

ENV 1444

CAPITALIST NATURE: A POLITICAL ECOLOGY

COURSE SYLLABUS

WINTER SESSION 2025

Thursdays, 13:00 – 16:00

Instructor: Scott Prudham

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Overview

This course is organized around the idea of “capitalist nature”.¹ Specifically, the course is concerned most centrally with six questions:

- (i) What are the unique political, ecological, and geographical dynamics of environmental change propelled by capital accumulation and the dynamics of specifically capitalist forms of “commodification”?
- (ii) How and why is nature commodified (however partially) in a capitalist political economy, and what are the associated problems and contradictions?
- (iii) How do the contemporary dynamics of environmental change, environmental politics, and environmental justice shape and help us understand transformations in markets, commodity production regimes, and capitalist social relations and institutions more broadly?
- (iv) How can we understand the main currents of policy and regulatory responses to these dynamics?
- (v) How do prevailing ideas about nature (non-human as well as human) reflect, reinforce and subvert capital accumulation?

¹ O'Connor, M. (1993). On the misadventures of capitalist nature. *Capitalism, Nature, Socialism*, 4(3), 7-40.

- (vi) Is there or can there be any such thing as “green capitalism”?

Objectives

1. To develop some conceptual tools to analyse how capitalist dynamics transform or metabolize nature (in the broadest sense and including in material and semiotic registers), how biophysical processes become enrolled in and actively constitute capital accumulation and commodification, and how environmental politics and environmental justice shape a (more than) capitalist society.
2. To develop and refine critical reading skills, and in particular, to read more closely, carefully, and critically (which does not mean antagonistically) than we would otherwise be able to do on our own.
3. To read and luxuriate in the joy of scholarly reading and thinking about scholarly reading.
4. To participate in and learn from group discussions of assigned readings.

Logistics

Course meetings: Thursdays, 13:00 - 16:00 in ES 1042.

The course will meet once per week for three hours (or less if we finish early). Students will be asked to comment on readings prior to class meetings in the form of emails sent to me and posted to the appropriate Discussion forum in Quercus (accessible through the University of Toronto portal on the U of T homepage) or via some other electronic means (we will discuss this during the first class meeting). Class meetings will be oriented primarily toward discussion, analysis, and critique of the assigned readings. I will get us started each week. However, I much prefer that issues be raised and discussed interactively. In addition to regular attendance, participation in the discussion of assigned readings, and email responses, students will be expected to complete some sort of significant, original piece of written work (see below for suggested formats and approaches).

Office hours: Fridays 14:30 – 16:30 or by prior alternate arrangement.

Readings:

The readings in this course consist primarily of books. Longer books we read over two weeks, and shorter books we read in one week. These readings will be supplemented by one or two articles per week that complement, contradict, critique, or extend the assigned book excerpts.

The course should provide a good start for Ph.D. students in preparing for comprehensive exams, but also for Master’s students looking for an introduction to literatures and concepts that may be applied to contemporary political economy, environmental politics and environmental policy.

Grading scheme:

- Participation (including via email responses as well as class discussions) – 50 percent
- Term paper (or other equivalent) – 50 per cent

Details on Course Work:

