

ENV 1444

Capitalist Nature: A Political Ecology

Course Syllabus

Winter 2019

Thursdays, 11:00 a.m. – 2:00 p.m., ES 1042

Instructor: Scott Prudham

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Office Hours: Thursdays 2:30-4:30 p.m., Sidney Smith Hall #5007 or by prior arrangement

Overview

This course is concerned with exploring the idea of “capitalist nature”.¹ Specifically, the course is based on six central questions:

- (i) What are the unique political, ecological, and geographical dynamics of environmental change propelled by capital accumulation and the dynamics of specifically capitalist forms of “commodification”?
- (ii) How and why is nature commodified (however partially) in a capitalist political economy, and what are the associated problems and contradictions?
- (iii) How do the contemporary dynamics of environmental change and environmental politics shape and help us understand transformations in markets, commodity production regimes, and capitalist social relations and institutions more broadly?
- (iv) How can we understand the main currents of policy and regulatory responses to these dynamics?
- (v) How do dominant ideas about nature (non-human as well as human) reflect, reinforce and subvert capital accumulation?
- (vi) Is there or can there be any such thing as “green capitalism”?

¹ O'Connor, M. (1993). On the misadventures of capitalist nature. *Capitalism, Nature, Socialism*, 4(3), 7-40.

Objectives

1. To develop some conceptual tools to analyse how capitalist dynamics transform or metabolize nature (in the broadest sense and including in material and semiotic registers), how biophysical processes become enrolled in and actively constitute capital accumulation and commodification, and how environmental politics shape a (more than) capitalist society.
2. To develop and refine critical reading skills, and in particular, to read more closely, carefully, and critically (which does not mean antagonistically) than we would otherwise be able to do on our own.
3. To read and luxuriate in the joy of scholarly reading and thinking about scholarly reading.
4. To participate in and learn from group discussions of assigned readings.

Logistics

Course meetings: Thursdays, 11:00 a.m. - 2:00 p.m., ES 1042.

The course will meet once per week for three hours. Students will be asked to comment on readings prior to class meetings in the form of email summaries and responses submitted to me and circulated to the rest of the group via the course web site in Quercus (accessible through the University of Toronto portal on the U of T homepage) or via some other electronic means (we will discuss this during the first class meeting). Class meetings will be oriented primarily toward discussion, analysis, and critique of the assigned readings. I will get us started each week. However, I much prefer that issues be raised and discussed interactively. In addition to regular attendance, participation in the discussion of assigned readings, and email responses, students will be expected to complete some sort of significant, original piece of written work (see below for suggested formats and approaches).

Office hours: Thursdays 2:30 - 4:30 p.m. in SS 5007 or by prior arrangement.

I am available during this time on a drop-in basis. I have a strong preference that consultation on issues related to the course, including on course related assignments, take place during this time. If this does not work for you, please make an appointment see me at an alternate mutually agreeable time. I am more than willing to look over something in writing you send it to me in advance of our meeting, provided you give me at least 24 hours.

Readings:

The readings in this course consist primarily of books. Longer books we read over two weeks, and shorter books we read in one week. These readings will be supplemented by one or two articles per week that complement, contradict, critique, or extend the assigned book reading. The idea of the articles is to complement the books with materials and arguments that may be of some assistance in deepening our understanding of the books particularly vis-à-vis course related questions and themes.

The course should provide a good start for Ph.D. students in preparing for comprehensive exams, but also for Masters students looking for an introduction to literatures and concepts that may be applied to contemporary political economy, environmental politics and environmental policy.

Grading scheme:

- Weekly participation in class discussion – 30 per cent
- Email responses to readings – 30 per cent
- Term paper (or other equivalent) – 40 per cent

Details on Course Work:

