Political Ecology

Academic year 2018-2019, second semester

Lecturer: Dr. Mihnea Tanasescu
Office: POLI Department, VUB, Pleinlaan 5, second floor, room 2.72.
Mihnea.Tanasescu@vub.be
Office hours: by appointment

Overview

Political Ecology is a multi-disciplinary field of study that considers the relevance of power and politics for shaping the relationship between humans and their environments. Political ecology contends that environmental imbroglios can only be understood in specifically political terms. In the last decades, the field has expanded to involve not just the political causes of environmentally suspect relationships, but also the many ways in which human-environment relations have political implications (for example, how specific relationships to wildlife have implications for conservation policy, or how specific relationships to resources such as water have implications for water rights). Increasingly, the field is concerned with the uneven distribution of environmental good and with how the construction of such goods is itself involved in the reproduction of inequality. Political ecology is committed to critical analysis and methodological pluralism. It is politically committed to social and environmental justice and motivated by the desire for structural political change.

The course is aimed at students with a background in the social sciences. However, it is specifically tailored to a political science orientation, as it is the political implications of human-environment relations that we will explore. The course relies on a heavy reading load, and students are expected to tackle dense research texts in English and critically assess their arguments. A willingness to read and think through complex arguments is paramount. This goes hand in hand with a willingness to deconstruct received wisdom about human-nature relations.
The course is designed to be a non-exhaustive but rigorous introduction to political ecology. The material is divided into four different themes that capture some of the more important currents in the field: The Human Planet, Nature Conservation, Human-Nature Reciprocity, and Earth Law. Each of these themes will be explored through a series of lectures and seminars. The reading assignments for each week will be uploaded to Canvas and are clearly indicated in the syllabus.

Students should also keep up to date with the wider world of political ecology. For this, they are encouraged to follow https://entitleblog.org and https://politicalecologynetwork.wordpress.com. The Journal of Political Ecology (https://journals.uair.arizona.edu/index.php/JPE), Conservation and Society (http://www.conservationandsociety.org), and Human Ecology Review (https://press.anu.edu.au/human-ecology-review) are some of the open-source journals students should be familiar with and keep an eye on.

Objectives

At the end of the module students should:

• be able to identify and explain ways in which power and politics influence the human-environment relationship, and vice versa
• be able to independently analyze socio-environmental issues under the lenses of political ecology, and conduct empirical research that leads to such analysis
• have basic knowledge of the history of political ecology and the most common approaches specific to this orientation
• have familiarity with different methods in political ecology and their advantages and disadvantages
• give pertinent examples of current practice and research in political ecology
• develop skills in the preparation and presentation of critical arguments pertaining to the human-environment relationship
• develop critical skills applied to cases in political ecology and the capacity to contextualize cases, and to know what information is missing (knowing what is not known)
**Format**

The course will be conducted through:

- ex cathedra teaching by the course convener; the PowerPoint slides of the lectures, when applicable, will be made available on Canvas.
- seminar style discussions of assigned readings and cases.
- students are required to read the corresponding texts to prepare for each session and be ready to present the main arguments in class and engage in topical discussion. **Class participation is a must**, as it is a main ingredient in the approach of this course. Students will often be charged with debating particular topics and representing the results to the class.
- depending on the cultural landscape of Brussels during the course, students may be required to participate in other lectures/seminars/conferences/workshops/screenings on topics of direct relevance to political ecology. Any such events will be announced within a sufficient time-frame and will be updated on the course syllabus.

To sum up: the course blends lectures with seminar-style discussions. Particularly as we advance through the course, groups of students will have to present cases to the wider class and analyze them. Students are expected to have read at least the required reading for each class, and encouraged to have read more and draw parallels across cases. We will often blend theoretical readings with case studies.

**Literature**

The course makes use of primary sources in English. The necessary material will be made available with sufficient time before each course. See the reading list of each individual lecture for details.

**Examination**

**Class participation** is 20% of the final grade.
Students have a choice between a final paper and a take home exam. Both count for 80% of the final grade. The choice has to be made explicit by each student by the middle of the semester and cannot be changed.

A final paper will consist of maximum 6000 words, including footnotes and endnotes and excluding bibliography, and will be either a political ecological analysis of a case, or a theoretical discussion of relevant concepts in political ecology, or a combination of the two. Independent research, over and beyond the literature presented in the course, is expected. The topic of the paper shall be agreed with the lecturer ahead of time. The deadline for submitting the paper will be announced within a reasonable time-frame. Only electronic submissions are accepted, to be sent, by the deadline, to mihnea.tanasescu@vub.be. For every day that a paper is late, three points (out of twenty) will be subtracted from the final grade. A paper is considered a day late five minutes after the deadline has passed, and every twenty-four-hour period henceforth.

