
Introduction to Urban Political Ecology

Cities are dynamic, concentrated sites of human activity. They are often places we associate with political economic structures- of trade, investment, science and property. But what do cities have to do with ecology and environmental change? In this course, we explore the intersection of social and environmental processes in cities, and across the urban continuum. We will use scholarly resources from anthropology and other social sciences to ask, *how does nature come to be defined and delineated in cities? How are spaces of nature in cities governed, owned and controlled? When and how are people marginalized by environmental interventions, and how do they contest that marginalization?* Our aim is to better understand how and why struggles over the environment and struggles for social justice and equity intersect.

Course Objectives

1. Define key theoretical concepts in political ecology.
2. Identify and analyze key local and global exchanges that influence the environmental, social, and political conditions of specific cities.
3. Undertake, apply and evaluate primary research in political ecology.
4. Explain the function and utility of quantitative and qualitative research strategies for understanding environmental change in cities.

Assignments

1. Reading group work: posts, facilitation, full and active participation (20%)
2. Class attendance and active participation (15%)
3. Midterm exam (15%)
4. Film response (5%)
5. Urban Environmental Analysis, in stages (25%)
6. Final exam (20%)

Course Commitments

- Mutual respect: careful listening and active discussion with everyone in the class. We are in this together.
- Careful and thorough engagement with course materials is the only way to get the most out of the class.
- Clear communication regarding unavoidable absences or incomplete work: If any circumstance hinders your participation in this course, please speak with me *in advance*.
- Unexcused absences will adversely affect your grade. This is in fairness to your colleagues.
- Give credit where credit is due: plagiarism is a serious offense. We check all work to be sure it is original and your own.
- No electronic devices (cell phones or laptops) should be used in class unless you are giving a presentation.
- No food is permitted in class unless you are sharing with everyone.
- Please be patient with e-mail. I try to respond to class e-mail within 24 hours, but this cannot always be guaranteed. Your best bet: speak to me directly just before, or just after, a class meeting.

Major Due Dates

- Research Question draft October 8
- Annotated literature list October 17
- Midterm October 24
- Abstract and Literature Review November 12
- Final Exam Dec 12
- Research Paper December 14

Please note that to assure fairness in grading, late assignments are never accepted.

Class Format:

Class meets on Mondays and Wednesdays. Attendance and participation are mandatory for all sessions, and they will ensure that you get the most out of the course. This is a seminar, which means that we will combine lecture time with group discussions and student facilitation. The course will be as rich as we make it: the more we contribute through thorough preparation and careful engagement with the materials, the more we will all learn.

Readings and Films

All readings are available through Classes, Bobst Library, and the NYU Bookstore. You are required to read assigned texts **before class, by the day they are listed on the syllabus**. The Classes site will be the most updated resource for weekly readings, assignments, and other materials.

Urban Environmental Analysis

One of the best ways to learn about urban environmental change is to undertake an active study. To this end, writing an urban environmental analysis is this course's most significant assignment. You may choose your topic and your city according to your particular interests, but given the proximity of potential case studies here in New York, you're strongly encouraged to focus here. This aspect of the course is designed to give you an experiential introduction to combining archival work with independent research and to engage a complex urban environmental issue as a political ecologist might. At the same time, we cannot cover research methods in full in this course; this project is meant to give you a sense of mixed research methodology and why it matters. You will a) write a focused research question, b) gather data and when appropriate undertake some independent fieldwork, and c) explain your findings using key concepts in political ecology. Your final analysis (a 15-20 page research paper) will contain a discussion of key concepts, archival work from a minimum of 15 sources and references, and, when applicable, primary data.

Exams

There will be a midterm and final examination. Both will consist of identification/definitions, short answers, and essays. Questions for the midterm will draw from readings, lectures, and films covering material from the first half of the course, while the final will prioritize post-midterm material. Keep in mind, however, that in both exams you will be asked to synthesize course themes.

