Habermas argued that ultimately, explanations in social science rely on “the force of the unforced argument.” In other words, while it may be possible to discount certain explanations in the social sciences, it is ultimately not possible to conclusively prove a specific argument. The best one can do is marshal evidence to support a particular understanding or model.

With this in mind, we will examine several key issues in anthropological theory through the lens of the Captain Cook controversy. In seeking to how the question of whether or not Hawaiians thought Captain Cook was their god Lono, has been approached and understood by anthropologists, we will look at how anthropological explanations are constructed. We will also examine the relationship of theory to explanation and data. How are general models and preconceptions translated into ethnography? How is it possible that the same event can be interpreted in such different ways? What can this teach us more generally about the nature of anthropological knowledge? By what means and authority do anthropologists speak for the people they study? Whose voice is listened to, and why?

This debate will serve as a starting point to explore other issues as well. We will discuss the relationship of anthropological to other forms of writing, and anthropological constructions of Self and Other. We will also look at anthropological complicity in the colonial project and its aftermath.

Although the core of this course will focus on the Captain Cook debate, we will also draw upon other debates and controversies in the history of anthropology to further illuminate these and other issues. These include the publication of Malinowski’s diaries, Turnbull’s portrayal of the Mountain Ik, the Mead/Freeman controversy and the recent Chagnon / Neel Yanomami controversy. Each of these will help us further understand the issues we are interested in, as well other issues in anthropology, such as anthropological responsibilities to the people we work with.
Suggested readings

The following list is not intended to be exhaustive, and is subject to revision. It is illustrative of the range of sources that this course will draw upon.

American Anthropological Association

Barth, Fredrik and Colin Turnbull

Borofsky, Robert

Brady, Ivan

Caton, Hiram

Fabian, Johannes

Freeman, Derek

Marcus, George and Michael Fischer, eds.

Mead, Margaret

Obeyesekere, Gananath
Pratt, Mary Louise  

Sahlins, Marshall  

Said, Edward  

Sanjek, Roger  

Tierney, Patrick  

Turnbull, Colin  

Wilson, Peter, et al.  