

Climate change, history and social theory (graduate seminar)

CEGU 40244, SOCI 40244, HIST 43204, PLSC 40204, CHSS 43204, CCCT 40344

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University of Chicago

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This course considers some of the major approaches to climate change, history and social theory that have been elaborated in contemporary scholarship. The course is framed with reference to the analysis of major socioenvironmental transformations at planetary, national, regional and local scales during the last four centuries of global capitalist development, through historical case studies from major world regions and imperial configurations and their present-day legacies. Key topics include the environmental subtexts/contexts of classical and contemporary social theory and historiography; the histories and geographies of environmental crises under capitalism; the conceptualization of “nature” and the “non-human” in relation to societal (and industrial) dynamics; the role of capitalism and fossil capital in the production of “metabolic rifts”; the formation of agrarian capitalism inside and outside the plantation colonies; the impact of earth system science on history and social theory, including in relation to questions of periodization and associated debates on the “Anthropocene,” the “Capitalocene” and the “Plantationocene”; the interplay between urbanization, rural dispossession and climate emergencies; the uneven sociopolitical geographies of risk, vulnerability and disaster; the (geo)politics of decarbonization; insurgent struggles for climate justice; and possible post-carbon futures from carbon removal care work to degrowth and half-earth.

Prerequisites

- This course is reading-intensive and theory-heavy. Students should be prepared to read complex, densely argued texts with appropriate care, focus, and perseverance. The course is intended primarily for Ph.D. students.

Requirements

- *Regular attendance and active participation* in all sessions. Since we only meet once per week in a 9-week quarter, this is a mandatory requirement (exceptions only in case of emergency).

If you are confronting any issues that are impeding your studies this term, please reach out to the instructors so that appropriate support can be found.

- *Intensive preparation* for all discussions by reading all assigned texts carefully and comprehensively in advance. The practice and discipline of reading is central to our work.
- Meet all *deadlines* for writing assignments, as specified below.
- *Weekly discussion posts*. Due weekly, starting in Week 2 of the quarter. These are brief reflections or questions regarding the week's readings, due each Tuesday by 6pm. These will be posted to a weekly "Discussion" thread on our Canvas site (look under "Discussions" tab for the relevant week).

Prior to each week's Wednesday class, please read the reflections posted by your classmates (check back after 6pm each Tuesday evening).

- *Two analytical essays*. These are about 7 pages each (approximately 2500 words). Deadlines are 10/30 and 12/11. Essay topics will be discussed in class. The second essay may be longer if needed (up to 3500 words / 10 pages).

Grading

- 25% Attendance and participation
- 25% Discussion Posts
- 25% Analytical essay #1
- 25% Analytical essay #2

Academic Honesty

Plagiarism will result in a failing grade for the assignment and possibly for the course, as well as a referral to the Dean of Students. Plagiarism is the accidental or intentional copying of phrases or sentences without proper citation to the author or source. This may include published texts, material found on the internet or the work of students and colleagues. Be sure to document the exact sources of everything you write down in your notes; use quotation marks if you are quoting anything, be it a phrase or a sentence. These are essential habits to "lock in" now to avoid making any future mistakes in this regard, whether as graduate students or in future professional / academic contexts.

Crucial note: *the use of chatbots or any other AI-based writing tools is not permitted for any part of any of the writing assignments for this class.*

SCHEDULE OF READINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Note: During the course of the term, our weekly reading selections may be updated in light of class discussions and debates. We will inform the class accordingly.

Week 1: October 2

Introduction – Climate Change, Earth System Science and Contemporary Debates

- Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), *Climate Change 2023: Synthesis Report; Summary for Policymakers* (42 pages)
- Will Steffen, Paul Crutzen and John McNeill, “The Anthropocene: Are Humans Now Overwhelming the Great Forces of Nature?” *Ambio* 36, 8, December 2007 (10 pages).
- Johan Rockström, Will Steffen, et. al., “A safe operating space for humanity,” *Nature*, 46, 24 (September 2009).
- Interview with Rhiana Gunn-Wright: “How Covid-19 Made it Easier to Talk About Climate Change.” *New York Times*. July 26, 2020.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/24/us/climate-change-green-new-deal-covid-coronavirus.html>

