

1 ✨ Introduction

Understanding Everyday Life

She woke up on a warm morning in AD 750. The Maya farming community of Chan was thriving, and more and more people were moving into the community. This meant clearing new land for agricultural fields. As her grandparents had taught her, and their grandparents had taught them, she went to help clear the fields nearby her home with some new neighbors after a warm meal of corn gruel prepared from freshly ground corn from her family's fields. Working with her chert adze, she carefully cleared the understory but was always conscious to leave the productive mature tropical-forest canopy trees—fruit trees, mahogany trees, *chico zapote*, and many others, standing. Agriculture and the forest could exist together. As she may or may not have been aware, this was one of the reasons why health remained consistent in her community, and why health was declining at this same time for people living in the nearby Maya city of Tikal, where much of the mature tropical forest had been depleted.



I woke up on a cold midwestern morning in AD 2012 with a wind chill factor of 30 below. I went to the kitchen and poured myself a bowl of organic cereal, a product of Canada, for breakfast. Like countless other people from all walks of life and all across the globe, I went outside and got in my car to drive to work. I usually don't drive to work in the morning, as I live only one mile from Northwestern, but when it is 30 below, I drive that one mile. As an individual act, my getting in my car in the morning and driving to work seems inconsequential. But because this act is repeated by a multitude of others and across time, its consequences are,

in fact, far from trivial and have quite a dramatic effect on our world. Still, we get in our cars and drive to work.



Both today and in the past, the things people do in their everyday lives are not as mundane as they first appear. They are sometimes quite extraordinary, and they are always profoundly implicated in what is going on in the world and the long-term social dynamics of societies. The two vignettes presented above illustrate the critical explanatory power of exploring the everyday. In the ancient Maya case, the way people cleared the forest for agricultural land affected both the health of the forest and human health, which had significant implications for both human societies and the natural world. In the contemporary case, the act of driving to work produces transformations in climate, economy, and power. Scholars can learn much about people and society by understanding ordinary acts of everyday life.



This book is about everyday life and why it matters. The title of the book, *Everyday Life Matters*, is a double entendre. First, everyday life matters because what people do on a daily basis is critical in the construction of their societies. Second, everyday life is the matter of much of archaeology—archaeologists dig up the minutiae of what people did on a day-to-day basis.

In this book I develop theories and methods for a critical analysis of everyday life in the past through the engagement of recent thinking in archaeology and social theory. I then draw upon my archaeological research on the two-thousand-year history (800 BC–AD 1200) of ancient Maya farmers at Chan, Belize, to explore the importance of everyday life in understanding human societies. I developed a collaborative, international, multidisciplinary archaeological research project at Chan between 2002 and 2009 (Robin 2012a). Chan is located in the upper Belize Valley region of west-central Belize, a peripheral part of the ancient Maya world. Its two-thousand-year occupation spans the major periods of political-economic change in Maya society (the Preclassic, Classic, and Postclassic periods), making it an ideal place to explore how everyday life intersects with broader transformations in society. During this time, the great lowland Maya cities of Tikal, Copán, Calakmul, Palenque, and many others rose, flourished, and fell, while in Europe the Roman Empire rose and fell and prehistory gave way to the Middle Ages.

Unremarkable in terms of community size or architecture, the farming community of Chan nonetheless flourished for two thousand years while the fortunes of nearby major Maya civic-centers waxed and waned. The Chan research into farmers' everyday lives reveals innovations in human-environmental practices, religious knowledge, and political strategies, and yields new insights into the operation of power in ancient Maya society. The archaeological record of everyday life at Chan belies traditional notions of peasants as a passive, backwards, and simple folk. Across their daily lives, Chan's farmers constructed a socially and environmentally sustainable community that thrived for twenty centuries while larger cities rose and fell around them. Developing a critical understanding of farmers' everyday lives at Chan challenges researchers to rethink and to reformulate a wide range of anthropological theories about the constitution of human societies and the nature of human agency and consider a greater role for ordinary people in the past. Thus, in a final sense, this book demonstrates that studying everyday life in the past matters for understandings of human societies. Interpretations of the past may be flawed if researchers do not take daily life into account, as I illustrate in chapter 7, by comparing and contrasting the Chan study to archaeological analyses of farmers in complex societies that do not consider day-to-day life.