1. Email responses -- Weekly email responses to the assigned readings must be submitted to me (scott.prudham@utoronto.ca) by 13:00 on Wednesdays, the day prior to the course meetings. Please don't be late; I need to be able to read these prior to class meetings and to prepare something for the next day. These comments help me to facilitate the class discussion and will also allow me to get a sense of how the readings are being received and what significant questions or issues are being raised. I ask that you also post your comments via the Quercus Discussion forum at the same time as when you email them to me so that others may read and consider your comments prior to coming to class. For this we need to allow time for others to read and consider the comments. If you are accustomed to reading for class the night before (not usually a good idea anyway), just convince yourself class is on Wednesday, and there will be no problem! The email responses are also meant to facilitate the development of close, critical reading skills, and to develop a facility with completing substantive, fair-minded critiques. The email responses should be a maximum of 500 words in length and should be sent in the body of an email (i.e., no attachments); please do not exceed this limit (we will all appreciate it). The email comments should consist of three elements:
 - a. A concise paraphrase of the main argument of the reading, including some of the argument structure and the evidence on which the argument is based, where appropriate. This is a difficult skill to master, since it requires distilling the argument to its bare essentials, and concisely explaining it in your own words. As you will see, it is not obvious, and not all of us will agree on even this seemingly basic distillation of the argument.
 - b. A response of some sort. This should be evaluative and can focus on aspects of the argument that are either strong or weak, discussions of the relevance and significance of the argument, and suggestions as to how the argument might be improved. Critiques should always be fair-minded and respectful, reflecting the author's apparent purpose. Keep in mind that there is a fundamental difference between critiquing someone else's argument on its own terms on the one hand and advancing your own position on the other. The second strategy is easier, often more obvious, and, in my opinion, too prevalent in academia. I am not saying this is off limits, but I am saying that appraisals should also deal with the argument on the authors' terms. Practise empathy. Try to put yourself in the author's place. Contesting or disputing the argument tends to come more easily than explaining how and why the argument is actually persuasive and important. But there is often a lot to say in reinforcing the strengths of an argument that is not limited to merely re-stating the argument, or to vacuous celebration. I do not want to be complicit in this class in equating critique with negation, and I would appreciate some assistance in this regard in both written responses, and in how

- we engage with one another in class discussion. Consider discussing, for example, how the reading(s) might help explain something you are interested in.
- c. Questions for discussion. These can be anything from “what does the author mean by...?” to “what is the context (geographical, historical, political, cultural, intellectual, etc.), out of which this reading arises...?” to “what are the implications of...”. Some of these readings are quite difficult and I stress that sometimes the most productive questions are the ones that seem the most basic. If there are elements of the argument or conceptualization you do not understand, there is no shame in and certainly no penalty for asking for discussion on certain points. I consider honest questions very helpful contributions to the dialog we will have in class meetings. These kinds of questions also take courage to ask and we should all reward that. Questions of clarification are the best way to flag jargon, concepts, theories, etc., that may be invoked in the readings but which may not be adequately explained in the text itself and which may be unfamiliar to many of us. Keep in mind this is an interdisciplinary seminar, so levels of familiarity with relevant concepts will vary widely. Please accept my invitation to simply ask for a discussion of concepts raised by the authors (e.g., “what does the author mean by commodification?”), and by all means, reiterate these questions when we meet.

In addition to sending me your email responses, I will also ask you to post them to the Quercus Discussion forum (or to an alternative email list if we need it) in order to allow others to read your comments. Please note that you must send me your comments as well as post them. Again, please circulate your comments in plain text format. No attachments please!

2. Class Participation. The majority of class time will be spent in discussion. Please contribute by asking questions, suggesting issues for discussion, drawing on the text to analyse it, listening carefully to others, engaging respectfully with their views, and helping each of us to understand the readings better together than we can do individually. This latter is, in my view, a central purpose of a graduate seminar. I want to ensure that everyone feels comfortable speaking, but it would also help if we can get into the practice of following discussion threads rather than jumping around randomly based on a strict speaker’s queue. Please bear in mind that my evaluation of individual student participation is not based solely on the quantity of input but is instead a qualitative assessment of contributions, including constructive engagements with other students. You are not in competition with one another, or if you believe you are, please don’t bring that into the class!
3. Term paper/grant application/critical review paper/ research proposal/ annotated bibliography. This will be a maximum of 30 pages (double spaced) and can be on just about any subject you choose. It need not be about capitalist nature per se, but I would like to see some sort of environmental politics/justice/policy/political economy or political ecology connection, be it the role of environmental science in policy formation, environmental social movements, environmental justice issues, the political economy of environmental policy, etc. It should be something that seems relevant to the course, but that ideally also fits your purposes. If you are not sure, let’s talk it through. You can complete a review paper, a research paper, or a re-worked

paper you are intending to submit for publication. It is up to you. Ph.D. students may want to consider the option of completing an essay or annotated bibliography tied to one or more areas of a comprehensive examination list under development. Students can also use the paper to contribute to a research proposal in some fashion.