- Bill McKibben, “Global Warming’s Terrifying New Math,” *Rolling Stone*, July 19, 2012:
<https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/global-warmings-terrifying-new-math-188550/>
- Adam Tooze, “Climate, carbon and class,” *Chartbook Newsletter #24*, June 27, 2021.
- Robin Wall Kimmerer, “Skywoman Falling,” *Braiding Sweetgrass* (Milkweed Press, 2020), 3-10.
- Joel Wainwright and Geoff Mann, “The State is Not Enough,” *Public Books* December 2018.
- Several short reports on the geologists’ recent “No” vote on whether to demarcate the “Anthropocene” as an official epoch of earth history:
 - Alexandra Witze in *Nature* (2 March 2024).
 - David Adam in *Nature* (14 March 2024)

Week 2: October 9

Dialectics, metabolic ‘rift’ and the metabolic dynamics of capital

Background

- Richard Lewontin and Richard Levins, “Organism and environment,” *Capitalism, Nature, Socialism* 8, 2 (1997): 95-98.

Core readings

- John Bellamy Foster, “Marx’s theory of metabolic rift: classical foundations for environmental sociology,” *American Journal of Sociology* 105, 2 (1999): 366-405.

- Jason W. Moore, “Metabolic rift or metabolic shift: dialectics, nature and the world-historical method,” *Theory and Society* 46 (2017): 285-318.
- Mindi Schneider and Philip McMichael, “Deepening, and repairing, the metabolic rift,” *Journal of Peasant Studies* 37, 3 (2010): 461-484.
- Kohei Saito, “Marx’s theory of metabolism in the age of global ecological crisis,” *Historical Materialism* 28, 2 (2020): 3-24.
- Kohei Saito, “Marx in the Anthropocene: value, metabolic rift, and the non-Cartesian dualism,” in *The Anthropocene-Biopspheric Crisis: Rethinking the Strategies for Value and Class Struggle. Journal IndoProgress (JIP)*, 2, 1 (2022): 6-30.

Optional

- Brett Clark and Richard York, “Carbon metabolism: global capitalism, climate change and biospheric rift,” *Theory and Society* 34, 4 (2005): 391-428.
- Jason W. Moore, “Transcending the metabolic rift: a theory of crises in the capitalist world-ecology,” *Journal of Peasant Studies* 38 (2011): 1-46.
- Damian White, Brian Gareau and Alan Rudy, “Ecosocialisms, past, present and future: from the metabolic rift to a reconstructive, dynamic and hybrid ecosocialism,” *Capitalism, Nature, Socialism* 28, 2 (2017): 22-40.
- Anna Sturman, “Kohei Saito, *Karl Marx’s Ecosocialism*,” *Past and Present Reading Group*, September 28, 2021: <https://www.ppesydney.net/kohei-saito-karl-marxs-ecosocialism/>

Week 3: October 16

Theoretical controversies on nature, climate and the nonhuman

- Donna Haraway, “Staying with the trouble: anthropocene, capitalocene, chthululucene,” in Jason W. Moore ed. *Anthropocene or Capitalocene: Nature, History and the Crisis of Capitalism*. Oakland, CA.: PM Press, 2016, 34-77.
- Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, “On nonscalability: the living world is not amenable to precision-nested scales,” *Common Knowledge* 18, 3 (2012): 505-523.
- Bruno Latour, “Why Gaia is not a God of Totality,” *Theory, Culture and Society* 34, 2-3 (2016): 61-81.
- Timothy Lenton and Bruno Latour, “Gaia 2.0,” *Science*, 361 (6407), 2018, 1066-68.
- Andreas Malm, “Introduction: Theory for the Warming Condition,” “On the building of nature: against constructionism,” and “On combined development: against hybridism,” in *The Progress of This Storm: Nature and Society in a Warming World*. London: Verso, 2018, 1-77 [selections to be confirmed]

Optional

- Jason W. Moore, “The rise of cheap nature,” in Jason W. Moore ed. *Anthropocene or Capitalocene: Nature, History and the Crisis of Capitalism*. Oakland, CA.: PM Press, 2016, 78-115.

- James O'Connor, "The conditions of production and the production of conditions," in *Natural Causes*. New York: Guilford Press, 1988, 144-157.
- Neil Smith, "Nature as accumulation strategy," *Socialist Register*, March 19, 2009, 17-35.

Week 4: October 23

A golden age for conceptual and methodological innovation?

- Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The climate of history: four theses," *Critical Inquiry* 35, 2 (2009), 197-222.
- Pierre Charbonnier, *Affluence and Freedom* (London: Polity, 2021), 7-29.
- Deborah Coen and Fredrik Albritton Jonsson, "Between History and Earth System Science," *Isis*, 113, 2, June 2022.
- Nancy Fraser, "Climates of capital: for a trans-environmental socialism," *New Left Review* 127 (2021): 1-45.
- Kyle Whyte, "Indigenous climate change studies: indigenizing futures, decolonizing the anthropocene," *English Language Notes* 55, 1 (2017): 153-162.

Optional

- Deborah Coen, "Big is a Thing of the Past" *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 77: 2 April 2016
- James O'Connor, "What is environmental history?," in *Natural Causes*. New York: Guilford Press, 1998, 48-70.
- Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, *The Shock of the Anthropocene: The Earth, History and Us*. London: Verso, 2016 (selections TBA).
- Kathryn Yusoff, *A billion black Anthropocenes or none*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019 (selections TBA).

Analytic essay #1: topics to be discussed

Week 5: October 30

Plantations, agro-industrial transformation and environmental crises

- Simon Lewis and Mark Maslin, "Defining the Anthropocene," *Nature* March 2015, 171-180.
- Eric Herschthal and John L. Brooke, "The Plantation Carbon Complex: Slavery and the Origins of Climate Change in the Early Modern British Atlantic," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 81, 2 (2024): 255-306

- Brian Donahue, “Mixed husbandry: the English ecological system,” in *The Great Meadow: Farmers and the Land in Colonial Concord* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 54-73
- Chris Otter, *Diet for a Large Planet*, Chapter 1, “Meat,” 21-47
- Edward Melillo, “The First Green Revolution: debt peonage and the making of the nitrogen fertilizer trade, 1840-1930,” *American Historical Review* 117, 4 (2012): 1026-1060
- Kenneth Pomeranz, “Abolishing the land constraint: the Americas as a new kind of periphery,” *The Great Divergence: China, Europe and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001), chapter 6, 264-300.
- Tony Weis, “The accelerating biophysical contradictions of industrial capitalist agriculture,” *Journal of Agrarian Change* 10, 3 (2010): 315-341.
- Swarnabh Ghosh, Neil Brenner, and Nikos Katsikis, “The global industrial feedlot matrix: a metabolic monstrosity,” in Jeffrey Nesbit and Charles Waldheim eds., *Technical Lands* (Berlin: Jovis, 2023), 132-155.

Optional

- Jason W. Moore, “The end of the road? Agricultural revolutions in the capitalist world-ecology, 1450-2010,” *Journal of Agrarian Change* 10, 3 (2010): 389-413.
- Raj Patel, “The long Green revolution,” *Journal of Peasant Studies* 40, 1 (2013): 1-64.
- Chris Otter and John Brooke, “The Organic Anthropocene,” *Eighteenth Century Studies*, Vol. 49, No 2 (2016): 281-302.
- Simon Newman, *A New World of Labor: The Development of Plantation Slavery in the British Atlantic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), chapter 8, 189-210.
- Wendy Wolford, “The Plantationocene: A Lusotropical Contribution to the Theory,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* (2021): 1-18.
- Ariel Ron, “When Hay was King: Energy History and Economic Nationalism in the United States,” *The American Historical Review*, Volume 128, Issue 1, March 2023, Pages 177–213
- Raj Patel and Jim Goodman, “A green new deal for agriculture,” *Jacobin* 4.04.2019: <https://jacobinmag.com/2019/04/green-new-deal-agriculture-farm-workers>

Analytic essay #1 due November 6

Week 6: November 6

Energy Revolutions/Fossil Capital

- Andreas Malm, “The Origins of Fossil Capital: From Water to Steam in the British Cotton Industry,” *Historical Materialism* 21, 2 (2013) 15-68.
- Andreas Malm, “China as chimney of the world: the fossil capital hypothesis,” *Organization & Environment* 25, 2 (2012): 146-177.
- Fredrik Albritton Jonsson, *Fossil Nation*, Chapter 1, “The Canal System,” Draft, July 2024, 1-32
- Fredrik Albritton Jonsson, *Fossil Nation*, Chapter 3, “Iron Nation: the Military Origins of the Fossil Economy,” Draft, July 2024, 1-34
- Elizabeth Chatterjee, “The Asian Anthropocene: Electricity and Fossil Developmentalism,” *Journal of Asian Studies*, 10 September 2019.
- Elizabeth Chatterjee, “Late Acceleration: The Indian Emergency and the Early 1970s Energy Crisis,” *The American Historical Review*, 129, 2, June 2024, Pages 429–466
- Timothy Mitchell, “Carbon democracy,” *Economy and Society* 38, 3 (2009): 399-432.