1. **Email responses.** Weekly email responses to the assigned readings must be submitted to me (scott.prudham@utoronto.ca) **by noon on Wednesdays, the day prior to the course meetings.** Please don't be late; I need to be able to read these prior to class meetings and to prepare something for the next day. These comments will be used to help me facilitate the class discussion and will also allow me to get a sense of how the readings are being received and what significant questions or issues are being raised. I am also asking you to post and share your comments with others via the Quercus course web site (or possibly via some other electronic group if we need to do that). For this we need to allow time for others to read and consider the comments. If you are accustomed to reading for class the night before (not usually a good idea anyway), just convince yourself class is on Wednesday, and there will be no problem! The email responses are also meant to facilitate the development of close, critical reading skills, and to develop a facility with completing substantive, fair-minded critiques. The email responses should be a *maximum* of 500 words in length and should be sent in *plain text (i.e. no attachments)*; please do not exceed this limit (we will all appreciate it). The email comments should consist of three elements:
 - a. *A concise paraphrase of the main argument of the reading*, including some of the argument structure and the evidence on which the argument is based, where appropriate. This is a difficult skill to master, since it requires distilling the argument to its bare essentials, and concisely explaining it in your own words. As you will see, it is not obvious, and not all of us will agree on even this seemingly basic distillation of the argument.
 - b. *A response of some sort.* This should be evaluative and can focus on aspects of the argument that are either strong or weak, discussions of the relevance and significance of the argument, and suggestions as to how the argument might be improved. Critiques should always be fair-minded and respectful, reflecting the author's apparent purpose, and should mix "internal" appraisals (i.e., can the argument stand as it is posed?) and "external" appraisals (i.e., ways in which the argument does not deal with or explain things you think are important). Keep in mind that there is a fundamental difference between critiquing someone else's argument on its own terms on the one hand, and advancing your own position

on the other. The second strategy is easier, often more obvious or easy, and is typical of the external critique; it is also, in my opinion, too prevalent in academia. I am not saying this is off limits, but I am saying that appraisals should also deal with the argument on the authors' terms. *Keep in mind also that contesting or disputing the argument tends to come more easily than explaining how and why the argument is actually persuasive and important. But there is often a lot to say in reinforcing the strengths of an argument that is not limited to re-stating the argument, or vacuous celebration. I do not want to be complicit in this class in equating critique with negation, and I would appreciate some assistance in this regard in both written responses, and in how we engage with one another in class discussion.* Consider discussing, for example, how the reading(s) might help explain something you are interested in.

- c. **Questions for discussion.** These can be anything from “*what does the author mean by...?*” to “*what is the context (geographical, historical, political, cultural, intellectual, etc.), out of which this reading arises...?*” to “*what are the implications of...?*”. Some of these readings are quite difficult and I stress that sometimes the most productive questions are the ones that seem the most basic. If there are elements of the argument or conceptualization you do not understand, there is no shame in and certainly no penalty for asking for discussion on certain points. I consider honest questions very helpful contributions to the dialog we will have in class meetings. These kinds of questions also take courage to ask and we should all reward that. Questions of clarification are the best way to flag jargon, concepts, theories, etc., that may be invoked in the readings, but which may not be adequately explained in the text itself and which may be unfamiliar to many of us. Keep in mind this is an interdisciplinary seminar, so backgrounds with relevant concepts will vary widely. Please accept my invitation to simply ask for a discussion of concepts raised by the authors (e.g. “what does the author mean by commodification?”), and by all means, reiterate these questions when we meet.

In addition to sending me your email responses, I will also ask you to post them to the Quercus course site (or to an email group) in order to allow others to read your comments. I will explain in class how to access the course website if I need to. Please note that you must send me your comments as well as post them. Please circulate your comments in plain text format. No attachments please!

2. **Class Participation.** The majority of class time will be spent in discussion. Please contribute by asking questions, suggesting issues for discussion, drawing on the text to analyse it, listening carefully to others, engaging respectfully with their views, and helping each of us to understand the readings better together than we can individually. This latter is, in my view, a central purpose of a graduate seminar. I want to ensure that everyone feels comfortable speaking, but it would also help if we can get into the practice of following discussion threads rather than jumping around randomly based on a strict speaker's queue.
3. **Term paper/grant application/critical review paper/ research proposal/ annotated bibliography.** This will be a maximum of 30 pages (double spaced) and

can be on just about anything you want it to be on. It need not be about capitalist nature *per se*, but I would like to see some sort of environmental connection, be it the role of environmental science in policy formation, environmental social movements, environmental justice issues, the political economy of environmental policy, etc. It should be something that seems relevant to the course, but that ideally also fits your purposes. If you are not sure, let's talk it through. You can complete a review paper, a research paper, or a re-worked paper you are intending to submit for publication. It is up to you. Ph.D. students may want to consider the option of completing **an essay or annotated bibliography** tied to one or more areas of a comprehensive examination list under development. Students can also use the paper to contribute to a research proposal in some fashion.

