

# AK2210 HT20-1 Political Ecology

Political Ecology Course – KTH Environmental Humanities Laboratory



Course responsible: Prof. Marco Armiero [armiero@kth.se](mailto:armiero@kth.se)

Teaching team: Dr. Salvatore Paolo De Rosa and Dr. Roberta Biasillo

AK 2210, HT2020 (Fall 2020), 7.5 credit points

Division of History of Science, Technology and Environment, KTH

Fall 2020

The course will be held remotely through ZOOM

## **Introduction**

The course explores the interdisciplinary field of political ecology with a special focus on its historical dimension. Political ecology is a theoretical and methodological approach to the study of socio-ecological systems. It focuses on conflicts, power relations and uneven distribution of environmental costs and benefits. The field seeks to "politicise" debates about environmental problems, and thereby stands in contrast to a-political ecologies that tries to understand environmental issues in terms of universal driving forces related to, for example, population trends or biophysical factors.

The course intends to familiarise you with central concepts and tools used by political ecologists and thereby help you to take an active role in the political-ecological field if you wish. Unlike other sciences that you may be familiar with so far, political ecology does not work with experiments, modelling or quantitative analysis; instead, the course takes as its point of departure theoretical concepts that are documented through case studies which combine qualitative and quantitative information in an empirically-backed narrative ("story"). Each course occasion will focus on different key concept from political-ecological theory and use an important, published case study to illustrate how this concept is "put to work".

By the end of the course, you will be able to:

- Describe the present-day ecological crisis in the world from multiple perspectives: political-economic, cultural and epistemological
- Analyse the historical processes that have led to the current crisis and how different social groups have been influenced by environmental problems in different geo-historical contexts;
- Develop new and imaginative ways to conceptualize nature-society relationships in different geopolitical, historical and cultural contexts in order to contribute to the design of a more inclusive and socially just environmental policy.

## **Course Organization**

Teaching is based on seminars that combine smaller lecture components with discussions in class of texts that the students have read in advance. Before each seminar, the students are required to read two articles and/or book chapters. In the typical case, one of these is theoretical (with a focus on the central concept around which the seminar should revolve), while the other article usually contains a case study.

All students are expected to read these two articles in advance and write a short comment to them (see further below). At the beginning of each class, we will have a common discussion about the readings. Everybody is required to participate in the collective discussion.

The course consists of 13 seminars in total, each of which takes two hours, plus 2 office hours before final individual essay submission. Students are required to read assigned text(s) in advance and submit their comments/reflections with the exception of first class meeting. All required readings (organized per class session) and this syllabus (including instructions for assignments) are available for download from the Files tab on Canvas, and written assignments are to be uploaded to the assignment folder.

### **Assessment and Grading**

Grading for the course is based on three elements, combined into a single overall grade on the KTH grading system (A-F). Late submission of written assignments will be penalized by a deduction of one half-grade for every 24 hours or part thereof between the deadline and the time of submission. If you consider you have a valid reason why you are unable to meet a deadline, you must contact the course instructor before the deadline has passed in order for an extended deadline to be considered.

Active participation in class activities and written reflections (30%): This is a measure not only of presence at course meetings, which is a prerequisite for passing the course, but also of activity in and preparation for meetings. A key component of participation is leading one class discussion, to be assigned at the first course meeting. To guarantee that you have read and critically engaged with the assigned texts, you are required to submit a short written reflection (approx. 300-400 words) through Canvas before 23:59 on the day before each lecture (except the first).

### **Final assignment**

As final assignment (30% of the final grade), each student is requested to contribute with at least one entry to the Atlas of the Other Worlds Project. The Atlas is an open access database gathering grassroots initiatives for climate change mitigation & adaptation from around the world. The Atlas has an urban focus (that is, the initiatives must be based in the urban context). The definition of what we consider "grassroots initiatives" is open, in order to leave students quite free to select their own cases. In general, any collective action by activists or civic associations in urban contexts that deals in some way with the politics of climate change falls within this definition. During the course the instructors will provide a template to follow for collecting data about the grassroots initiatives. The best entries will be published in the Atlas of the Other Worlds, granted the approval of the students, who will remain the authors of the entries.

