Power, politics and environmental change

Programme
MA Environmental Humanities 2014-15, Masaryk University, Brno, Czech Republic

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Course description
The course explores some key ways in which power influences environmental change and governance, from an environmental social science perspective. The classes draw on the disciplines of political ecology, ecological economics, and environmental history that explain how environmental change is produced and what are its social implications. The purpose is to develop a critical understanding of environmental change and the relevance of power and politics in incurring this.

Learning outcomes
After the end of the module, students should be in a position to:
1. Explain how power and politics are useful for understanding and studying environmental change
2. Use several models of how power operates to explain the role politics play in producing environmental change

Structure of classes
The duration of each class is one-and-a-half hours.

Most classes, i.e. classes 3, 4, 6, 7, and 8 are based on one reading (i.e. journal article or book chapter) done by students before the class. Students will answer a question (max. 500 words) based on the reading, email their answers to the course tutor until 2 hours before the class, and bring their answer in class where some of them will be
asked to present their answers. This will be followed by a 15-20 minutes class discussion on the question, the topics it touches upon and the issues it raises, which will be based on student answers to the question. The class is complemented by either a classroom activity or a more ‘traditional’ lecture format in which the tutor explains further points related to the topic and concludes with a summary of main points raised with the class.

Class 1 is an introductory class, Class 2 is a conventional lecture given by the course instructor, and Class 9 involves watching a documentary in the classroom and then discussing it; students are not required to read a reading and answer an assignment question for any of those two classes. Class 5 is a student ‘open clinic’ session, during which the course instructor will provide feedback to students (for details see ‘Class 5’ below).

### Programme

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Day</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Room</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>Thursday 12 March</td>
<td>17:00-18:30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Ecological distribution conflicts</td>
<td>Friday 13 March</td>
<td>09:45-11:15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Green materialism</td>
<td>Monday 16 March</td>
<td>18:45-20:15</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>The power of structures</td>
<td>Tuesday 17 March</td>
<td>18:45-20:15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>‘Open clinic’ session</td>
<td>Wednesday 18 March</td>
<td>17:00-20:15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>The power from within</td>
<td>Thursday 19 March</td>
<td>18:45-20:15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Incomplete dominations: post-structuralism</td>
<td>Friday 20 March</td>
<td>15:00-16:45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>The agency of nature</td>
<td>Monday 23 March</td>
<td>18:45-20:15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>The force of nature</td>
<td>Tuesday 24 March</td>
<td>08:00-10:15</td>
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### Student evaluation

Students will be evaluated by their performance on two evaluation tools:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Evaluation tool</th>
<th>Portion of final mark</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Final essay</td>
<td>75% of final mark</td>
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<tr>
<td>Class participation (including answers to class questions)</td>
<td>25% of final mark</td>
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1. The main student evaluation tool – **75% of final mark** – will be a **short essay** of a **maximum length of 3,000 words** (excluding references), which students will hand in (via email to the course lecturer) by **Friday 24 April 2015**.

You can either write an individual essay or form a group of a maximum of two students who will write one essay. In the case of a group (i.e. two students) essay, the students will equally share the overall mark of the essay. This means that if, for example the essay is marked as ‘c’ in the ECTS scheme, then both students who have written the essay will be awarded a ‘c’ mark for that essay. Students who plan to write a group essay should notify me by **Class 7**, i.e. by Friday 20 March the latest.

The **topic of the essay** is the following:
“Tuvalu is a small island state in the Pacific Ocean, which is regularly quoted in the media as the first nation likely to disappear due to the effects of climate change. Tuvalu consists of nine atolls whose average height is 2 metres above sea level, which according to models of projected sea-level rise in the area could sink significant parts of the nation under the sea by the end of the 21st century. Increasing salt intrusion together with other changes in weather patterns, such as more intense and frequent droughts, floods and storms, increase the vulnerability to environmental change of this small island nation.

Considering that the scientific literature analyses vulnerability to environmental change as the result of not only changing climatic patterns but also as the result of socio-political and economic conditions (Adger, 2006), which operate at different scales such as local-national-international, past-present-future, etc. explain in your essay:

i. What are the driving forces of vulnerability to climate change in Tuvalu?

ii. How do these interact with each other at different geographical, economic, governance (political decision-making), and social scales to produce vulnerability?

To answer the questions, you should research and use evidence from secondary sources such as newspaper clips, magazine articles, reports, maps, photos, etc. as well as other scientific publications on the issue of vulnerability in Tuvalu.

In writing your essay, try to use what you have learned in this course about the different ways in which power operates in social and natural systems to produce or shape the results of environmental change.

To perform well in your essay, you should demonstrate that you are able to tackle your research topic by collecting data using a diversity of secondary sources and analysing it in such a manner that demonstrates the importance of power and politics in shaping socio-environmental outcomes. Clarity of expression and focus of the essay (e.g. answering the questions) will also be evaluated.

