

THE POLITICS OF THE ENVIRONMENT AND SUSTAINABILITY
POLS670, Spring 2026
(Final)

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I. Objectives. This seminar is not intended to be an encyclopedic overview of all environment and sustainability related issues but aims to address some central questions in a preliminary but sophisticated fashion. Throughout the course we will be dealing with ways in which people try to make sense of the environment. While the seminar is organized into various weekly themes you will note that there are overlaps and relations across themes. The underlying questions that run throughout the whole seminar are: what is the relationship between nature and society? What interventions/strategies are proposed? How are the two related?

The organization of the course is thematic – and that is one of the organizing principles. The second arranges the themes in terms of Problems and Solutions. In the first part we will focus on framing ‘problems’ and in the second part on framing ‘solutions’, fully recognizing that the two are mutually constituted, i.e., how we frame a solution implies a preferred framing of a problem and how we frame a problem implies a preferred solution. The third organizing principle is historical. The topics are arranged in terms of when they emerged on the global ecosocial agenda – independent of the dates of the readings that we use. I will provide this historical background in my comments at the end of each seminar.

II. Evaluation. Your evaluation will be based on two review essays (25% of your grade each); 6 précis (of which the 5 best will be counted), (5% of your grade each); and class facilitation and participation (25%).

III. Guidance for Class Discussions, Facilitations, and Précis.

The key goal of the seminar is for you to learn how to organize weekly readings/writings around key concepts, issues or themes while aiming to relate them to broader themes on the governance of the world political economy. Stated differently, you should view weekly readings as steps towards understanding broader themes and not as ends in themselves.

- a. ***Analysis of Specific Readings (primary).*** What is the purpose of each reading or why did the author write it? What is the specific argument that the author makes about society and nature? How does the author support her argument or what is her evidence (you should follow the reading’s outline).
- b. ***Connections.*** How do some or all of week’s readings relate to previous readings or other material you are familiar with? Suggestions of readings for future iterations of this seminar are welcome. Do any of these themes or any of the readings help you with your research agenda?
- c. ***Synthesis or Overarching Themes (primary).*** What is a central theme that brings together all of the readings? The goal here is to organize and compare the readings around one or two key ideas, issues, questions, dimensions, debates, continuum/range, difference and so on. The fewer these are, the better. Tables and other visuals are always welcome and encouraged.
- d. ***‘Hidden figures’:*** What are any important silences in our readings? This does not refer to topics not covered by a week’s readings (given the length of time there are many). Rather, it refers to actors, issues and questions that ought to be covered.

IV. Weekly Seminars. Each week’s seminar will be divided into 3 parts. During the **first part** we will discuss

the individual readings along with connections, mostly in facilitated groups, to be followed by class discussion. During the **second part** we will discuss the synthesis and hidden figures, also mostly in facilitated groups, followed by open class discussion. While quality of contributions is more important than quantity you should contribute every week and frequently. The value of a seminar is not only to engage issues that we feel strongly or confident about but, equally importantly, to engage issues and views on which we feel less certain. I would ask that those of you who are more comfortable talking in public to be attentive to the class dynamics. During the **third part** I will provide some guidelines for the subsequent week's material. These will be brief as this is not a lecture class.

V. Facilitators/Rapporteurs. Each week several of you (that will depend on final size of class) will serve as facilitators/rapporteurs. Your goal will be to facilitate group discussions, ensuring everyone participates, and summarize some main points that were raised in your group. The facilitator is not the one primarily responsible for reading and discussing the readings. Everyone must be ready for that. The goal of the facilitator/rapporteur is not to provide a summary or a synthesis of the readings but, rather, to keep the discussion moving on and centering on the key issues. Innovative ways to organize and move the discussions forward are most welcome. Each one of you should be able to do 3-4 facilitations spread throughout the semester if I am counting right. More on this in next iteration.

VI. Precis. The precis should focus on a synthesis of the weekly readings and hidden figures (items IIIc and IIId, with the latter very short). You are expected to write six (6) précis of about 250 words each, even if you are satisfied with your grades. I will count only the five (5) best ones. You should write at least two précis for each part of the course. Please avoid producing three consequential ones. Precis should provide frequent and appropriate references to the readings. Please see samples in Sample Learning Module.

