

# **Power, politics and environmental change**

## **Programme**

MA Environmental Humanities 2016-17, 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 understandings 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 2, 3, 4, and 5 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** (at the latest), 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, and Class 6 involves watching a movie 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.

### **Programme**

	<b>Class</b>	<b>Day</b>	<b>Time</b>	<b>Room</b>
1	Introduction	Mon 7 Nov.	13.30-15.00	Hall
2	Green materialism	Tue 8 Nov.	18.45-20.15	P22
3	The power of structures	Wed 9 Nov.	15.15-16.45	U33
4	The power from within	Thu 10 Nov.	17.00-18.30	P21
5	The power of discourse and incomplete dominations	Fri 11 Nov.	15.15-16.45	U32
6	Transforming nature (movie screening class)	Mon 14 Nov.	09.45-11.15	P24

### **Student evaluation**

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

<b>Evaluation tool</b>	<b>Portion of final mark</b>
Final essay	80% of final mark
Class participation (including answers to class questions)	20% of final mark

1. The main student evaluation tool – 80% of final mark – will be a **short essay** of a **maximum length of 2,000 words** (excluding references), which students will hand in (via email to the course lecturer) by end of day **Monday 9 January 2017**. Essays submitted later than that date will not be accepted for marking; students who do not submit an essay will fail the course. If you submit the essay but fail to score more than 50% of the final mark to pass the course, you will be given the chance to write a short essay and pass the course.

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 5, i.e. by Friday 11 November 2016 the latest.

The **topic of the essay** is the following:

Read the following article (a pdf will be provided by the course tutor):

Klein, N. 2016. Let Them Drown. The Violence of Othering in a Warming World. *London Review of Books* Vol. 38 No. 11 · 2 June 2016, pp: 11-14

If you prefer, instead of reading the text you can watch the video where Klein presents her article at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CChLEtlu4iY>

Naomi Klein argues that a key source of vulnerability to climate change is “othering”, a practice which she calls “violent”.

1. What does Klein mean by that, and how does “othering” happen? Explain in your own words (i.e. without copy-pasting Klein’s text). Your answer should not be longer than 1,000 words. (40% of the final mark)
2. Think of another example of “othering” which produces victims of environmental change. Explain what it involves, and how it happens. Use knowledge from the class to answer the question, e.g. the issue of winners and losers from environmental change, how discourse produces change that favours some at the expense of others, what mechanisms of power operate and how, etc. Your answer should not be longer than 1,000 words. (40% of the final mark).

### **Bibliography for the essay**

Some more resources (the first and the last one will be provided in pdf by the course tutor) to help you better understand the essay’s key term of “othering”:

Corfield, J. 2007. Orientalism. In: Robbins, P. (ed.) *Encyclopedia of environment and society*. SAGE Publications, pp: 1309-1310

Gabriel, Y. 2012. The Other and Othering. A short introduction. Available at: <http://www.yiannisgabriel.com/2012/09/the-other-and-othering-short.html>

Sharpe, J.P. 2009. Chapter 1: Imagining the world. *Geographies of Postcolonialism. Spaces of Power and Representation*. SAGE, pp.11-28

(This is not obligatory reading, they are simply additional resources in case you need support for your essay).

2. **20% 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 2, 3, 4, and 5 (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

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### **Class 2: 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 occur.

#### ***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

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### **Class 3: 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

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### **Class 4: 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

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### **Class 5: The power of discourse, and the incomplete character of domination**

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

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**Class 6: Transforming nature (movie screening class)**

For the first part of this class we will watch the 1984 movie ‘Where Green Ants go to Dream’ (by German director Werner Herzog). After the screening, we will discuss how the movie talks about the influence of power relations in environmental transformation and conflict, trying to bring into the discussion knowledge we have acquired in the course.

***Reading:*** None.

***Student Assignment:*** None.