SYLLABUS
CRD 244/GEO 254: POLITICAL ECOLOGY OF COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT
UC DAVIS, WINTER 2020

“[W]hat is called human power over nature is actually the power exercised by some humans over others with nature as its instrument.”
— C.S. Lewis, cited by Hindmarsh and Lawrence (2004: 28)

Political ecology has three essential foci. The first is interactive, contradictory and dialectical: society and land-based resources are mutually causal in such a way that poverty, via poor management, can induce environmental degradation which itself deepens poverty. Less a problem of poor management, inevitable decay or demographic growth, land degradation is seen as social in origin and definition. Second, political ecology argues for regional or spatial accounts of degradation which link, through ‘chains of explanation’, local decision-makers to spatial variations in environmental structure. Third, land management is framed by ‘external structures’ which for Blaikie meant the role of the state and the core-periphery model.
— Michael Watts (2000: 591)

“A hallmark of recent [feminist political ecology] work is its commitment to collaborations with other engaged people that span the worlds of academia, policy, practice and activism, where a feminist perspective requires self-reflexivity, an openness to multiple truths and more marginalized voices, and where feminist ethics guide everyday practices of research, engagement and “impact.”
— Rebecca Elmhirst (2018)

LOGISTICS
Instructor: Ryan E. Galt, Professor, Department of Human Ecology
office hours: Monday 2:00 to 4:00 p.m., or by appointment, in 2429 Hart
email: regalt@ucdavis.edu

Class time and place: Wednesdays 1:10 to 4:00 p.m. in 166 Hunt

COURSE OVERVIEW
This graduate seminar explores the interactions between societies and the environment from the perspective of geographical political ecology. Political ecology, a rich field with contributions from geographers, anthropologists, sociologists, political scientists, ecologists, and biologists, integrates social theory and social science — especially political economic analysis and feminist and post-structural theory — with environmental sciences/studies across multiple scales to analyze the dynamic relationships between society and land-based resources, environmental outcomes resulting from social structures, and the environmentally-mediated interactions between and within social groups.

Geographical political ecology includes a large number of theoretically-informed, empirical studies in spatially-delimited locales shaped by the interplay between local and extra-local processes. In 2004, Michael Watts and Richard Peet (2004) argued that political ecology as a field is nearly at the point of being a “normal science” in the Kuhnian sense (1970). To back this up, it has:
• foundational works (e.g., Wolf 1983, Watts 1983, Blaikie 1985, Blaikie and Brookfield 1987);
• a rigorous and diverse conceptual and methodological toolkit;
• a rich history of theorizing nature-society relationships in multiple contexts and across scales;
• its own scientific journals (e.g., Journal of Political Ecology, Capitalism, Nature, Socialism, Land Degradation & Development);
• textbooks that define the field (Forsyth 2003, Robbins 2004, Neumann 2005, Robbins 2012);
many edited volumes of case studies (Peet and Watts 1996, Rocheleau, Thomas-Slayter, and Wangari 1996, Zimmerer and Bassett 2003, Peet and Watts 2004, Paulson and Gezon 2005, Biersack and Greenberg 2006, Harcourt and Nelson 2015); a flourishing list of monographs too large to list here (but see <https://occupylondon.org.uk/a-comprehensive-political-ecology-reading-list/>); and two recent handbooks to define and advance the field, with 47 chapters and 48 chapters apiece (Bryant 2015, Perreault, Bridge, and McCarthy 2015, respectively).

A great deal of political ecological work has focused on the politicization of nature through the processes of environmental conservation, economic development and commodification, and conflicts over livelihoods and the landscapes on which they depend. A political ecological approach to local communities and social movements — i.e., communities of interest — stresses understanding them in the context of their relationship to the state, markets, other elements of civil society; discourses of identity, culture, and nature; and the various components of the biophysical environment.

In this class we will seek to understand various “flavors” of political ecology, and to use political ecology to understand cases of the commodification of resources; community involvement in environmental degradation and conservation efforts; the use of nature in primary production activities such as agriculture, forestry, and fishing; environmental social movements; and the linkages between nature and society in rural, urban, and suburban areas in both third world and first world contexts. We will also examine the place of social theory, ecological theory, scale, capitalist development, knowledge, power, environmental justice, and first world/third world distinctions in political ecology.

While much work in geographical political ecology focuses on detailed understandings of cases, the field also dialogues with a number of larger questions: How do we conceptualize society-environment interactions at various scales? How can one bring together biophysical and social sciences in analysis and practice? What does a political ecological perspective mean for our understandings of sustainability as a concept and as a movement? What role does social justice play in sustainability? Is capitalism sustainable? How should society be reconfigured to increase ecological sustainability, and how should we as individuals and as members of communities attempt to reconfigure society? What alternatives to the widespread commodification of nature exist, how do we bring them into being, and scale them up? There is much learning and work to be done, so let’s get started!

