

Community, Environment and Society

SOC 304 - Winter 2009
McKenzie 240A - Tuesday, Thursday 4 - 5:20

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I. Purpose

The goal of this class is to analyze the relationship between human society and the rest of the natural world, keeping in mind that human society is part of the natural world, and does not exist separately from it. We will analyze how capitalist social relationships affect the environment, and how the environment affects capitalism.

We will focus primarily on how commodification in capitalism leads to a 'metabolic rift' between the human economy and the natural ecosystem, leading to ecological degradation, and how the inherent contradictions of capitalism require ever-expanding consumption for the system to continue functioning, resulting in an ever-increasing scale of ecological degradation. Another focus will be the unequal distribution of environmental benefits (wealth, etc.) and environmental consequences (pollution, etc.) under capitalism. This includes imperialism and the use of most of the world's resources by the wealthy "core" nations. Some of the ecological problems we will cover include deforestation, degradation of the soil by industrial capitalist agriculture, global warming, POPs (persistent organic pollutants) and other cancer-causing and teratogenic chemicals in the air, soil and water, nuclear contamination and proliferation, etc.

In the last few weeks of the class, we will turn to a focus on the economic crisis that is now unfolding, and its roots in the contradictions of capitalism and the limits to natural resources. Because natural resources, especially energy resources like oil, are stagnating and declining, capitalism can no longer expand. Hence, it can no longer function. Many "peak oil" scholars are predicting the collapse of global capitalism over the next decade. While much suffering will occur during this economic crisis, it presents us with a rare opportunity to overcome capitalism (and its crises and ecological imperialism), begin healing the metabolic rift, and begin mitigating the ecological and humanitarian crisis. At the end of the course, you will learn about solutions to the economic and ecological crises, which can be implemented in a non-capitalist context, as well as social movements which have already been promoting these solutions.

II. Required Texts (All available at the UO Book Store)

The Vulnerable Planet (John Bellamy Foster)
Ecology against Capitalism (John Bellamy Foster)
The Consumer Trap (Michael Dawson)
Asphalt Nation (Jane Holtz Kay)
The Party's Over (Richard Heinberg)
Soil not Oil (Vandana Shiva)

III. Recommended Texts (These are in no way required for the course. They are listed here primarily as recommendations for future reading. Roughly arranged by topic.)

Capital, Volume I (Karl Marx)
Reading Capital (Althusser and Balibar)
Monopoly Capital (Paul Baran and Paul Sweezy)
Marx's Ecology (John Bellamy Foster)
The Dialectical Biologist (Richard Levins and Richard Lewontin)
Dance of the Dialectic (Bertell Ollman)
Hungry for Profit (Fred Magdoff, John Bellamy Foster, and Frederick H. Buttel)
Natural Causes (James C. O'Connor)
Hubbert's Peak (Kenneth Deffeyes)
Crossing the Rubicon (Michael C. Ruppert)
Blood and Oil (Michael Klare)
Resource Wars (Michael Klare)
High Noon for Natural Gas (Julian Darley)
Who Rules America? (G. William Domhoff)
The Political Economy of the Media (Robert W. McChesney)
Toxic Sludge is Good for You (John Stauber and Sheldon Rampton)
Our Ecological Footprint (Mathis Wackernagel and William Rees)
With Speed and Violence (Fred Pearce)
Guns, Germs and Steel (Jared Diamond)

IV. Course Requirements

(15%) **Attendance:** For your benefit, I will give you credit just for coming to class. A roll sheet will be passed around at the beginning of each class. It is your responsibility to make sure you sign the roll sheet. I will only excuse an absence if you have proof of a legitimate reason for absence(s) (doctor's note, coach's note, etc.).

(15%) **Course Overview Test:** This will be a test with about 25 multiple choice and true/false questions, and some short-answer questions. The purpose of this test is twofold: (1) Its primary purpose is to ensure that you have good handle on what you are going to learn in the rest of the course. If you get a good handle on the basic concepts and ideas at the outset, this should make your reading and learning go more smoothly. (2) It will also test you on some of the material from the beginning of the course. **I will post a study guide for this test on Blackboard, but no study guides will be given for the Midterm or the Final.**

(35%) **Midterm Exam:** Multiple choice, true/false, short answer, and essay questions. The Midterm will include material from lectures, the readings, and films.

(35%) **Final Exam:** Multiple choice, true/false, short answer, and essay questions. The Final will be cumulative, but will focus primarily on material from the second half of the course. Like the Midterm, it will include material from lectures, readings, and films.

Note on grades: Mitch will be in charge of keeping track of grades, so if you are confused about a grade, please ask Mitch.

V. Class Schedule

Week 1 (Jan. 6 and 8) - Course overview and history of environmental degradation.

Reading: *The Vulnerable Planet*

Week 2 (Jan. 13 and 15) - History of environmental degradation, continued.

Reading: *The Vulnerable Planet*

Film: *The Story of Stuff* (Jan.15)

COURSE OVERVIEW TEST: Thursday, Jan. 15

Week 3 (Jan 20 and 22) - Capitalism and the Environment.

Reading: *Ecology against Capitalism*

Week 4 (Jan. 27 and 29) - Capitalism and the Environment, continued.

Reading: *Ecology against Capitalism*

Film: *The Corporation* (Jan. 29).

Week 5 (Feb. 3 and 5) - The automobile.

Reading: *Asphalt Nation* (selections to be announced)

MIDTERM EXAM: Thursday, Feb. 5th.

Week 6 (Feb. 10 and 12) - Capitalism and consumerism.

Reading: *The Consumer Trap*

Week 7 (Feb. 17 and 19) - Capitalist agribusiness and the degradation of the soil and water.

Reading: *Hungry for Profit* (selections to be posted on Blackboard)

Film: *Hungry for Profit* (Feb. 19)

Week 8 (Feb. 24 and 26) - Peak oil and the coming collapse of global capitalism.

Reading: *The Party's Over* (selections to be announced)

Film: *The End of Suburbia* (Feb.26)

Week 9 (Mar. 3 and 5) - Peak oil continued, and solutions to ecological and humanitarian crises in a non-capitalist context.

Reading: *Soil not Oil*

Week 10 (Mar. 10 and 12) - Solutions to ecological and humanitarian crises, continued.

Reading: *Soil not Oil*

FINAL EXAM: Monday, Mar. 16th, 1:00 PM. McKenzie 240A.

Film listings are tentative and subject to change.