Reading Groups, Class Facilitation, and Participation

Each of you has been assigned to a reading group with a set of other classmates. This group will form a core aspect of your engagement with, and participation in, the class; it will help create an intellectual esprit de corps among the group as a whole. You are encouraged to meet face-to-face with each other once a week for at least 30 minutes to discuss class readings and then craft a collective short response to one of the readings chosen from those labeled [RG] on the syllabus. You will then write a brief discussion board post about this reading – available to the entire class – that makes the following points:

- 1. What is the author's argument and what forms of evidence are used to substantiate it?**
- 2. What questions does the argument raise?**
- 3. How does this reading connect to course themes and debates?**

Most weeks involve a Reading Group post. Reading Group weeks are indicated on the syllabus with numbered brackets, e.g. [RG 1, 2, 3]. Reading Group work, reflected in required posts, facilitation, and in a brief peer-evaluation of the group at the end of the semester, are worth 20% of your grade. Posts will be graded on a check +, check, check - scale, along with narrative feedback when applicable. Each of these checks are roughly equivalent to the grades of A (95), B (85), and C (75). These will be turned into a scaled 100-point final grade for this portion of the class at the end of the semester, taking into consideration overall performance, progression, and group dynamics.

Your end of semester peer evaluation will be graded on a complete/incomplete basis.

During the term, your reading group will also be tasked with facilitating two class sessions. Your job will be to engage your fellow students in the material and to connect your specific Reading Group text with the other readings and themes of the course/session. How you choose to meet these two goals is up to you. For the session your group facilitates, you are required to turn in an **individual 500-word essay** after the class session. This should reflect on how you and your other Reading Group members handled the facilitation. The remaining part of this assignment is simply the challenge of being a respectful and thoughtful peer, class participant, and intellectual in the context of this course and related co-curricular activities. This includes reading thoroughly, being a good listener, showing up on time, and the like. This aspect of the class, “attendance and active participation,” is worth 15% of your final grade and will be assigned by the professor based on a 100-point scale.

HONOR CODE

All written work in this course must be original and composed exclusively by you, the author. You must acknowledge in writing any assistance you receive from the literature, other students, textbooks, internet, or any other source. Plagiarism is a serious offense and will be immediately referred to the Dean’s office.

DISABILITY DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

Academic accommodations are available to any student with a chronic, psychological, visual, mobility, learning disability, or who is deaf or hard of hearing. Students should please register with the Moses Center for Students with Disabilities at [212-998-4980](tel:212-998-4980).

NYU's Henry and Lucy Moses Center for Students with Disabilities /726 Broadway, 2nd Floor /New York, NY 10003-6675 /Telephone: [212-998-4980](tel:212-998-4980)/ Voice/TTY Fax: [212-995-4114](tel:212-995-4114)/Web site: <http://www.nyu.edu/csd>

WEEKLY SCHEDULE

September 5: *What is Political Ecology?*

- <https://www.thenatureofcities.com/2013/03/27/urban-sustainability-and-resilience-why-we-need-to-focus-on-scales/>

September 10 & 12: Key Concepts, Key Challenges: *Urban Ecosystems, Urban Metabolisms, Urban Mosaics, Urban Natures*

Pickett, S.T.A., M.L. Cadenasso. 2002. Ecosystem as a multidimensional concept, meaning, model and metaphor. *Ecosystems*. 5:1-10.

West, Paige, 2010. Making the Market: Specialty Coffee, Generational Pitches, and Papua New Guinea. *Antipode* 42(3): 690-718

Price, J. (2006). "Thirteen Ways of Seeing Nature in L.A." *Believer Magazine*. Part 1 available here:

- https://www.believermag.com/issues/200604/?read=article_price
- Part 2 available here: https://www.believermag.com/issues/200605/?read=article_price

Swyngedouw, E. and N. C. Heynen (2003). "Urban Political Ecology, Justice and the Politics of Scale." *Antipode* 35(5): 898-918.

September 17: Film viewing *Plastic China*

Njeru, J. (2006) 'The Political Ecology of the Plastic Waste Problem', *Geoforum*, vol. 37: 1046-1058.

September 19: City garbage, Urban Waste (Prof. Karen Holmberg)

- <https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/observations/more-recycling-wont-solve-plastic-pollution/>

September 24: Circuits of Waste, continued.

Alexander, C. and Reno, J. (eds.) (2012) *Economies of Recycling: The Global Transformation of Materials, Values and Social Relations*. Zed Books: New York. (Introduction, pp 1-26)

Goldman, Michael. 2011. "Speculative Urbanism and the Making of the Next World City." *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*. 35 (3): 555-581.

Malthus, T. 1798. *An essay on the Principle of Population*.