Before working on the final assignment, each student must discuss the selected entry with one of the instructors.

(Here is a list of possible grassroots initiatives: urban gardening; reforestation; collective caring of green spaces; collective housing; development of decentralized renewable energy; initiatives to reduce individual transportation; initiatives to spread awareness about climate change; block of fossil fuel production; marches and demonstrations; petitions; proposals for local bills; etc.)

## **Plagiarism**

Plagiarism means using someone else's ideas or work without providing full, clear acknowledgment. KTH treats plagiarism as a very serious matter. All suspected instances of plagiarism will be investigated fully and if proven, can lead to suspension from the university. You are strongly encouraged to check your awareness of plagiarism and related issues by looking at KTH's plagiarism handbook, available at <https://www.kth.se/student/studentliv/studentratt/fusk-och-plagiering-1.323885>. During the course, you will be given information about the correct way to make references. Your final individual essay will be screened by text-matching software.

## **Readings**

All required reading material will be available on the Canvas page of the course in the folders marked by class date.

## **Special Needs**

In line with KTH policy, additional support and/or consideration will be provided to any student who requires assistance due to a special needs diagnosis. In this case, you should contact the KTH coordinator for special needs students, as soon as possible. They can be reached by email at [funka@kth.se](mailto:funka@kth.se) or by phone at 08-790 70 98 and 08-790 71 99.

## **Venue**

ZOOM

## **Course Instructors**

Marco Armiero

Salvatore Paolo De Rosa

Roberta Biasillo

## **Examiner**

Nina Wormbs ([nina@kth.se](mailto:nina@kth.se)), Associate Professor at the Division of History of Science, Technology and Environment at KTH.

## Schedule

25 August is cancelled

28 August

Time schedule: 10:00-12:00

### 1 – Introduction to the course

Description of goals, structure, and final assignment of the course.

No assignment

1 September

Time schedule: 10:00-12:00

### 2 – What is Political Ecology?

Introduction of the term PE, distinguishing it from apolitical ecologies of various kinds, and showing a unity of practice amidst much diversity of thought.

A review of the deep roots of this line of inquiry, arguing that political ecologists have been around a very long time.

**Readings:** Paul Robbins, *Political Ecology*. Wiley-Blackwell 2012 (second edition), pp. 1-48.

**Assignments:** Look for at least another definition of PE and compare it with that offered by Robbins (500 words)

Audiovisual – Extra Links:

1. [The members of ENTITLE, the European Network of Political Ecology, explain what Political Ecology is about \(Links to an external site.\)](#)
2. [Maria Kaika explains political ecology \(Links to an external site.\)](#)
3. [Paul Robbins and the Ecology in Political Ecology \(Links to an external site.\)](#)

4 September

Time schedule: 10:00-12:00

### 3 – The Critical Tools

Description of the historical development of a critical science of the environment, showing the disparate fields and eclectic tools that converged in the last three decades of the twentieth century to give greater analytical form to the field.

**Readings:** Paul Robbins, *Political Ecology*. Wiley-Blackwell 2012 (second edition), pp. 49-81.

Paulson, S., Gezon, L.L., Watts, M. (2003), Locating the political in political ecology: An introduction. *Human Organization*, 62(3):205-217.

**Assignments:** What are the tools from PE which can be used to address current environmental and social challenges? (500 words)

Audiovisual – Extra Links:

1. [Paige West, Critical Political Ecology. From space and place to sovereignty \(Links to an external site.\)](#)

8 September

Time schedule: 10:00-12:00

#### 4 – Degradation, Marginalization, Conservation, Control

Examination of four of the central theses of political ecology research. The case materials in the two chapters are selected to represent a range of research regions across the world, including cases from the “developed” and “underdeveloped” worlds.

**Readings:** Paul Robbins, *Political Ecology*. Wiley-Blackwell 2012 (second edition), pp. 155-198.

**Assignment:** Use of the examples in the chapters to discuss degradation. (500 words)

11 September

Time schedule: 10:00-12:00

#### 5 - Historical Political Ecology

Historical work in political ecology is often termed “historical political ecology.” Historical approaches to political ecology are as varied and multifaceted as political ecology itself but they share the common political ecological core of being informed by various forms of critical social theory, utilizing multiple, mixed research methods (archival, survey/interview, ethnographic, biophysical), being committed to social and environmental justice, and aiming to have contemporary policy relevance.