VII. Review Essays. You will be asked to write two (2) essays of about 2,500 words each. The essays will aim to synthesize, interpret and contrast the readings we will be dealing with. They are not intended to be summaries of those readings, unless there is a research related reason. The essay topics along with suggestions and directions will be distributed well in advance.

VIII. Readings. We will mostly read articles, chapters and reputable online material. Chapters from books, articles from journals we do not subscribe to or other material that is not available electronically will be posted on Canvas. Articles in journals we subscribe to electronically can be accessed directly.

SCHEDULE

January 21

Introductions
Course Overview

Ice breaking discussion

What is the worldview or the values about society and nature evident in each reading? Do their view align or differ? What are 2-4 criteria along which they align or differ?

Marchese, David (2022). This Pioneering Economist Says Our Obsession with Growth Must End. *New York Times* (July 17). Canvas and www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/07/18/magazine/herman-daly-interview.html

Rockström Johan (2024) The Tipping Points of Climate Change- and Where we Stand.

https://www.ted.com/talks/johan_rockstrom_the_tipping_points_of_climate_change_and_where_we_stand

Brand, Ulrich and Markus Wissen (2018) What Kind of Great Transformation? The Imperial Mode of Living as a Major Obstacle to Sustainability Politics. *Gaia* 27 (3): 287-292. <https://doi.org/10.14512/gaia.27.3.8>

PART 1 FRAMING PROBLEMS

January 28 Society and Nature: Varieties of Environmentalism

These readings provide ways to organize different approaches towards environmentalism. What criteria do they use? How do they align these criteria? The article by Connelly introduces essentially contested concepts, a methodology that runs through this course.

Marks, Robert (2012) The (Modern) World since 1500. In J.R. McNeill and Erin Stewart Mauldin (eds) *A Companion to Global Environmental History*. Wiley-Blackwell, 57-78. (Canvas Readings, Part I)

Jennifer Clapp and Peter Dauvergne (2011) Peril or Prosperity? Mapping Worldviews of Global Environmental Change. Chapter 1 from their *Paths to a Green World*. The MIT Press, pp. 1-18 (Canvas Readings, Part I).

Hopwood, Bill, Mary Mellor and Geoff O'Brien (2005) Sustainable Development: Mapping Different Approaches. *Sustainable Development* 13(1): 38-52. (Canvas Readings, Part I)

Connelly, Steve. 2007. Mapping Sustainable Development as a Contested Concept. *Local Environment* 12 (3): 259-278. (Canvas Readings, Part I)

February 4 Limited and Limitless

A long-standing debate, central to environmental politics, has been that of limits. In the three weeks that follow we will examine the unfolding of the debates over limits and boundaries with attention to the interface of the social and the ecological.

Dobson, Andrew (2016) Are there Limits to Limits? In Gabrielson, Tina, Cheryl Hall, John Meyer and David Schlosberg (eds) *The Oxford Handbook of Environmental Political Theory*. Oxford University Press, 289-303.

Meadows, Donella, Jorgen Randers and Dennis Meadows (2002) Synopsis: Limits to Growth: The 30 Year Update. At <https://donellameadows.org/archives/a-synopsis-limits-to-growth-the-30-year-update/>

Turner, Graham (2008) A Comparison of The Limits to Growth with 30 Years of Reality. *Global Environmental Change* 18(3): 397-411.

Lomborg, Bjorn (2012) Environmental Alarmism, Then and Now. *Foreign Affairs*. (Canvas, Readings, Part I)

Swyngedouw, Erik. (2010) Apocalypse Forever? Post-Political Populism and the Spectre of Climate Change. *Theory, Culture and Society* 27 (2-3): 213-232.

February 11 Power, (In)equality and (In)justice at a Global Level

The advocates of limits and boundaries have often been criticized for not paying attention to persistent inequalities, whether across North and South and across categories of people – dimensions we discuss during the next two weeks and which are also central to debates over work, workers and nature.

