

Power, politics and environmental change

Programme

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

Course tutor

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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

	Class	Day	Time	Room
1	Introduction	Thursday 12 March	17:00-18:30	P52
2	Ecological distribution conflicts	Friday 13 March	09:45-11:15	P52
3	Green materialism	Monday 16 March	18:45-20:15	U34
4	The power of structures	Tuesday 17 March	18:45-20:15	U34
5	<i>‘Open clinic’ session</i>	Wednesday 18 March	17:00-20:15	U34
6	The power from within	Thursday 19 March	18:45-20:15	U34
7	Incomplete dominations: post-structuralism	Friday 20 March	15:00-16:45	M117
8	The agency of nature	Monday 23 March	18:45-20:15	U34
9	The force of nature	Tuesday 24 March	08:00-10:15	P52

Student evaluation

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

Evaluation tool	Portion of final mark
Final essay	75% of final mark
Class participation (including answers to class questions)	25% of final mark

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.

Adger, W. N. 2006. Vulnerability. *Global Environmental Change* **16**(3), pp. 268-281

Manhire, T. 2011. Tuvalu drought could be dry run for dealing with climate change. *The Guardian*, Monday 17 October 2011

Tuvalu Climate Change – SOS. Accessible at:

<http://media.adelaidenow.com.au/multimedia/2008/10/tuvalu/tuvalu-perthnow.html>

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.

Reading: Robbins, P. 2004. Introduction. In: *Political Ecology*. Malden: Blackwell Publishing. pp. xv-xvi

Student Assignment: No assignment for this class

Further bibliography

Robbins, P. 2012. *Political Ecology*. John Wiley & Sons

Paulson, S., Gezon, L., Watts, M. 2005. Politics, ecologies, genealogies. In: Paulson, S., Gezon, L. (eds.) *Political Ecology across Spaces, Scales, and Social Groups*. New Jersey: Rutgers

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. Martínez-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

Martínez-Alier, J. 1995. Political Ecology, Distributional Conflicts, and Economic Incommensurability. *New Left Review* **II/ 211**, pp. 70-88

Blaser, M. 2004. Life projects: indigenous peoples’ agency and development. In: Blaser, M., Feit, H.A. (Eds.) *In the Way of Development: Indigenous Peoples, Life Projects and Globalisation*. London: Zed Books, pp. 26-44

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.

Reading: Robbins, P. 2004. Green Materialism. In: *Political Ecology*. Malden: Blackwell Publishing. pp. 44-52 and pp. 36-38

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

Greenberg, J.B., Parks, T.K. 1994. Political ecology. *Journal of Political Ecology* Vol.1, pp. 1-12

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

Schroeder, R.A., St. Martin, K., Albert, K.E. 2006. Political ecology in North America: discovering the Third World within? *Geoforum* 37, pp. 163-168

McCarthy, J. 2002. First World political ecology: lessons from the Wise Use movement. *Environment and planning A*, 34(7). pp. 1281-1302

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.

Reading: Robbins, P. 2007. Do Lawn People Choose Lawns? In: Robbins, P. Lawn People: How Grasses, Weeds, and Chemicals Make Us Who We Are. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, pp. 96-116

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

Peet, R., Robbins, P., Watts, M. 2011. Global nature. In: Peet, R., Robbins, P., Watts, M. (Eds.) *Global political ecology*. London & New York: Routledge, pp. 1-47 [especially pp. 31-36]

Agrawal, A. 2005. *Environmentality: technologies of government and the making of subjects*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press

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.

Reading: St. Martin, K. 2006. The impact of “community” on fisheries management in the US Northeast. *Geoforum* **37**, pp. 227-245

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

Escobar, A. 1996. Construction nature: Elements for a post-structuralist political ecology. *Futures* **28** (4), pp. 325-343

Sharpe, J. 2009. *Geographies of postcolonialism: spaces of power and representation*. Sage Publications

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.

Reading: McNeill, J.R. 2010. Yellow fever rampant and British ambition repulsed, 1690-1780. In: McNeill, J.R. *Mosquito empires: ecology and war in the Greater Caribbean 1620-1914*. New York: Cambridge University Press, pp. 137-149

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

Armiero, M. 2011. *A Rugged Nation: Mountains and the Making of Modern Italy*. Isle of Harris, UK: The White Horse Press

Swyngedouw, E. 1999. Modernity and Hybridity: Nature, Regeneracionismo, and the Production of the Spanish Waterscape, 1890-1930. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* **89**(3)

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

Diamond, J. 1997. *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company

McNeill, J.R. 2001. The World According to Jared Diamond. *The History Teacher* **34**(2)