If you choose the bibliography option, I am looking for a short (i.e. 1000 words or less) statement of topic which discusses what you are trying to capture with this list, your main research questions, and how the list is organized. This should be followed by the actual list with a maximum 500-word statement regarding each reading. Last, there should be some sort of concluding discussion or statement. The topic is flexible, depending on your interests, but should relate to this course's themes and questions. This does NOT have to be an actual comps list, although for some, it may be. Some may consider it merely an exercise in drawing together an annotated bibliography on a topic of interest. In terms of number of sources, it depends on whether you rely mostly on books or mostly on articles, but I would think somewhere on the order of 15-20 journal articles is in order. One obvious topic is political ecology itself or some subset. The due date for your term paper/grant application/critical review paper/ research proposal/ annotated bibliography depends on your status. If you are graduating in June, then I need your term project document submitted by April 16th. If you are not graduating in June, then I need your term project document submitted by May 8th. If you require an extension, the forms for applying are available via the SGS website. The decision to grant extensions is not formally up to me, so we have to apply in each case and provide a reason. Normally these requests are granted.

A Word on Auditors

I have no objection in principle to individuals auditing this course. That comes with two caveats. First, if there are too many people in the course, including both registered students and auditors (and I would consider more than 15 to be at least worth discussing as an upper bound), then I must insist that registered students have priority over auditors. Conversely, if we have fewer than about 5-7 registered students, I could quite likely come under pressure to cancel the course in future years, and I would ask that any of you who can possibly take the course for credit, please do so. In addition, I ask that all auditors, as conditions of auditing, do the following:

- (i) come to class on a regular basis;
- (ii) participate fully in the discussion;
- (iii) do all of the readings; and

- (iv) complete the weekly email responses.

I do not expect auditors to complete the term assignment, and I understand if you miss one or two weeks of course meetings.

Required Books

The books we will read in the course are listed below. I have not ordered the books into a bookstore as I find this is becoming less and less the manner in which students obtain books and the bookstores then complain that no one buys the books I order! So I am afraid you are on your own here. I recommend independent book sellers, and the online ordering services provided via [Abebooks](#) which deals with independent book sellers. They sell new and used books.

1. Ervine, K. (2018). *Carbon*. Medford, MA.: Polity.
2. Goldstein, J. (2018) *Planetary improvement: cleantech entrepreneurship and the contradictions of green capitalism*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
3. Guthman, J. (2011). *Weighing in: obesity, food justice, and the limits of capitalism*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
4. Li, T. (2014). *Land's end: capitalist relations on an indigenous frontier*. Durham: Duke University Press.
5. Malm, A. (2016). *Fossil capital: the rise of steam-power and the roots of global warming*. London; Brooklyn, NY: Verso.
6. Polanyi, K. ([1944] 2001). *The great transformation: the political and economic origins of our time*. Boston: Beacon Press.
7. Tsing, A. L. (2015). *The mushroom at the end of the world : on the possibility of life in capitalist ruins*. Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press.
8. Watts, M. ([1983] 2013). *Silent violence: food, famine, & peasantry in northern Nigeria*. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press.
9. Williams, R. (1973). *The country and the city*. London: Verso.

Supplementary articles – these should be available for download from the library at the University of Toronto (or other university libraries). Let me know if you encounter difficulties and I can provide you with a copy.

Bernstein, H. (2004), 'Changing before our very eyes': agrarian questions and the politics of land in capitalism today. *Journal of Agrarian Change*, **4**: 190–225.

Burawoy, M. (2003). For a sociological Marxism: the complementary convergence of Antonio Gramsci and Karl Polanyi. *Politics and Society* **31**(2): 193-261.

Chakrabarty, D. (2009). The climate of history: four theses. *Critical Inquiry*, **35**(2), 197-222.