[Wright, Erik Olin (2016) Two Approaches to Inequality and their Normative Implications. *Items, Insight from the Social Sciences*. At <https://items.ssrc.org/what-is-inequality/two-approaches-to-inequality-and-their-normative-implications/>]

Hornborg, Alf (1998) Towards an ecological theory of unequal exchange: articulating world system theory and ecological economics. *Ecological Economics* 25(1): 127-136.

Givens, Jannifer, Xiaorui Huang and Andrew Jorgenson. 2019. Ecologically Unequal Exchange: A Theory of Global Environmental Injustice. *Sociology Compass*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12693>

Chancel, Lucas (2022) Global Carbon Inequality over 1990-2019. *naturesustainability* 5, 931-938.

Lomborg, Bjorn (2020) Welfare in the 21st century: Increasing development, reducing inequality, the impact of climate change, and the cost of climate policies. *Technological Forecasting and Social Change* 156 (Canvas Readings)

February 18 Power, Inequality and (In)justice Across People and Places

Joan Martinez-Alier (2012) The Environmentalism of the Poor: Its Origins and Spread. In J.R. McNeill and Erin Stewart Mauldin (eds) *A Companion to Global Environmental History*. Wiley-Blackwell, 513-529. (Canvas, Part I Readings)

Davies, Thom (2019) Slow Violence and Toxic Geographies: ‘Out of Sight’ to Whom? *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space* 40(2): 409-427. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2399654419841063>

Witter, Rebecca and Terre Satterfield (2019) Rhino Poaching and the “Slow Violence” of Conservation-Related Resettlement in Mozambique’s Limpopo National Park, *Geoforum* 101: 275-284.

Tornel, Carlos (2023) Decolonizing Energy Justice from the Ground Up: Political Ecology, Ontology, and Energy Landscapes. *Progress in Human Geography* 47(1): 43-65.

Ojeda, Diana et al. (2023) Feminist Ecologies. *Annual Review of Environment and Resources* 47:149–171

February 25 Homogenocene, Anthropocene, Capitalocene [most are very short]

Does it make a difference what we call our era? [note that none is a formal geological era]

Malhi, Yadvinder (2017) The Concept of the Anthropocene. *Annual Reviews of Environment and Resources* 42: 77-104.

Crutzen, Paul and Eugene Stormer (2000) The “Anthropocene”. *Global Change Newsletter* 41 (May): 17-18. (Canvas Readings, Part I)

Curnutt, John (2000) A Guide to the Homogenocene. *Ecology* 81(6): 1756-1757 (Canvas, Readings, Part I)

Mann, Charles (2011) The Dawn of the Homogenocene. *Orion*. At <https://orionmagazine.org/article/the-dawn-of-the-homogenocene/>

Lövbrand, Eva, Beck, Silke, Chilvers, Jason, Forsyth, Tim, Hedrén, Johan, Hulme, Mike, Lidskog, Rolf and Vasileiadou, Eleftheria (2015) Who speaks for the future of Earth? How critical social science can extend the conversation on the Anthropocene. *Global Environmental Change*, 32: 211-218.

Malm, Andreas and Alf Hornborg (2014) The Geology of Mankind? A Critique of the Anthropocene Narrative. *The Anthropocene Review* 1(1): 62-69.

Moore, Jason (2016) Name the System! Anthropocene and the Capitalocene Alternative. At <https://jasonwmoore.wordpress.com/2016/10/09/name-the-system-anthropocenes-the-capitalocene-alternative/>

March 4 Planetary Boundaries

What are planetary boundaries? Are they different from limits? What is the role of society?

Biermann, Frank and Rakhyun E. Kim (2020) The Boundaries of the Planetary Boundary Framework: A Critical Appraisal of Approaches to Define a “Safe Operating Space” for Humanity. *Annual Review of Environment and Resources*, 45, 497-521.

Rockström J, Steffen W, Noone K, Persson A°, Chapin FS III, et al. 2009. A safe operating space for humanity. *Nature* 461(7263):472–75.

Steffen, Will et al. (2015) Planetary Boundaries: Guiding Human Development on a Changing Planet. *Science* 347(6223): 736- At: <https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.1259855>

Brand, Ulrich et al. (2021) From Planetary to Societal Boundaries: An Argument for Collectively Defined Self-Limitation. *Sustainability: Science, Practice and Politics* 17(1): 264-291.