A Brief Statement of Educational Philosophy

I do not follow the banking model of education, in which students passively receive knowledge “deposited” by experts (see hooks 1994: 40), and in which memory is the storage tank and intelligence is the ability to access memory. Rather, I believe education should include critical thinking, problem solving, creativity, curiosity, and the development of critical consciousness. Education should include wrestling with ethical issues, and examining one’s values and interests, as well as those common in the society in which we exist. I believe that students bring important knowledge, experiences, and voice into the classroom, and the classroom learning community can benefit greatly from this diversity. In a graduate seminar we all should be, and are, teachers and learners — simultaneously.
I also do not believe that intelligence is fixed or predetermined, even if some biological elements of it appear to be so. Rather, I think intelligence develops and expands when people try hard to learn new things that they do not understand and when they make new connections. Trying things out and making mistakes (i.e., fearless experimentation) are essential parts of the learning process and the development of our intelligence, and it is my job to create a learning environment in which this can occur, for students and for myself. Fundamentally, all people can change and develop — by examining and better organizing their knowledge, thought processes, ethical commitments, and behaviors. This also involves finding gaps and inconsistencies in their own views and in common sense understandings, and working to narrow these gaps and reduce inconsistencies. For me, it is these changes, and not just accumulation of facts, that represent true learning.

I strongly believe that education has a social purpose to develop students’ critical consciousness (Freire 1973). In this way, education is fundamentally linked to participatory democracy, in which informed citizens together make decisions about the future of society and the environment. I believe I have an obligation to help make each class session worth attending and to facilitate your learning process. I ask that you let me know if I am not doing this. The buck stops with you, however, both as students and as co-teachers. As adults here by choice, you bring yourself and your desire to learn and participate here, and what you do in the course ultimately depends on your commitment to yourself, your learning process, and our learning community.

LEARNING ACTIVITIES AND GRADES

Discussion leadership (10%)
Each student must facilitate class learning activities and discussion for one class session (see sign-up sheet passed around on the first day of class). This means you will work together with another student or group of students. Discussion leaders must coordinate efforts before class.

You may choose one of two styles of discussion leadership. Style 1 involves, first, a brief (15-20 minute), formal conference-style presentation that you write (8-10 pages single-spaced) that focuses on the key theoretical and conceptual issues in the week’s readings. The second part to Style 1 involves chairing/moderating the majority of the ensuing discussion (see facilitation suggestions in Style 2, below). In Style 2, you are prohibited from doing reviews of the readings. Instead, you will jump right into facilitation of discussion, which involves posing provocative questions, connecting people’s comments to the readings as launching-off points, presenting a brief background to the subfield or topic(s) under discussion, and/or touching on recent events that highlight the week’s topics. To your facilitated discussion you can add highly relevant activities that you create and lead, which should last for no more than 30 minutes. If class leaders want further ideas for facilitating group learning activities, I suggest you contact me beforehand, as I have useful resources (e.g., Pretty et al. 2002, Bean 1996). Importantly, your leadership role in choosing Style 2 can involve bringing in local cases that illustrate the themes, concepts, and/or theories from that class session. Field trips accessible by bike (or, if farther away, coordinated with classmates with cars) are encouraged as part of your leadership activities, and we can devote some time in class to brainstorm possible locations. Field trips should occur during class time.

In-class engagement (10%)
Grades for in-class engagement reflect attendance and your participation during class sessions. I expect that you 1) read critically, 2) come to class with questions and discuss points of agreement and disagreement, and 3) make connections with other readings to share with your classmates. I also expect engagement with the small assignments found under certain weeks.
Critical commentaries (10%)
A 250-500 word (1-2 page) critical commentary, posted on Canvas, is required on the readings for six class sessions. The critical commentaries should include your one-sentence overview and critical evaluation of one to three of the readings and are meant to help you gather your thoughts and questions for discussion (see above). Each Critical Commentary should end with at least two questions you’d like to answer through discussion. These are due on Canvas two hours before class starts and are graded as done/not done. Discussion leaders are prohibited from writing reflection papers for the sessions they lead. NOTE: please write it professionally in a word processor outside of your browser, then paste it into the Canvas entry.

Term paper (60%)
A term paper related to course themes and your research interest(s) is required. You must limit your paper to 5,000 words (about 20 pages double-spaced, 12 point serif font, 1-inch margins). The paper requires three products from you in the following order:
(1) in Week 4 a prospectus and rough outline, due 30 minutes before class on Canvas;
(2) in Week 9 a rough draft of your paper for peer review, due 30 minutes before class on Canvas (if you and your peer reviewer agree, you can also submit it to each other by hard copy, but I still need it on Canvas); and
(3) in Week 11 (Finals Week) your final paper, due at 11:59 p.m. Sunday on Canvas.