The following documents can help you set off in your inquiry. Note that these are only meant to be start-up documents, i.e. an assistance to help you start with your work and that you should draw evidence from more documents in your essay; if you only use the following three documents to write your essay, your mark will be reduced.


2. **25% of the final mark** will be awarded on the basis of student **participation in the classes**. This will mainly involve student commitment and performance in answering the class assignments for classes 3, 4, 6, 7, and 8 (see ‘Course outline’ below), but other factors such as eagerness to participate and constructive comments during the class will also be taken into account. Performance in each assignment amounts to 5% of the overall mark.

**Course outline**

This section provides an outline of classes together with the readings students should do and class assignments they should complete for each class.

**Class 1: Introduction**

Introduction to course logistics as well as key concepts such as power, politics, environmental change, conflict and governance that are basic for the course.


**Student Assignment:** No assignment for this class

**Further bibliography**


**Class 2: Ecological distribution conflicts**

This class explains the notion of ecological distribution conflicts, which is central to the political ecology explanation of environmental change and conflict, through a case-study of opposition to wind farm projects.

**Reading:** Zografos, C. Martinez-Alier, J. 2009. The politics of landscape value: a case study of wind farm conflict from rural Catalonia *Environment & Planning A* 41, pp. 1726-1744

**Student assignment:** No assignment for this class.

**Further bibliography**


Class 3: Green materialism

This class introduces students to the conceptual framework of historical materialism (applied for the study of environmental issues), which is key for understanding environmental change and conflict under the lenses of political ecology.


Student assignment 1: Robbins explains that “[f]or materialists, environmental degradation is... inevitable in capitalism” (p. 46). Explain in your own words why is this the case, and how does such degradation occurs.

Further bibliography


Moore, J. W. 2000. Sugar and the expansion of the early modern world-economy: commodity frontiers, ecological transformation, and industrialization. Review (Fernand Braudel Center), 409-433

Class 4: The power of structures

This class focuses on the presentation of structuralism, a major approach for understanding power and politics and how these influence environmental change.

Reading: Brownlow, A. 2006. An archaeology of fear and environmental change in Philadelphia. Geoforum 37, pp. 227-245

Student Assignment 2: Brownlow (2006) argues that “…the uncontrolled growth of weeds and their emerging dominance in the landscape do appear to symbolize disorder, decay, and the absence of control that accompany years of political and fiscal neglect. Socially speaking, the significance of weeds is not what they do but, rather, what they represent; the same can be said for the abandoned autos, heaps of garbage, discarded needles, condoms, and drug paraphernalia, and broken glass that are pervasive throughout the park” (p. 242). Why, according to Brownlow, have disorder and decay fallen upon Cobbs Creek?

Further bibliography


Class 5: “Open clinic” session

This class is designed in order for the course lecturer to provide feedback to students about their performance and about any other issues related to study and research that may interest them. Each student will have 10-15 minutes (depending on the size of the class) during which the lecturer will give individual feedback on student performance in terms of written assignments and participation in the class. Moreover, and depending on time availability, those students who are interested to do so will be able to ask broader question concerning research, such as for example questions about dissertations or final projects they may be working on, further study opportunities, writing academic essays or articles, etc.

Class 6: The power from within

The class looks at power as something exercised from within individuals instead of something exercised upon them, and how this contributes to environmental change.


Student Assignment 3: According to Robbins, people who are more aware of the environmental impacts of chemicals and are more concerned about their communities are those who use more intensively chemicals on their lawns. How do Robbins’ middle-class US lawn managers (“lawn people”) end up using chemicals which they know that are harmful not only to the environment but also to their own health? Why do they do that to themselves and the environment?

Further bibliography


Class 7: Incomplete dominations: post-structuralism

This class focuses on the presentation of post-structuralism, its approach on understanding power and politics and its application in political ecology.


Student Assignment 4: St. Martin (2006) explains that “As with past enclosures of common property, the discursive enclosure clears communities and their associated social/cultural relations from the domain of economy and produces a resource open to discursive and literal appropriation” (p. 173). How does that happen?
Further bibliography


Class 8: The agency of nature

In this class we will examine an alternative (to Jared Diamond’s) way to consider the role and power of nature in shaping human affairs and environmental change.


**Student Assignment 5:** McNeill argues that although it is probably a rude blow to our species “lowly mosquitoes and mindless viruses” have the power to shape human international affairs. How did mosquitoes (*A. aegypti*) helped the Spanish Empire retain key fortifications in the Caribbean against the attacks of other European powers (e.g. British, French, Dutch, etc.)?

Further bibliography


Class 9: The force of nature

In this class we will watch the documentary ‘Guns, germs, and steel: Episode 2 Conquest’, which is based on the same title book written by Prof Jared Diamond. After the video, we will discuss some issues evolving around the question of what role nature plays in determining environmental change.

**Reading:** None.

**Student Assignment:** None.

Further bibliography
