

Oct 6      **Discuss Final Project / Review for MIDTERM EXAM**

Oct 8      **MIDTERM EXAM (in the classroom, on Blackboard)**

Oct 13      **NO CLASS (Fall Break)**

**PART 3: ORIGINS OF POLITICAL INEQUALITY**

Oct 15      **Egalitarianism**

- *Reading:* Venkataraman, V. (July 15, 2024). The Ju/'hoansi protocol. Aeon: <https://aeon.co/essays/what-the-ju-hoansi-can-tell-us-about-group-decision-making>
- *In-Class Viewing:* The Meat Fight

-----No ultra-processed food week-----

Oct 20

### **Egalitarian Societies**

- *Reading:* Lewis, J. (2014). Pygmy hunter-gatherer egalitarian social organization: the case of the Mbendjele BaYaka. From *Congo Basin Hunter-Gatherers*. **17, 1**
- *Reading:* Cashdan, E. (1980). Egalitarianism among hunters and gatherers. *American Anthropologist*.
- *Quiz*

Oct 22

### **Aggrandizers and Patrons**

- *Reading:* Hayden, B. (2021). Foragers or feasters? Inequalities in the Upper Paleolithic. *Paleo*. **2, 3**
- *Quiz*

-----No cell phone or social media week-----

Oct 27

### **Fraternal Security**

- *Reading:* Rodseth, L. (2012). From bachelor threat to fraternal security: male associations and modular organization in human societies. *International Journal of Primatology*. **4, 5**
- *Quiz*
- *In-Class Viewing:* Ongka's Big Moka

Oct 29

### **Managerial Mutualism**

- *Reading:* Carneiro, R. (2000). The transition from quantity to quality: a neglected causal mechanism in accounting for social evolution. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences USA*.
- *Reading:* Fukuyama, F. (2011). Tribal societies: property, justice, war. From *The Origins of Political Order* (pp. 64-79). **6, 7**
- *Quiz*

## **PART 4: STATES**

Nov 3

### **The Rise of God-Kings**

- *Reading:* Turchin, pg. 1-22 and 131-147. **8, 9**
- *Quiz*

- Nov 5      **The Iron Law of Oligarchy**
- *Reading:* Turchin, pg. 149-180. **10, 11**
  - *Quiz*
- Nov 10      **The Axial Age**
- *Reading:* Turchin, pg. 181-209. **12, 13**
  - *Quiz*
- Nov 12      **Origins of Democracy**
- *Reading:* Wade, L. (2017). Unearthing democracy's roots. *Science*. **14, 15**
  - *Reading:* Shulevitz, J. (Oct, 2020). A new theory of Western civilization. *The Atlantic*:  
<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/10/joseph-henrich-weird-people/615496/>
  - *Quiz*

## **PART 5: MODERN POLITICS**

- Nov 17      **Political Polarization**
- *Reading:* Boyer, pg. 186-202, 237-244. **16, 17**
  - *Reading:* Williams, D. (May 31, 2025). Status, class, and the crisis of expertise. *Conspicuous Cognition*:  
<https://www.conspicuouscognition.com/p/status-class-and-the-crisis-of-expertise>
  - *Quiz*
- Nov 19      **The Future of Democracy**
- *Reading:* Acemoglu, D. (Jul/Aug 2023). The end of democratic capitalism? How inequality and insecurity fueled a crisis in the West. *Foreign Affairs*.  
<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/reviews/end-democratic-capitalism>
- Nov 24      **NO CLASS (work on Group Presentation)**
- Nov 26      **NO CLASS (Thanksgiving break)**
- Dec 1      **Group Presentations**
- Dec 3      **Group Presentations / Review for FINAL EXAM**
- Dec 12      **FINAL EXAM** (9am-12pm, in the classroom, on Blackboard)