- <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2015/nov/23/cities-in-numbers-how-patterns-of-urban-growth-change-the-world>

September 26: More people, more consumption, or both? [RG 1]

Brown et. al. Beyond Malthus: Sixteen Dimensions of the Population Problem. *The Environment in Anthropology*, Pp. 80-86.

- Population predictions...environment and urbanization....Volume: 29 issue: 1, page(s): 195-216
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0956247816663557>
- <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2018/mar/19/urban-explosion-kinshasa-el-alto-growth-mexico-city-bangalore-lagos>
- <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2018/mar/22/collapse-civilisation-near-certain-decades-population-bomb-paul-ehrllich>

October 1: "Public" or "Publics?" [RG 2]

Foster, Jennifer. 2012. Off track, in nature: Constructing ecology on old rail lines in Paris and New York. *Nature and Culture* 5(3), pp. 316-337.

Amita Baviskar (2003) "Between violence and desire: space, power, and identity in the making of metropolitan Delhi" (*International Social Science Journal* 55, 89-98).

Heynen, N., et al. (2006). "The Political Ecology of Uneven Urban Green Space." *Urban Affairs Review* 42(1): 3-25.

- the idea of pseudo public spaces (<https://www.nature.com/articles/s41599-017-0048-6>)
- http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/22/opinion/in-the-shadows-of-the-high-line.html?_r=1&sc=1&sq=opinion%20high%20line&st=Search

October 3: Field Trip One – “Public” space and multiple publics

Ingold, Tim. 2011. *Stories against Classification: Transport, Wayfaring, and the Integration of Knowledge. In Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge, and Description.* London: Routledge, 156-164.

Ogden, et al. "Forest Ethnography: An Approach to Study the Environmental History and Political Ecology of Urban Forests"

Landry, S. M. and J. Chakraborty (2009). "Street Trees and Equity: Evaluating the Spatial Distribution of an Urban Amenity." *Environment and planning A* 41(11): 2651-2670.

October 10: Google is not Research / *Doing research in Urban political ecology: tools for research design / We will meet at Bobst Library*

****Bring three potential research questions (clearly thought through in advance, and listed in writing) that you wish to explore as potential research paper topics.**

de Certeau, Michel. 1984. *Walking in the City.*

Thrift, Nigel. 2004. *Driving in the City. Theory, Culture & Society* Vol. 21(4/5): 41–59

- <https://www.nature.com/collections/mxcwjrnwvt>

October 15: Lungs of the City? [RG 3]

Heynen, N. C. (2003). "The Scalar Production of Injustice within the Urban Forest." *Antipode* 35(5): 980-998.

For interest: Battaglia, M., G.L. Buckley, M. Galvin, and J.M. Grove. 2014. It's Not Easy Going Green: Obstacles to Tree-Planting Programs in East Baltimore. *Cities and the Environment* 7, Issue 2, Article 6.

Graham, S. (2015). "Life support: The political ecology of urban air." *City* 19(2-3): 192-215.

Véron, R. (2006). "Remaking urban environments: the political ecology of air pollution in Delhi." *Environment and planning A* 38(11): 2093-2109.

October 17: Urban Air Quality

***Literature Review Due: preliminary annotated bibliography with 8 scholarly sources for your research paper.**

Douglas, M. (1984) *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo.* London, Ark Paperbacks. (Please read: Introduction; Chapter 1 'Ritual Uncleanliness' & Chapter 2 'Secular Defilement')

October 22: Waste [RG 4]

Chakraborty, D. (1991). 'Open Space/Public Place: Garbage, Modernity and India', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 14(1). Available at: <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00856409108723146>

Moore, S. (2009), 'The Excess of Modernity: Garbage Politics in Oaxaca, Mexico', *The Professional Geographer*, 61(4), pp. 426-437.

October 24: Midterm Exam

October 29: Field Visit 2 Water and Resilience

Big U and Rebuild by Design

- <http://www.rebuildbydesign.org/our-work/all-proposals/winning-projects/big-u>
<http://www.rebuildbydesign.org/news-and-events/press/theres-a-huge-overlooked-economic-threat-to-new-york-city>
- <https://www.wnyc.org/story/five-years-later-sandy-project-grinding/> (read or listen)
- <https://www.riverkeeper.org/blogs/ecology/storm-surge-barriers-for-ny-harbor-threaten-life-of-the-hudson-river/#.W03vEoDIWXA.twitter>

October 31: Water Supply and Water Proximity [RG 5]

Gandy, M. (2004). "Rethinking urban metabolism: water, space and the modern city." *City* 8(3): 363-379.