A take home exam is written in response to a question posed by the lecturer at a specified time and date. The students then have three hours to write a maximum 6000 words essay on the topic chosen by the lecturer. They are free to write the exam wherever they please. The following regulations are to be respected:

- The students may not consult any other person except the lecturer in answering the essay question. The essay should reflect their own thinking.
- All sources regarding concepts, ideas or words should be cited, in line with the rules regarding plagiarism.
- The lecturer will be available by email for answering questions about the take home exam during its whole duration.
- The students have to take all the necessary precautions to avoid technical problems with their computer. It is their responsibility that they have a electronic copy of their essay, that email functions properly and that the essay is sent on time. The students may make use of university computers or write the essay on their own computer at the university itself.
• The take home exams should be sent to the lecturer, by e-mail (mihnea.tanasescu@vub.be), at the agreed-upon time. No extensions are possible. Three points (out of twenty) will be deducted for every hour an assignment is late.

For both the essay and the take home exam options, standard plagiarism rules apply. Any student that is found guilty of plagiarism will have their exam/essay nullified. The exam/essay is to be written in English. No exceptions are possible. If for medical reasons an exam or essay needs to be written by hand, this can be accommodated if the lecturer is consulted ahead of time and within a reasonable time-frame.
Lecture Overview

Structure

Nota bene: the contents of the lecture overview will be updated regularly throughout the semester. This syllabus is to be treated as a live document and consulted regularly. Reading assignments will be added or subtracted for forthcoming lectures, and the order of the lectures may, as a result of unforeseen contingencies, be changed.

The lectures are divided along four main themes, covering different areas of interest in political ecology. Each class will be divided into an introductory lecture on the topic of the day, and a seminar-style discussion of the reading assignments. Depending on the number of students attending, the class will be divided into three or four groups. Each group will have its own reading assignments for each week, and there may be a common reading assignment for the whole class. Each student is responsible for knowing what group they are part of, and no excuses are acceptable. During each class, after the lecture of the day, the different groups will discuss their reading assignment and present it back to the whole class. Any student from the group can be called upon the summarize the reading assignment for the whole class.

Below is an overview of the themes and the lectures planned for this semester.

Theme I: The Human Planet?

Week 22: Introduction to Political Ecology
February 14th

Required Reading:


Week 23: Natural Disasters
February 21st

Required Reading:

Group 1:

Group 2:

Group 3:

All Groups:

Recommended Reading:


**Week 24: Agriculture and Migration**
February 28th room E.0.05

**Required Reading:**

**Group 1:**

**Group 2:**

**Group 3:**

**All groups:**

**Recommended Reading:**

**Week 25:** cancelled; rescheduled for next week
March 7th

**Week 26a:** The Anthropocene (guest lecture by Professor Marcel Wissenburg, Radboud Universiteit Nijmegen)
March 14th morning room E.0.05

**Required Reading:**

**Group 1:**
Group 2:

Group 3:

All groups:

Recommended Reading:

### Theme II: Nature Conservation

**Week 26b: Neoliberal Conservation**  
March 14th afternoon (15:00 – 18:00) room D.0.08  

**Required Reading:**

Group 1:

Group 2:

Group 3:

All groups:

**Recommended Reading:**

**Week 27: Conflict and Conservation**  
March 21st room E.0.04  
**Required Reading:**  
Group 1:

Group 2:

Group 3:

All groups:

**Recommended Reading:**

**Week 28: New Directions: Restoration and Rewilding**  
March 28th room E.0.05
Required Reading:

Group 1:

Group 2:

Group 3:

All groups:

Recommended Reading:

Week 29: Parks and People (guest lecture by Dr. Esther Marijnen, Ghent University)
April 4th room E.0.05

Required Reading for All Groups:

Weeks 30 & 31: Spring Break
Theme III: Human – Nature Reciprocity

Week 32: Nature, Invasiveness, Novelty
April 25th room E.0.05

Required Reading:
Group 1:

Group 2:

Group 3:

All groups:

Recommended Reading:
**Week 33: Urban Political Ecology**  
May 2nd  
**room E.0.05**  

**Required Reading:**  
Group 1:  

Group 2:  

Group 3:  

All groups:  

**Recommended Reading:**  

**Week 34: The Ethics of Knowing Beyond the Human**  
May 9th  
**room E.0.05**  

**Required Reading:**  
Group 1:  

Group 2:  

Group 3:  
All groups:


**Recommended Reading:**


**Theme IV: Earth Law**

**Week 35: Planet-centered Jurisprudence and Wild Law**

May 16th, room D.0.08

**Required Reading:**

**Group 1:**


**Group 2:**


**Group 3:**


**All groups:**


**Recommended Reading:**

**Week 36: The Rights of Nature in Ecuador, Bolivia, India and Legal Personality for Nature in Aotearoa New Zealand**

May 23rd room E.0.05

*Required Reading:*

**Group 1:**

**Group 2:**

**Group 3:**

**All groups:**

*Recommended Reading:*