**Readings:** Diana K. Davis, Historical Approaches to Political Ecology, in Tom Perreault, Gavin Bridge, James McCarthy (Eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Political Ecology*, Routledge, 2015, pp. 263-275.

Karl Offen, "Historical Political Ecology: An Introduction." *Historical Geography* 32 (2004): 19-42.

**Assignment:** Can you present methods and objectives that characterised the use of historical analysis in political ecology?

15 September

Time schedule: 10:00-12:00

### 6 – Political Ecology Emerges

The common character of diverse political ecological texts: they stress winners and losers, are narrated dialectically, begin or end from contradictions, and stress simultaneously the politicized state of the environment and the politicized nature of accounts about the state of the environment.

**Readings:** Paul Robbins, *Political Ecology*. Wiley-Blackwell 2012 (second edition), pp. 82-100.

**Assignment:** Why Robbins uses Blaikie's Political Economy of Soil Erosion in the Box 4.1? (500 words)

18 September

Time schedule: 10:00-12:00

### 7 – The political ecology of a disaster: The Vajont case (Italy, 1963)

Defining and analysing disasters from a political ecology perspective. In depth exploration of a hydroelectric dam burst occurred in Northern Italy with a specific focus on different actors involved, knowledge production processes, post-disaster recovery strategies and cultural elaborations.

**Reading:** [Marco Armiero, A Rugged Nation: Mountains and the Making of Modern Italy, The White Horse Press 2011 \(Links to an external site.\)](#), pp. 173-194.

**Assignment:** UNESCO has included the Vajont disaster among the "precautionary tales" for a better future. Why? (500 words)

Audiovisual – Extra Links:

1. [One of the Worst Human-Made Disasters in History \(Links to an external site.\)](#) – The Vajont Disaster

22 September

Time schedule: 10:00-12:00

## 8 – Corporeal Political Ecology

Potent ethical and political possibilities emerge from the literal contact zone between human corporeality and more-than-human nature. Imagining human corporeality as trans-corporeality, in which the human is always inter-meshed with the more-than-human world, underlines the extent to which the substance of the human is ultimately inseparable from “the environment.” Tracing a toxic substance from production to consumption reveals global networks of social injustice, lax regulations, and environmental degradation.

**Reading:** Stacy Alaimo, *Bodily Natures. Science, Environment, and the Material Self*, Indiana University Press 2010, pp. 1-25.

**Assignment:** Apply the concept of trans-corporeality to an example you are familiar with. Refer either to your own experience or study. (500 words)

Audiovisual – Extra Links:

1. [Trailer of the movie “Perfect Sense” \(2011\) \(Links to an external site.\)](#)

25 September

Time schedule: 10:00-12:00

## 9 – What is Environmental Justice?

Definition and development of the EJ movement and field of study. Aims and challenges of a new political space, both empirical and theoretical, where antagonist interests fight in order to define a new arrangement of the socio-ecological hierarchies.

**Readings:** Marco Armiero, *Environmental Justice. The making of a scholarly category and a global movement*, in M. Russo (ed.), *Living Together. The Contemporary project of the shared space*, CLEAN edizioni 2017, pp. 164-174.

David N. Pellow, *What is Critical Environmental Justice?*, Polity 2018, pp. 1-33.

**Assignment:** What are the definitions of environmental justice and injustice provided in the readings? Represent on a timeline events and milestones of the EJ mentioned in the readings? (500 words)

Audiovisual – Extra Links:

1. [VideoDictionary – Laura Pulido: Environmental Racism \(Links to an external site.\)](#)

29 September

Time schedule: 10:00-12:00

## 10. Climate Justice and the City

In the first part, we will question why cities have become a crucial arena for climate politics. In the second part, we will trace the rise of the Climate Justice claim and its connections with the Environmental Justice movement and paradigm.