Everyone, from rich to poor, has an everyday life. By using an ancient Maya farming community as the case study for studying everyday life, this book is also about ordinary people and the importance of their daily lives. I have found that studying everyday life is particularly useful for understanding the roles and relations of ordinary people in past societies. A society's textual record often focuses on the grand events of history and is often written by and for elites. Such records can leave out the histories of ordinary people, and when they do discuss ordinary people, they often do so from an indirect perspective. But everyone in the course of their day-to-day life leaves some material and spatial traces in the archaeological record. The archaeological traces of ordinary peoples' daily lives can provide the missing social information to understand the past. An analysis of everyday life can reveal the *hidden transcripts*: the social perspectives developed by members of society through their lived experiences, which are omitted from *public transcripts*, the overt and public representations of social life inscribed in the texts, art, and architecture of society's dominant groups (sensu stricto Scott 1990).

A focus on everyday life underscores the crucial role that archaeologists can play in reconstructing the lost voices of traditionally neglected social groups. Rather than being a part of the anonymous masses, in Michel de Certeau's (1984) writing on everyday life, the ordinary person doing ordinary things is the one who is the "common hero" of human history. Chan's farmers' daily lives might be overlooked in grand narratives of human history, but the existence of twenty centuries of sustainable lifestyles illustrates the consequential nature of understanding "common heroes" in the study of humanity.

Why Everyday Life?

Everyday life is at the core of human existence. People walk, they talk, they dwell, they meet, they play, they pray. It is through these daily practices that humans construct, perceive, and modify their world. A typical day involves spending time with families, doing work, and interacting with others in homes and across communities. These activities constitute the social fabric around which people create enduring memories and relate to others and the world around them.

While these insights at one level might seem obvious, the major intellectual traditions of anthropological theory—such as structuralism, functionalism, cultural ecology, cultural evolutionism, symbolic anthropology, existentialism, big man theory, and so on—assigned peoples' everyday practices a passive position in understanding human societies, because daily practices were presumed to be guided by external systems that are beyond people's grasp or presumed to be determined by individual subjectivities, particularly the will of important people in society, who are often men. This lack of attention to ordinary practices is amplified in archaeology, particularly in the archaeology of the world's ancient civilizations, with its traditional focus on excavating the exotic and monumental remains of temples and tombs.

Grand narratives of human history do not just overlook everyday life: they trivialize it and make it invisible. They do so by presenting a narrative of a society as dependent upon broader powers and dynamics, denying and mystifying the things people do and the structural causes that develop through everyday actions.

The seeming routine and ordinary nature of everyday life, such as waking up each morning to a bowl of cereal or corn gruel, is what leads it to

be taken for granted not only by social theorists but also often by people living their lives (Bourdieu 1977). However, given the multiplicity of actions possible in any one context, the very routines and ordinariness of daily life that at first make it seem unremarkable are actually what make it quite remarkable.

Despite its ordinary appearance, everyday life comprises the complexity of the experiences and interactions that people have with others and their world. These day-to-day experiences are a nexus of activities and interactions that both give shape and meaning to the world and give people the ability to shape their world and make it meaningful. While humans live in a world that has been historically constructed, they also live in a world that becomes anew as they reconstruct it through their daily actions. Rather than everyday life being simply mundane, out of the richness of everyday life arises a remarkable commentary on social and mental phenomena of the human world. It is at the daily level of peoples' lived experiences that the micro (self, interaction, experience) and macro (institutions, power relations, societies) levels of social life intersect.

Scholars such as Pierre Bourdieu (1977) suggest that researchers can look to everyday life to identify how people are socialized into existing social relations. In this way, studying everyday life can provide a means to understand stasis and tradition—how and why things may stay the same through time. Stasis and tradition are not a condition of inaction. Staying the same requires the continued reproduction of existing relations. For other scholars, such as Michel de Certeau (1984), everyday life additionally constitutes a haven for the development of countercultural acts that can lead to change. Thus, by studying everyday life, researchers can explore both how things stay the same and how they change: people learn about and critique their world through the ordinary practices of everyday life. Reproduction and improvisation are two dimensions of everyday life that I bring together in this book, particularly in chapter 2: everyday life is simultaneously a haven for the reproduction of tradition and the production of innovation in society.

Because everyday life comprises the ordinary practices, objects, and places that make up a person's world, the dual potential of everyday life to be habitual and surprising is clearly visible in the archaeological record of people's daily material and spatial practices, as seen in two case studies from the pre-Columbian Aztecs and eighteenth-century Jamaicans. Aztec girls began to learn to weave from their mothers and older sisters within