Mar 11 Work and Nature [Cancelled due to travel. Modified and moved to May 6]

The way we work, what we work on and why are central to the society-nature relationship. Let us ponder whether it is possible to enhance sustainability without changing work.

[White, Richard (1996) “Are you and Environmentalist or do you work for a Living?” Work and Nature. In William Cronon (ed) *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*. Norton Press, 171-185 and 499-502. (Canvas Readings, Part I)]

International Labor Organization. Global Commission on the Future of Work (2019). *Work for a Brighter Future. Executive Summary*. At https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---cabinet/documents/publication/wcms_662539.pdf

Iskander, Natasha and Nicola Lowe (2020) Climate Change and Work: Politics and Power. *Annual Review of Political Science* 23: 111-131.

Bottazzi, Patrick (2019) Work and Social-Ecological Transitions: A Critical Review of Five Contrasting Approaches. *Sustainability* 11 (14); 19pp

Bohnenberger, Katharina (2022) Is it a green or a brown job? A taxonomy of sustainable employment. *Ecological Economics* 200 (October). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecolecon.2022.107469>

March 13 (F) First Essay Due (8pm)

March 18 Spring Break

PART II: FRAMING SOLUTIONS

In the weeks that follow we will examine proposed solutions to the society-nature relationship, starting with the origins of sustainable development and ecological modernization and moving on to socio-ecological systems, degrowth, valuing nature and transitions/transformations

March 25 From Ecodevelopment to Sustainable Development¹

Sustainable development emerged within a particular historical trajectory.

Monneret, Emma (2023) *Ignacy Sachs and Ecodevelopment: The Concept and its Posterity*. Thesis, Universite Lumiere Lyon. (Canvas Readings, Part II)

World Commission on Environment and Development [Brundtland]. 1987. *Our Common Future*. Forward and Overview (Canvas Readings, Part II)

Purvis, Ben, Yong Mao and Darren Robinson (2017) Three Pillars of Sustainability: In search of Conceptual Origins. *Sustainability Science* 14: 681-695.

Ruggerio, Carlos Alberto (2021) Sustainability and sustainable development: A review of principles and definitions. *Science of The Total Environment* 786 (September 10) <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.scitotenv.2021.147481>

April 1 The promise of ecological modernization

Not as well known in the USA it argues that we can address our environmental problems through an ecologically informed modernization of the economy

Mol, Arthur and Martin Jänicke. 2009. The Origins and Theoretical Foundations of Ecological Modernisation Theory. In Arthur Mol, David Sonnenfeld and Gert Spaargaren (eds) *The Ecological Modernisation Reader*. Routledge: 17-27. (Canvas Readings, Part II)

Christof, Peter. 1996. Ecological Modernisation, Ecological Modernities. *Environmental Politics* 5(3): 476-500. (Canvas Readings, Part II)

Deutz, Pauline. 2009. Producer responsibility in a sustainable development context: ecological modernization or industrial ecology? *The Geographical Journal*, 175 (4): 274-285

Leipold, Sina (2021) Transforming ecological modernization ‘from within’ or perpetuating it? The circular economy as EU environmental policy narrative. *Environmental Politics* 30(6): 1045-1067.

April 8 Resilient Social-Ecological Systems?

Social-ecological analysis emerged from ecologists. How much does the analysis integrate the social?

Folke, Carl (2006) Resilience: The Emergence of a Perspective for Social-Ecological Analyses. *Global Environmental Change*, 16: 253-267.

Nelson, Donald, W. Neil Adger and Katrina Brown (2007) Adaptation to Environmental Change: Contributions

¹ Possibly to be followed by week on commons

of a Resilience Framework. *Annual Review of Environment and Resources*, 32: 395-419.

Smit Barry and Johanna Wandel (2006) Adaptation, Adaptive Capacity and Vulnerability. *Global Environmental Change* 16: 282-92.