**Readings:** Ashley Dawson, *Extreme Cities* (only the Introduction p. 6-13). Verso.

Schlosberg D and Collins L. B. (2014) From Environmental to Climate Justice: Climate Change and the Discourse of Environmental Justice. *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Climate Change* 5(3):359-374.

**Assignment:** What is the relation between environmental and climate justice? How are they connected? How are they different? (500 words).

Additional resources (optional but recommended):

- Bali Principles of Climate Justice, 2002 <https://corpwatch.org/article/bali-principles-climate-justice> (Links to an external site.)
- A Vision for an Equitable and Just Climate Future, 2019 (check the short video and the platform) <https://ajustclimate.org/> (Links to an external site.)

2 October

Time schedule: 10:00-12:00

## 11. Climate Breakdown and Climate Activism in Malmö

Sweden and Malmö are praised as climate champions, but behind the consensus what are the outcomes of, and the challenges to, their techno-managerial approach to climate and environment? We will critically assess municipal climate politics in Malmö and sketch the landscape of grassroots climate movements organizing in the city and beyond.

**Readings:** Holgersen S. and Malm A. (2015) "Green Fix" as Crisis Management. Or, in Which World is Malmö the World's Greenest City? *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography* 97(4):275-290.

Swyngedouw E. (2015) Depoliticized Environments and the Promise of the Anthropocene, in Bryant R. L. (ed.) *International Handbook of Political Ecology*. London: Edward Elgar Publishing. p.131-145.

**Assignment:** Why is it problematic the global consensus around climate change governance? (500 words).

Additional resources (optional but recommended):

- Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (2019) *If Crisis or War Comes*
- Extinction Rebellion Sweden (2019) *When The Climate Crisis Comes*

6 October

Time schedule: 10:00-12:00

## 12. Direct-Action Against Fossil Fuels and Decolonial Climate Politics

In the first part, we will focus on the activist strategy of direct-action as it is increasingly employed by climate justice movements against fossil fuels, with examples from Europe and from the #NoDAPL campaign in USA. In the second part, we will examine the contribution of Indigenous Peoples' resistance in decolonizing climate and environmental politics.

**Readings:** Estes N. (2019) *Our History is the Future*. Verso (only the prologue *Prophets*, p.1-24)

Álvarez L. and Coolsaet B. (2018) Decolonizing Environmental Justice Studies: A Latin American Perspective. *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 1-20.

**Assignment:** Provide some reflections on why it is important to recognize other histories and other knowledges to deal with environmental injustice and climate breakdown (500 words).

Additional resources (optional but recommended):

- What is direct action? <https://sub.media/video/what-is-direct-action/?fbclid=IwAR3MbO4ne3A-973Z7TkLDDWmo3sQKIUMCpMHeS4OXbxA1wPq5fwIDHBIsao> (Links to an external site.)
- ([Links to an external site.](#)) Winona LaDuke at Standing Rock: It's Time to Move On from Fossil Fuels (short video interview) [https://www.democracynow.org/2016/9/12/native\\_american\\_activist\\_winona\\_laduke\\_at](https://www.democracynow.org/2016/9/12/native_american_activist_winona_laduke_at) (Links to an external site.)

9 October

Time schedule: 10:00-12:00

## 13. Mapping alternative practices

This class aims to train students for the final assignment of the course. During the class, students will familiarize themselves with examples of mapping in political ecology research. The class will focus on background research and on the specificities of mapping exercises.

**Readings:** Adrien Labaeye, Collaboratively mapping alternative economies. Co-producing transformative knowledge, available at <https://journals.openedition.org/netcom/2647> (Links to an external site.)

Shannon Dosemagen, Jeffrey Warren and Sara Wylie, GRASSROOTS MAPPING: Creating a participatory map-making process centered on discourse, available at <https://www.joaap.org/issue8/GrassrootsMapping.htm> (Links to an external site.)

**Assignment:** Look at these examples of participatory mapping:

<https://ejatlas.org/> (Links to an external site.)

<https://www.shareable.net/community-maps/> (Links to an external site.)

<https://urbanalternatives.org/> (Links to an external site.)

Do some preliminary research to select the case(s) you wish to map (describe in 300 words