Dale, G. (2008). Karl Polanyi's The Great Transformation: perverse effects, protectionism

- and gemeinschaft. *Economy and Society*, **37**(4): 495-524.
- Ekers, M., & Prudham, S. (2017). The Metabolism of Socioecological Fixes: Capital Switching, Spatial Fixes, and the Production of Nature. *Annals of the American Association of Geographers*, **107**(6): 1370-1388.
- Fraser, N. (2014). Can society be commodities all the way down? Post-Polanyian reflections on capitalist crisis. *Economy and Society*, **43**(4): 541-558.
- Harvey, D. (1998). The body as an accumulation strategy. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, **16**(4): 401-421.
- Huber, M. T. (2009). Energizing historical materialism: fossil fuels, space and the capitalist mode of production. *Geoforum*, **40**(1): 105-115.
- Katz, C. (2001). Vagabond capitalism and the necessity of social reproduction. *Antipode*, **33**(4): 709-728.
- Lohmann, L. (2010). Uncertainty markets and carbon markets: variations on Polanyian themes. *New political economy*, **15**(2), 225-254
- Mann, G. (2009). Should political ecology be Marxist? A case for Gramsci's historical materialism. *Geoforum*, **40**(3): 335-344.
- Murray Li, T. (2009). Exit from agriculture: a step forward or a step backward for the rural poor? *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, **36**(3), 629-636.
- O'Connor, J. (1988). Capitalism, nature, socialism: a theoretical introduction. *Capitalism, Nature, Socialism* **1**(1): 11-38.
- Peluso, N. L. (2012). What's nature got to do with it? A situated historical perspective on socio-natural commodities. *Development and Change*, **43**(1): 79-104.
- Prudham, S. (2009). Pimping climate change: Richard Branson, global warming, and the performance of green capitalism. *Environment and Planning A*, **41**(7): 1594-1613.
- Watts, M., & Goodman, D. (1997). Agrarian questions: global appetite, local metabolism: nature, culture, and industry in fin-de-siècle agro-food systems. In D. Goodman & M. Watts (Eds.), *Globalising food: agrarian questions and global restructuring* (pp. 1-24). London, New York: Routledge. Available from ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.myaccess.library.utoronto.ca/lib/utoronto/detail.action?docID=178636> .
- Wisner, B., & Luce, H. (1993). Disaster vulnerability: Scale, power and daily life. *GeoJournal*, **30**(2): 127-140.

Wittman, H. (2009). Reworking the metabolic rift: La Vía Campesina, agrarian citizenship, and food sovereignty. *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, **36**(4): 805-826.

Wrigley, E. A. (1962). The supply of raw materials in the Industrial Revolution. *The Economic History Review*, **15**(1): 1-16.

Schedule²

January 10	Introduction
January 17	Polanyi ([1944] 2001), introductory materials, Part One, and Part Two: I (i.e., to the end of Chapter 10 “Political Economy and the Discovery of Society”) plus O’Connor (1998) and Dale (2008)
January 24	Polanyi ([1944] 2001), to the end plus Fraser 2014. (Also recommended: Burawoy (2003)).
January 31	Watts ([1983] 2013) to the end of chapter 5 plus Wisner and Luce (1993)
February 7	Watts ([1983] 2013) to the end plus Wittman (2009) (Also recommended: Watts and Goodman (1997))
February 14	Li (2014), whole book plus Bernstein (2004) and Murray Li (2009)
February 21	Reading Week, no class meeting
February 28	Williams (1973) whole book plus Mann (2009)
March 7	Malm (2016) to the end of chapter 8 plus Chakrabarty (2009)
March 14	Malm (2016) to the end plus Huber (2009)
March 21	Guthman (2011) whole book plus Harvey (1998) (Also recommended: Ekers and Prudham (2017))
March 28	Ervine (2018) whole book plus Lohmann (2010)
April 4 ³	Goldstein (2018) whole book plus Prudham (2009)
April 11	Tsing (2015) whole book plus Peluso (2012)

² Note that there are 13 dates here. In the Faculty of Arts and Sciences at U of T there are now 12 weeks in the term, but this is a graduate course and SGS still works on a 13 week term. If this presents a problem for you, let me know.

³ This week’s meeting will need to be rescheduled as I will be away at an academic meeting for the week.