Colding, Johan and Stephan Barthel (2019) Exploring socio-ecological systems discourse twenty years later. *Ecology and Society* 24(1): 24(1) <https://doi.org/10.5751/ES-10598-240102>

April 15 Valuing Nature

Venkatachalam, L. (2025) Environmental Economics and Ecological Economics: Historical Evolution and the Current Status. *Review of Development and Change* DOI: 10.1177/09722661241309458

Costanza, Robert (2020) Ecological economics in 2049: Getting beyond the argument culture to the world we all want. *Ecological Economics* 168. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecolecon.2019.106484>

Pascual, Unai et al. (2023) Diverse Values of Nature for Sustainability. *Nature*, 620, 813-823.

Maechler, Sylvain and Valerie Boisvert (2025) Valuing Nature to Save It? The Centrality of Valuation in the New Spirit of Conservation. *Global Environmental Politics* 24(1): 10-30.

[Lohmann, Larry (2009) Toward a Different Debate in Environmental Accounting: The Cases of Carbon and Cost-Benefit. *Accounting, Organizations and Society* 34 (3-4): 499-534. (Canvas Readings, Part II) optional – worth your time at some point]

April 22 Growth and Degrowth

Is degrowth a response to limits? Does it move beyond ecodevelopment and strong ecological modernization?

Jacobs, Michael (2012) *Green Growth: Economic Theory and Political Discourse*. Center for Climate Change Economic and Policy, WP 108 and Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change and the Environment WP 92 (Canvas Readings, II)

Pollin, Robert (2018) De-Growth vs a Green New Deal. *New Left Review* 112: 5-25. (Canvas, Readings II)

Hickel, Jason and Giorgos Kallis (2019) Is Green Growth Possible? *New Political Economy*, 25(4): 469-486. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13563467.2019.1598964>

Lang, Miriam (2024) Degrowth, Global Asymmetries and Ecosocial Justice. Decolonial Perspectives from Latin America. *Review of International Studies* 50(5): 921-931. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210524000147>

Raina, Rajeswari, and Risbabh Kachroo (2024) Post-growth agrifood systems: Towards an emancipatory politics *Review of International Studies* 50(5): 898-909. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210524000408>

April 29 Just Transitions/Transformations

This week we will focus on just transition as a strategy that can be transformative. The study of sustainability and socio-technical transitions has often been apolitical leading several authors to highlight the need for transformations, improperly contrasting them to transitions as less ambitious changes.

Wang, Xinxin and Kevin Lo (2021) Just Transition: A Conceptual Review. *Energy Research and Social Science* 82. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2021.102291>

Stavis, Dimitris (2026) Just Transition as a Contested Ecosocial Strategy. In Karen Bell, Emma Foster and Silpa Satheesh (eds) *The Sage Handbook of Eco-Social Policy and Politics*. London: Sage, 1-21. [Canvas]

Okereke, Chukwumerije, Mbeva, Kennedy, & Reuben Makomere (2025). Introduction to the Special Issue: The North–South Politics of Global Just Transitions. *Global Environmental Politics*, 25(4), 1-22.
<https://doi.org/10.1162/GLEP.a.27>

Kohler, Jonathan et al. (2019) An agenda for sustainability transitions research: State of the art and future directions. *Environmental Innovation and Societal Transitions* 31: 1-32. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.eist.2019.01.004>

Eckersley, Robin (2021) Greening States and Societies. From Transitions to Great Transformations. *Environmental Politics* 30 (1-2): 245-265.

May 6 Work and Nature

International Labor Organization. Global Commission on the Future of Work (2019). *Work for a Brighter Future. Executive Summary*. At https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---cabinet/documents/publication/wcms_662539.pdf

UNDP. Unstuck (2026) What is the Future of Work? <https://unstuck.systems/future-of-work/>
[Please skim and do the following. 1) How many of the items focus on work and nature? 2) review 1-2 of those that, in your view, are closest to work and nature.]

Bottazzi, Patrick (2019) Work and Social-Ecological Transitions: A Critical Review of Five Contrasting Approaches. *Sustainability* 11 (14); 19pp

Bohnenberger, Katharina (2022) Is it a green or a brown job? A taxonomy of sustainable employment. *Ecological Economics* 200 (October). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecolecon.2022.107469>

Davidson, Brendan and Dimitris Stavis (2026) *An Ecosocial Typology of Green and Climate Jobs* [working title]. [Canvas]

May 10 (Sunday, 8pm) Second Essay Due