Violent Environments: Nature and Capital in Global History

From nuclear disasters, to mass extinctions of animal species, to the large-scale desiccation of global forests, the modern world’s violent relationship to nature threatens to undo the very ecologies that sustain human life. Yet this destructive form of modernity is not the result of evolutionary tendencies of an abstract human nature, but the outcome of the contradictory ways in which human beings have come to organize nature under the compulsions of modern capitalism.

This class invites undergraduate students to read the history of capitalism through an in-depth study of global environmental history. Global history is a necessary perspective for understanding large-scale structures, comparative trends and conjunctural events within environmental history; while also revealing the ways in which the global inequalities that characterize the contemporary world have emerged through the historical development of nature under capitalism. Course readings will thus reflect a particular concern for colonialism and the making of imperial modes of power in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Students will examine case-studies from irrigation infrastructure in modern Pakistan, grazing lands in the Ottoman Empire, Brazilian sugar plantations, the Columbia River basin, Saudi Arabia’s oil fields, Niger’s uranium mines, southwestern China’s agrarian frontier, and the drinking water pipelines of Flint, Michigan. Through class lectures and discussions, students will develop understandings of the complex interactions between nature, culture and society, generating critical perspectives on state-formation, histories of finance, the human body as a site of environmental history, the infrastructures of energy, race, and the past and future of modern capitalism. No previous experience in environmental or global history is presumed.

Readings

Readings will be posted on NYU Classes. Since this is a summer course, you will be expected to read more in less time. Readings must be completed prior to lectures as frequently there will be in-class assignments designed to help you process and synthesize what you’ve read.

Assignments

Weekly Reading Responses (students will submit for 3 weeks of their choosing): 200 – 250 Words

This course will introduce students to a range of perspectives on how historians write environmental history. Understanding differences between scholarly approaches requires students to read carefully and distill complex arguments. Students will thus be required to submit weekly reading responses that identify the major theme of the reading assignment, the argument presented by each author, and a critical discussion question for each text. For the weekly submission, students are required to submit one response for each meeting, so two responses for one week. Reading responses will be submitted at the second class meeting for the week.
First Paper – Critical Essay (due at Week 4): What is nature?
750 – 1000 Words

The first paper requires that you engage with the question: what is nature? This is not an essay for you to provide definitional answers taken from dictionaries, encyclopedias, or other reference material; but an opportunity for you to think critically about the concept of nature as it has been discussed in class and the weekly readings. Is nature a historical structure? Is nature a process? Is nature an agent? Is there any singular thing that we can point to and say, “nature!”? Students are expected to present an argument arguing for their analytical preference for one of the above – nature as structure, process, or agent – and to use course readings to defend that argument. Successful essays will not only present a coherent argument, but will demonstrate why this particular reading of nature is significant to our understanding of human-nature relationships.

Second Paper – Literature Review (due last week of class)
1000 – 1500 words

The paper requires that you select a minimum of three readings to review, in addition to at least one book or article that comes from outside the syllabus. Using these materials, you will write a literature review essay in the format provided to you drawn from examples in the American Historical Review. These literature reviews will be organized thematically. You will choose one from the following organizing themes: global history, energy, agriculture, science and nature, inequality, industry and industrialization, the human body, empire, commodities. You will select readings that help to explain your chosen theme and the particular ways in which environmental history offers a unique perspective on this theme. These reviews should focus not on summarizing the topic and argument of each reading individually, but rather they should compare the different points raised by each reading. Each review will make an argument that locates the readings in relation to your central theme. Students are required to meet with the instructor for preapproval of the book or article chosen from outside the syllabus. A prompt for the structure of this paper will be handed out at the first class.

Course Guidelines

1. Plagiarism will be penalized without exception. For details, see http://cas.nyu.edu/page/ug.academic integrity.
2. Students will follow the Chicago Manual of Style for all citations.
3. Laptops, phones, tablets, and other similar devices are not allowed in class, barring special circumstances (in which case you must speak with me first). Please print and bring all readings to class. If printing is cost prohibitive, speak with me to arrange to have the course assignments printed.
4. Attendance is mandatory; no student with three absences will pass the course.
5. Papers should be printed with double-spaced type, one-inch margins, and pages numbered. Late papers will be penalized at the rate of one grade per day, with no paper accepted after 72 hours.
6. All assignments are due as hardcopies and uploaded to the assignments section of NYU Classes by the start of the class on the day that they are due.
7. Students who require accommodations for religious holidays must provide me with dates for these absences within the first week of class. Students who require accommodations due to disability must register with the Moses Center.

Evaluation

Weekly Reading Responses: 20%
1st Paper: 25%
2nd Paper: 30%
Participation: 25%

Course Schedule

**Week One - Introduction**

1. Structures of Everyday Life

2. Is Nature a Commodity?

**Week Two – Imperialism**

1. Remaking Ecologies
   - Richard Grove, “The English and Dutch East India


2. State Knowledge and Development


Week Three – Malthus, Markets and Moral Economies

1. Malthus and the Moral Economy


2. Finance, Labor, Nature


**Week Four – Fossil Fuels and Industrial Competition**

1. Industrialism and Divergence


2. What is Energy?


**Week Five – Extractive Capitalism**

1. Imperial Projects in the 20th Century


2. State Power


**Week Six – Conclusion**

1. Disaster Ecologies


2. Rethinking Nature and Capital through Race
