Planet in Peril: The History and Future of Human Impacts on the Planet  
History 1505/ Sociology 1509  
Fall 2016

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Course Description: The 21st century opened with combined crises of climate, biodiversity, and eco-system functioning. In contrast to much sustainability discourse, human disruption of the natural environment is not new. Environmental historians have identified major human alterations in eco-systems over the last 500 years. This course combines contemporary analyses of human impacts on the environment with the historical record, and explores both the familiar and the novel in the realm of ecological challenges. We devote substantial attention to solutions to current ecological dilemmas.

Readings: The three required texts are at the BC Bookstore. Books and articles that are not available on the internet can be found on course reserves at O’Neill Library and can be accessed through the course website. We have attempted to make the course affordable by locating readings that are freely available and assigning a small number of low cost books. The total for books should be approximately $35.

Required texts:  
**Students with Disabilities:** We are committed to making our class accessible to all students. Please be in touch with us via email if you have any needs that are not addressed on the syllabus. Most of our readings are available in pdf form. We have one off-campus field trip. It is optional and ungraded. We will do our best to make it accessible for all students.

**Requirements and grading:** You are expected to do the readings each week, watch lectures when assigned (see below, “The Flipped Classroom,”) and come to class. There are also written and other requirements. The grading rubric is the following:

Weekly in-class quizzes (30%)
Two in-class essays on class themes (10% each, 20% total)
Final examination (20%)
Final lab project (20%)
Lab participation and attendance (10%)

Quizzes will generally take place on Mondays. If we do not have class on a Monday, or we have a guest speaker, the weekly quiz will be on Wednesday, as listed on the syllabus. There will be fourteen quizzes and you may drop your two lowest grades. There are no make-ups for missed quizzes. If you miss a quiz, that will count as one of your two low grades.

In-class essays will take place on two Fridays. The essay questions will focus on the themes of the class and they will be selected from a set of questions we will provide in advance.

The final exam will consist of essay questions which will be selected from a set of pre-circulated questions. The final exam date is Tuesday, December 20 at 12:30 pm.

**The Flipped Classroom and Active Learning:** There is growing evidence that a more active classroom pedagogy leads students to learn and retain more, and to have a more interesting academic experience. Therefore, we have taped most of the lectures for the class. They are available on the course website for you to view on your own time, outside of class. In class, there will be no computer use and you should take notes by hand unless you have permission from us. Evidence shows that hand-written notes help you learn better than typed notes ([http://www.scientificamerican.com/article/a-learning-secret-don-t-take-notes-with-a-laptop/](http://www.scientificamerican.com/article/a-learning-secret-don-t-take-notes-with-a-laptop/)).

**Learning Goals and Course Themes:** In addition to the general core curriculum learning outcomes (attached), we have a number of course specific learning goals.
* Learn about broad trends in sustainable and unsustainable uses of planetary resources from historical, global and social perspectives via the study of particular examples.
* Develop climate literacy.
* Develop a personal philosophy and approach to the challenges facing humans and planet.
* Gain experience by studying and engaging with a local environmental issue.
There are a number of themes that run through the course. They are present in readings and lectures, and we will discuss them explicitly throughout the course. We expect that you develop fluency with them. The three main themes are:

1) the ways in which capitalism as an economic system creates and potentially addresses ecological degradation
2) the role of the state
3) the relationship between inequalities and ecological outcomes

**Course structure:** Most weeks we will follow a common pattern. Mondays we will start with a reading/lecture quiz, then discuss material from lectures, readings, and the quiz. On Wednesdays we will usually have participatory activities and guest speakers. Every few Fridays we will engage in common conversation on one of the three themes as it relates to the unit we have just completed. On two Fridays we will have in-class essays.

