

Emergent urbanizations: new territories of urban/agrarian transformation in the global South

Instructors: Prof. Sai Balakrishnan; Prof. Neil Brenner
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DES—3379 / Wednesdays, 2-5pm, Gund 516

This course proceeds from a simple premise: new patterns and pathways of urbanization are emerging around the world, and these transformations require a radical rethinking of inherited approaches to urban theory and research. A major site of investigation for the course is the urbanization of the hinterland / countryside, and the concomitant remaking of inherited agrarian environments across much of the global South, during the last three decades. In these zones, as elsewhere, post-1980s processes of sociospatial restructuring have involved the transformation of agrarian sociospatial relations, land use systems and political ecologies through new forms of enclosure/land-grabbing, infrastructure investment, industrial development and financial speculation, often in close proximity to or in direct relation to processes of city building. Their investigation thus requires scholars to rethink inherited disciplinary divisions of labor (e.g. urban studies vs. agrarian studies) and sociospatial binarisms (e.g. urban/rural; city/countryside; industrial/agrarian; society/nature).

The course is structured as a research studio in which we will (a) explore the limits of inherited theoretical frameworks for the study of urbanization processes and their putative “outsides”; and (b) attempt to develop and apply alternative conceptualizations to decipher emergent conditions and transformations, especially in agrarian environments undergoing major industrial, infrastructural and ecological transformations. Our work is, in this sense, oriented simultaneously towards the analysis of emergent patterns and pathways of urban restructuring *and* the elaboration of appropriate theories, concepts and cartographies through which to decipher the latter. Following a high-intensity overview of inherited 20th-century approaches to the urban and agrarian questions, and major axes of debate within early 21st-century urban, agrarian and development studies, we explore emergent urban-agrarian transformations across diverse sites and regions, and the state spatial strategies and forms of spatial politics through which the latter have been animated, mediated and contested. Our major research foci will be strategic zones of the global south—especially in the so-called “BRICS (the rapidly industrializing territories of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa)—and a range of emergent agrarian-urban transformations that have crystallized within and across the transnational production networks associated with those zones.

In this proceeding, we consider the question of “emergence” at once as a problem of conceptualization, as a methodological dilemma and as a challenge for contextually embedded research and visualization. We will also explore the question of what contextual “specificity” might mean in the investigation of emergent urban/agrarian sociospatial transformations today. In addition to several writing assignments, students will work in pairs to develop original research projects on the zones and issues explored in the class. Although it is offered as a 4-credit course that meets 3 hours per week, the workload will more closely approximate that of a studio. Prospective students—especially those enrolled in a required studio class for a professional design degree—should consider carefully whether they will be able to keep up with the intense volume and pace of work in this class. Because the course is designed as a collaborative research project, we are not able to permit auditors to attend.

Course size:

limited to 20 students total; one 3-hour weekly meeting (W, 2-5pm in Gund 516). No auditors.

Student workload: heavy reading requirements in the early part of the semester coupled with regular writing assignments; independent research projects to be undertaken in second part of the semester. This will require historical analysis, reviews of scholarly literatures and creative approaches to data collection and cartographic visualization. Our workload and end-of-term deliverables will likely approximate that of an Options Studio. Professional degree students who are enrolled in other Studio classes should consider very carefully whether you have time to keep up with the intensive workload of this class.

Prerequisites:

Priority enrollment is granted to students who have previously taken a course with either or both of the instructors. Any Ph.D. students or DDes students who wish to enroll should touch base with the instructors to discuss several possible scenarios for your involvement in the course.

Assignments and Deliverables Overview:

This course is, basically, a research studio. We will be introducing you to several complex scholarly literatures and then applying their insights to an investigation of various issues related to emergent geographies of urban/agrarian transformation in strategic zones of the world economy.

The 20 students in the class will be organized into 10 research teams (composed of 2 students each), who will collaborate on most of the major assignments and deliverables. These research teams will be formed as of week 3 of the semester. Details of team foci and deliverables to be explained during the course of the semester as we deepen our inquiry.

Deliverables

- Weekly reaction papers, authored individually, up through Week 6 of the semester (details to be explained)
- 27 March (immediately following Spring Break): 3000 word essay, produced by pairs of students in each research team, that relates some of the core theoretical literatures covered in Part 1 of the course to your terrain of research and investigation. The assignment will require you to (a) consider several major driving forces underlying contemporary agrarian transformations in the global South; and (b) to demarcate a major spatial site (or type of site) in which those transformations are being materialized and contested.
- Throughout Parts 2 and 3 of the class: Weekly deliverables by research teams, following specific assignment protocols introduced each week, to advance your project. These deliverables will combine various elements of research: bibliography, textual analysis, assembly and summary of key data sources, narrative analysis, critical analysis of scholarly and public discourse, theoretical speculation, cartographic analysis and data visualization.
- Final assignment: preparation of a presentation (20 min) by each research team for end-of-semester research colloquium; submission of presentation + final essay (Due on the date of colloquium in early May, TBA).

Overview of seminar structure and workflow

Week 1: 30 Jan: Introduction and overview

PART ONE: Foundations

Weeks 2-5 (6 Feb, 13 Feb, 20 Feb, 27 Feb)

- In this part of the course, we dive deep into major scholarly literatures on the urban question, the agrarian question and on contemporary political-economic transformations in the global South that blur inherited epistemologies and cartographies of the urban/agrarian divide. This work will culminate in a series of readings that explore the rise of the “BRICS” and the emergence of new patterns and pathways of industrial development and agrarian sociospatial restructuring under contemporary “supply chain” capitalism. This work will thus provide a theoretical and historical foundation for our investigations in Part Two of the class.
- During this stage of the course, you will deliver weekly Reaction Papers, to be distributed to the entire class in advance of each meeting, and to be read by everyone (details to be explained)
- Research groups will be constituted in Week 3 and will need to begin meeting regularly to make preparations for upcoming assignments (specific instructions to be provided as of Week 4).

PART TWO: Probe

Weeks 6-10 (6 March, 13 March, 27 March, 3 April, 10 April).

- In this part of the course, research teams will follow weekly protocols to delineate and explore a specific terrain of research related to our core questions in this class. The teams will be focusing on specific geographical regions, their articulations to global supply chains and the multiscalar spatial politics through which those articulations are forged and contested. On a week-to-week basis, your assignment protocols will require you to develop and synthesize core scholarly literatures about your regions and sectors of investigation, while also developing more nuanced, fine-grounded accounts of specific land use, social and political transformations that have occurred during the last 3-4 decades.
- Along with weekly protocols, there will be several major deliverables:
 - 27 March (1st meeting after Spring Break): 3000 word essay reflecting on literatures covered in Part 1 of the course in relation to your site/terrain of investigation
 - 10 April: Synthesis of “probe” portion of the course and presentation of your core research agenda for the final portion of the course (details to be provided later)

PART THREE: Drill

Weeks 11-13 (17 April, 24 April + 1 May supplementary class)

- In this final portion of the course, having explored the dynamics of urban/agrarian transformation in relatively broad terms, you will “drill” more deeply into a specific research topic. While building upon your work on the “Probe” portion of the class, you will have more freedom to develop and direct your research in preparation for the final colloquium and research report. Both instructors will offer regular guidance as you deepen your work. In our remaining weekly sessions, students will update the class on progress, and we will continue to discuss general theoretical, methodological and empirical challenges. We will also likely need to revisit some of the core theoretical literatures covered in Part 1 of the class, while also consulting other literatures whose relevance only became apparent in the course of your concrete inquiries.

FINAL COLLOQUIUM: date TBD—probably

- Colloquium presentation
- Essay/ research report