Peer review of a peer’s term paper (10%)
Each of you will be responsible for reviewing another student’s term paper draft. Term paper drafts will be exchanged in Week 9 (see above). These reviews are due to the writer and myself before or in class in Week 10. Review using either electronic methods (e.g., track changes in Pages or Word) or paper (written comments) is acceptable, but either way I need to see evidence that it has occurred. More details are provided in the Peer Review assignment on Canvas.

REQUIRED READINGS
Graduate school is a special time in life where one of your main priorities should be throwing yourself into numerous readings to expose yourself to new ideas, arguments, and ways of producing knowledge. Thus, reading is fundamental to the course — I expect you to read 150 to 300 pages per week. If you are not fully committed to it, I ask that you take another class. Each day of class has corresponding readings that must be completed before the class session. Required texts are available in the campus bookstore. PDFs of the readings that are not in the required texts are available by week in Canvas’ “Files” section in the “Readings” folder (e.g., the folder named “Week 1-Oct 2” would correspond to class on October 2, and so forth).

Required texts
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Full citation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
Recommended texts (note: I have made PDFs of the required chapters)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Full citation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**WEAKLY SCHEDULE OF COURSE TOPICS & READINGS**

**PART I: FOUNDATIONS OF POLITICAL ECOLOGY**

**Week 1 — Jan. 8 — Introducing political ecology**


**Week 2 — Jan. 15 — Theory, concepts, and methods in political ecology**


Recommended

PART II: EXTENSIONS OF POLITICAL ECOLOGY

Week 3 — Jan. 22 — Feminist, queer, and post-structural political ecologies

SMALL ASSIGNMENT: Dianne Rocheleau, Barbara Thomas-Slayter, and Esther Wangari’s 1996 edited volume Feminist political ecology: global issues and local experiences was the first edited volume dedicated to feminist political ecology. Almost 20 years later, Wendy Harcourt and Ingrid Nelson published their edited volume Practicing feminist political ecologies: moving beyond the ‘green economy’ (one of our texts). Skim over the introductions to both (Rocheleau et al. 1996 is in the Recommended folder this week) to understand their main perspectives, and consider how these create resonance and discordances with each other and the assigned readings.


Recommended


Week 4 — Jan. 29 — Indigenous, post-colonial, and public political ecologies

TERM PAPER: prospectus and rough outline due


PART III: LINKING COMMODIFICATION, MARGINALIZATION, & DEGRADATION

Week 5 — Feb. 5 — Commodification of the commons, nature, food ... everything?


Recommended


Week 6 — Feb. 12 — Explaining environmental change in developing countries: case studies

SMALL ASSIGNMENT: Piers Blaikie's The Political Economy of Soil Erosion in Developing Countries is a classic text in political ecology. Published in 1985, it has been out of print (and therefore very expensive) for decades. Find it from a library or use the link below to look through the tables of contents and choose one chapter to skim to understand the major points. Be ready to discuss the main points in class. Some links, with various amount of content available, are below:

- https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=k_syDAAQBAJ&koi=fnd&pg=PT10&ots=nyTawI2lBf&sig=Y2biJuV5n-NLqL8pvy7u4DBEM4#v=onepage&q&f=false


PART IV: AGRARIAN CHANGE & AGRARIAN POLITICAL ECONOMY
**Week 7 — Feb. 19 — From the agrarian question to food systems**

**SMALL ASSIGNMENT:** Karl Kautsky has had a large influence on agrarian political economy, mostly through the 1970s translation of his classic book *The Agrarian Question* (originally published in 1899). This text, excerpts of which you will read, outlines a foundational argument that is still discussed and debated to this day, making it one of the oldest debates with which political ecologists engage. Get a sense of Kautsky’s life by reading through his short Wikipedia entry and/or look over one of the volumes dedicated to Marx, Kautsky, and *The Agrarian Question*, called *The Agrarian Question in Marx and his Successors*. The links are below:


**Recommended**


---

**Week 8 — Feb. 26 — Agrarian capitalism, commodification, and inequality**


---

**Week 9 — Mar. 4 — Agrarian capitalism, food regulation, and ecosystems**

**TERM PAPER:** Rough draft due for peer review


---

**PART V: COMMUNITY & ENVIRONMENTAL POLITICS**

**Week 10 — Mar. 11 — State and community in environmental protection and environmental change**

**TERM PAPER:** Peer review of rough draft due


Recommended


Week 11 — Mar. 18, Finals Week — Rural and environmental social movements in the North and South

TERM PAPER: due on Canvas on March 15 at 11:59 p.m.


REFERENCES


Elmhirst, Rebecca. 2018. "Ecologías políticas feministas: perspectivas situadas y abordajes emergentes (Feminist political ecologies – situated perspectives, emerging engagements)." Ecología Política (No.54, Special Issue on Ecofeminismos).