**Lab sessions:** You will participate in a weekly lab session, on Tuesday or Thursday. In this small group setting you will develop research skills and work on a real world project. The first part of the semester we will do skill-building via analytic, archival and interview exercises. We will then turn to the main project, which we are doing in collaboration with the City of Boston Climate Action Plan Office. Each lab group will be assigned a neighborhood of Boston. The project consists of engaging with residents and groups to research and propose one or two mini-projects which will address climate change issues in that neighborhood. The schedule for lab sessions is included after the main syllabus. There will be an optional field-trip for this project. We will do our best to make it accessible for all students.

**Reflection sessions:** Reflection sessions meet once a week, on Thursday evenings at 6 pm. The purpose of these sessions is to reflect on and integrate the material from the class, with emphasis on how it relates to your own life. We will begin our reflection sessions by learning two tools of reflection (meditation, journal writing). You will choose one of these tools for use in these sessions over the remainder of the semester. Subsequent sessions are divided into two sections: ethics and the sustainable life and changing the world.

**Academic Integrity and Plagiarism Policy:** We take cheating and plagiarism extremely seriously. Here is the University’s policy on these issues: [http://www.bc.edu/offices/stserv/academic/integrity.html](http://www.bc.edu/offices/stserv/academic/integrity.html). You are responsible for knowing what that policy is, and how cheating and plagiarism are defined.

**Reading List and Course Schedule**

**Week 1 The Challenge of Sustainability (August 29-September 2)**

*Readings*

• Global Footprint Network, *The Ecological Wealth of Nations*, pp. 2-10, available at:

**Week 2 The Columbian Exchange and Changes in Population (September 5-9)**

**September 5 Labor Day. NO CLASS**

September 7 Weekly quiz.

**Readings**

• Fred Pearce, 2009, “Consumption Dwarfs Population as Main Environmental Threat,” available at: http://e360.yale.edu/feature/consumption_dwarfs_population_as_main_environmental_threat/2140/

**Week 3 Themes of Environmental Explanation (September 12-16)**

September 16. Thematic discussion

**Readings**

• Thomas Friedman, *Hot, Flat and Crowded* (New York, 2008), chap. 10.
• Donald Worster, *Dust Bowl*, Introduction, pp. 3-8.
• Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums*, chap. 6, pp. 121-150.

**Week 4 Early Modern Deforestation (September 19-23)**

September 19. Guest Speaker. Leslie Homzie, O’Neill Library
September 21. Weekly Quiz

**Readings**


**Week 5 Modern and Contemporary Deforestation (September 26-30)**
September 28. Guest Speaker. Representative from Ecologic
September 30. Thematic discussion

Readings
- Wangari Maathai, *The Greenbelt Movement: Sharing the Approach*, chs 2, 6, pp. 6-33, 63-75.

Week 6 Energy and Climate 1: The Rise of Fossil Fuels (October 3-7)

October 5. Guest Speaker. Jessica Feldish, City of Boston, Climate Action Plan
October 7. First in-class thematic essay

Readings

Week 7 Energy and Climate 2: The Problem of Climate Change (October 10-14)

**October 10. Columbus Day. NO CLASS**

October 12. Weekly quiz

Readings

Week 8 Energy and Climate 3: US Climate Change Politics and the Emergence of Renewable Energy (October 17-21)

October 19. Guest Speaker. Phillip Warburg, author *Harness the Sun*
October 21. Thematic discussion

Readings
Week 9 Energy and Climate 4: Global Climate Justice (October 24-28)

**Friday October 28. NO CLASS**

**Readings**


Week 10 Food and agriculture 1: The Shift to Unsustainable Agriculture (October 31-November 4)

**Reading**

Donald Worster, *Dust Bowl*, chaps. 3-5, 12-14, Epilogue.

Week 11 Food and agriculture 2: The Rise of a Sustainable Alternative (November 7-11)

November 11. Second in-class thematic essay

**Readings**

- Berners-Lee, *How Bad Are Bananas?*, pp. 77-104.

Week 12 Toxics (November 14-18)

November 18. Thematic discussion

**Reading**
• Javier Auyero and Débora Alejandra Swistun, Flammable: Environmental Suffering in an Argentine Shantytown, Introduction, chs. 2, 4.