Ranganathan, M. and C. Balazs (2015). "Water marginalization at the urban fringe: environmental justice and urban political ecology across the North–South divide." *Urban Geography* 36(3): 403-423.

November 5: Private Water and Multiple Publics

Swyngedouw, E. (1997). "Power, Nature, and the City. The Conquest of Water and the Political Ecology of Urbanization in Guayaquil, Ecuador: 1880–1990." *Environment and planning A* 29(2): 311-332.
and *Planning A* 29(2) 311 – 332:1997).

Loftus, A. J. and D. A. McDonald (2001). "Of liquid dreams: a political ecology of water privatization in Buenos Aires." *Environment and Urbanization* 13(2): 179-199.

Bakker, K. (2008). "The ambiguity of community: Debating alternatives to private sector provision of urban water supply." *Water Alternatives* 1(2): 236.

November 7 & 12: Phase Two Project Presentations & discussion

Abstract and Literature review (5-7 pp) plus full paper outline due

November 14: Morphologies and Infrastructures [RG 1]

Williams, B. (2001). "A river runs through us." *American Anthropologist* 103(2): 409-431.

Romig, Rollo. (2017). "How to Steal a River." *The New York Times*. Available at:
<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/01/magazine/sand-mining-india-how-to-steal-a-river.html?mcubz=1>

November 19: Climate and Cities

Harvey, D. 1996. *The Environment of Justice.* In *Justice, Nature, and the Geography of Difference*. Malden: Blackwell.

While, A. and M. Whitehead (2013). "Cities, Urbanisation and Climate Change." *Urban Studies* 50(7): 1325-1331.

November 21: No class meeting. Watch Film "Sand Wars" DVD 35486 and post a 1-2 page response to Classes.

November 26: Climate and Cities [RG 2]

Betsill, M. and H. Bulkeley (2007). "Looking Back and Thinking Ahead: A Decade of Cities and Climate Change Research." *Local Environment* 12(5): 447-456.

Rice, J. L. (2014). "An Urban Political Ecology of Climate Change Governance." *Geography compass* 8(6): 381-394.

Jonas, A. E. G., et al. (2011). "The New Urban Politics as a Politics of Carbon Control." *Urban Studies* 48(12): 2537-2554.

November 28: Sustainability and Future Cities [RG 3]

Owen, D. (2004). "Green Manhattan." *The New Yorker* 18 October 2004. Available at: <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2004/10/18/green-manhattan>

Pickett, S. T. A., et al. (2013). "Ecological science and transformation to the sustainable city." *Cities* 32: S10-S20.

De Boeck, Filip. 2011. "Inhabiting Ocular Ground: Kinshasa's Future in the Light of Congo's Spectral Urban Politics." *Cultural Anthropology* 26 (2): 263-286

Halpern, O., J. LeCavalier, N. Calvillo, and W. Pietsch. 2013. "Test-Bed Urbanism". *Public Culture*. 25 (2): 273-306.

December 3 Energy [RG 4]

Watch before class: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PfOVIhGuI4A&ab_channel=BestDocumentary

Gunel, Gokce. "Inhabiting the Spaceship: The Connected Isolation of Masdar City." In *Climates: Architecture and the Planetary Imaginary*. New York: Columbia Books. Pp 361-371.

Gunel, Gokce. "The Infinity of Water: Climate Change Adaptation in the Arabian Peninsula. *Public Culture* 28:2. Pp. 291-315.

December 5 Energy [RG 5]

Mettler, Peter. 2010. *Petropolis: Aerial perspectives on the Alberta tar sands*.

Slayton, Rebecca. 2013. "Efficient, Secure Green: Digital Utopianism and the Challenge of a 'Smart' Grid" *Information and Culture* 48(4): 448-478.

December 10: Environmental Futures

Mathews, A and J. Barnes. (2016) "Prognosis: Visions of Environmental Futures." In *Environmental Futures*. Sussex: Wiley& Sons.

Kolbert, Elizabeth. *The Fate of the Earth*. *The New Yorker*. October 12, 2017.

December 12: Final Exam / Final paper is due on December 14