Note: No class on November 13; both instructors are traveling this week.

Week 7: November 20

Topic: State power and the contradictory politics of environment, energy, and climate

- Alyssa Battistoni, “State, capital, nature: state theory for the Capitalocene,” in Rob Hunter, Rafael Khachatryan, and Eva Nanopoulos eds., *Marxism and the Capitalist State: Towards a New Debate* (Berlin: Springer, 2023), 31-51.
- Christian Parenti, “Environment-making in the Capitalocene: political ecology of the state,” in Jason Moore ed. *Anthropocene or Capitalocene?* (Oakland: PM Press, 2016) 166-184.
- Christoph Görg, et. al., “Scrutinizing the Great Acceleration: the Anthropocene and its analytic challenges for social-ecological transformations,” *The Anthropocene Review* 2019, 1-20.
- Neta Crawford, “Pentagon fuel use, climate change, and the costs of war,” Watson Institute, Brown University, November 2019.
- Oliver Belcher, Patrick Bigger, Ben Neimark, and Cara Kennelly, “Hidden carbon costs of the ‘everywhere war’: logistics, geopolitical ecology, and the carbon boot-print of the US military,” *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 45 (2020): 65-80.
- Joel Wainright and Geoff Mann, “Climate leviathan,” *Antipode* 45, 1 (2012): 1-22.
- Alyssa Battistoni and Jedediah Britton-Purdy, “After carbon democracy,” *Dissent*, Winter 2020.

- Erik Swyngedouw, “Depoliticized environments: the end of nature, climate change, and the post-political condition,” *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplements*, 69 (2011): 253-274.

Week 8: December 4

Pathways towards alternative climate futures—blockages, movements, visions, horizons

Note: *a smaller cluster of core readings will be announced prior to this session.*

- Jason Hickel and Girgos Kallis, “Is green growth possible?” *New Political Economy* 25, 4 (2020): 469-486.
- Jason Hickel, “Is it possible to achieve a good life for all within planetary boundaries?,” *Third World Quarterly*, 40, 1 (2019): 18-25.
- Julia Steinberger, Gauthier Guerin, Elena Hofferberth, and Elke Pirgmaier, “Democratizing provisioning systems: a prerequisite for living well within limits,” *Sustainability: Science, Practice, Policy*, 20, 1 (2024): 1-15.
- Kohei Saito, “The abundance of wealth in degrowth communism,” in *Marx in the Anthropocene: Towards the Idea of Degrowth Communism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 216-244.
- Max Ajl, “A planet of fields” in *A People’s Green New Deal* (London: Pluto, 2021), 117-146.
- Andreas Malm, *How to Blow up a Pipeline*. London: Verso, 2021, selections.
- Drew Pendergrass and Troy Vettese, “The humanization of nature and half-earth socialism,” *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 99 (2021): 15-23.
- Thea Riofrancos, “Plan, mood, battlefield: reflections on the Green New Deal,” *Viewpoint Magazine*, May 16, 2029.
- Matt T. Huber, “Ecological politics for the working class,” *Catalyst Journal*, 9 (2019), 1-34.
- Ursula Le Guin, “The Author of the Acacia Seed and other Extracts from the Journal of the Association of Therolinguistics,” *The Compass Rose* (1982)
- Nick Estes, “A Red Deal,” *Jacobin* 8.06.2019: <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2019/08/red-deal-green-new-deal-ecosocialism-decolonization-indigenous-resistance-environment>

Optional

- Kate Aronoff, Alyssa Battistoni, Daniel Aldana Cohen and Thea Riofrancos, *A Planet to Win: Why we Need a Green New Deal*. New York: Verso, 2019.
- Andreas Malm, *Corona, Climate, Chronic Emergency. War Communism in the Twenty-First Century*. London: Verso, 2021.
- Vicky Albritton and Fredrik Albritton Jonsson, *Green Victorians: The Simple Life in John Ruskin’s Lake District* (University of Chicago, 2016)

Week 9: Final session (date/time TBD)

'Open mike'—readings and topic to be decided collectively

Analytic essay #2: due Wednesday 11 December