Week 13 Water (November 21-22)

Readings


Week 14 The Sixth Extinction (November 28-December 2)

Readings

• Elizabeth Kolbert, The Sixth Extinction, chs. TBA.
• Berners-Lee, How Bad Are Bananas?, pp. 149-156.

No online lectures this week

Week 15 Greening the Planet: Pathways into Sustainability (December 5-9)

December 9. Project presentations and class party.

Readings

• Stephanie Baasch, “A Local Energy Transition Success Story,” chap. 8, in Community Governance and Citizen-Driven Initiatives in Climate Change Mitigation, editors, Jens Hoff and Quentin Gausset (Routledge 2016), pp. 130-149.
Lab Schedule

August 30. Introductions and Eco-footprint Exercise

September 6  Introduction to city of Boston Climate Action Plan project
Overview of project, assignment of neighborhoods to labs, provision of contacts for
interviews.

September 13  Paradigms of Explanation exercise

September 20  Archival project week 1

September 27  Archival project week 2

October 4  Archival project week 3.

October 11  Interview project week 1

October 18  Interview project week 2

October 25  City of Boston Climate Action Plan neighborhood project

November 1  City of Boston project continued

November 8  City of Boston project continued

November 15  City of Boston project continued

November 22  City of Boston project continued

November 29  City of Boston project continued

December 6  City of Boston project final week
Reflections Syllabus

Reflection sessions will meet in Fulton 511, except on September 1, September 8, November 3, and November 17 when we will meet in Trinity Chapel Basement on the Newton Campus.

I. Tools of Reflection (120 minute sessions)

September 1 Meditation and Mindfulness (Guest speaker: Nick Kranz)
September 8 Journal Writing and Contemplation (Guest speaker: Kim Garcia)

Students will choose one of these tools to practice during reflection sessions for the remainder of the semester. We will end most sessions with 20 minutes of reflection in which students meditate, write in a journal, or engage in contemplation.

II. Ethics and the Sustainable Life

September 15 Film: The Age of Stupid (120 minute session)
September 22 Ethical Eating
September 29 Ethical Travel
October 6 No session scheduled
October 13 Film: Merchants of Doubt (100 minute session)
October 20 No session scheduled

III. Action for Change

October 27 The history of the climate movement (Guest speakers: Craig Altemose, Alyssa Lee, Better Future Project)
November 3 BC experience workshop (Mission and Ministry) (120 minutes)
November 10 Social Justice and Environment (Guest speaker: Maria Elena Letona, Neighbor to Neighbor)
November 17 : Shea Center for Entrepreneurship session on design thinking and sustainable solutions (120 minute session)
December 1 No session scheduled
December 8 Course wrap-up: Reflecting on the semester
Boston College Core Curriculum learning outcomes

1. Demonstrate the critical, mathematical, informational, analytic, expressive, and creative skills that are essential tools of the educated person well-prepared for a meaningful life and vocation.

2. Understand the major ideas and methods of inquiry of the scholarly disciplines that comprise the university and be able to use those methods of inquiry as beginning practitioners to address complex contemporary problems.

3. Be able to identify and articulate the strengths and limitations of the disciplines and the relationship of the disciplines to one another, and demonstrate an understanding of the breadth and diversity of human knowledge as well as its openness to integration in more comprehensive wholes.

4. Be conversant with and able to discuss intelligently enduring questions and issues that are fundamental to human inquiry and that have shaped the traditions from which the university has emerged.

5. Demonstrate the ability to apply more than one disciplinary perspective to the same enduring question or complex contemporary problem.

6. Be familiar with the scholarly exploration of religious faith and understand how faith and reason are related in the search for truth.

7. Demonstrate the ability to examine their values and experiences and integrate what they learn with the principles that guide their lives.

8. Be prepared and disposed to use their talents and education as engaged global citizens and responsible leaders in service of the common good.