If you choose the annotated bibliography option, I am looking for:

- a short (i.e., 1000 words or less) statement of topic which discusses what you are trying to capture with this list, your main research questions, and how the list is organized.
- The actual list of articles with a maximum 750-word statement regarding each reading. I would say that you should have a minimum of 12-15 articles in your annotated bibliography for it to have sufficient “heft” to function as such.
- Last, there should be some sort of concluding discussion or statement.
- The topic is flexible, depending on your interests, but should relate to this course’s themes and questions. This does NOT have to be an actual comps list, although for some, it may be. Some may consider it merely an exercise in drawing together an annotated bibliography on a topic of interest. One obvious topic is political ecology itself or, preferably, some subset.

The due date for your term paper/grant application/critical review paper/ research proposal/ annotated bibliography depends on your status. If you are graduating in June 2025, then I need your term project document submitted by Wednesday, April 9th 2025. If you are not graduating in June, then I need your term project document submitted by Monday, May 12th 2025. If you require an extension, the [form](#) for applying is available via the SGS website. The decision to grant extensions is not formally up to me, so we have to apply in each case and provide a rationale. Normally these requests are granted, but it is important not to leave this application to the last minute.

A Word on Auditors

I have no objection in principle to individuals auditing this course. That comes with two caveats. First, if there are too many people in the course, including both registered students and auditors (and I would consider more than 15 to be at least worth discussing as an upper bound), then registered students have priority over auditors. Conversely, if we have fewer than about 5-7 registered students, I could quite likely come under pressure to cancel the course in future years, and I would ask that any of you who can possibly take the course for credit do so. In addition, I ask that all auditors, as conditions of auditing, do the following:

- (i) attend class meetings on a regular basis;
- (ii) participate in the discussions;
- (iii) do all of the readings; and
- (iv) complete the weekly email responses.

I do not expect auditors to complete the term assignment, and I understand if you miss one or two weeks of course meetings.

Required Books

The books we will read in the course are listed below. Some are old. Some are new. I have not ordered the books into a bookstore as most students obtain books by other means and there are few bookstores that will take my order. So, I am afraid you are largely on your own here. I strongly recommend that you buy the course books. You may find services provided via [Abebooks](#) useful since they deal with independent book sellers and sell new and used books. The library at the University of Toronto will also be useful in obtaining electronic copies of some books on the reading list. In cases where books may not be readily available, I have placed them on the Reserve Reading List and this is accessible (or will be) through Quercus using the Library Reading List tool.

1. Arboleda, M. (2020). *Planetary mine: Territories of extraction under late capitalism*. Verso Books.
2. Fitting, E. M. (2011). *The struggle for maize: campesinos, workers, and transgenic corn in the Mexican countryside*. Durham, NC, Duke University Press: xvii, 302 p.
3. Guthman, J. (2019) *Wilted: pathogens, chemicals, and the fragile future of the strawberry industry*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
4. Mintz, S. W. (1986). *Sweetness and power: The place of sugar in modern history*. Penguin
5. Polanyi, K. ([1944] 2001). *The great transformation: the political and economic origins of our time*. Boston: Beacon Press.
6. Thompson, E.P. (1975). *Whigs and hunters: the origin of the black act*. New York, Pantheon.
7. Saitō, K. *Marx in the anthropocene: towards the idea of degrowth communism*. 1st ed. Cambridge: University Press, 2023.
8. Steckley, J. (2025). *The Nightcrawlers: A Story of Worms, Cows, and Cash in the Underground Bait Industry*. University of California Press. (Page proofs will be provided)

I have placed Polanyi ([1944] 2001), Thompson (1975), and Arboleda (2020) on reserve with the U of T Library. I also have pdf copies of Polanyi and Thompson available on request.

Supplementary articles – these should be available for download from the library at the University of Toronto (or other university libraries). Let me know if you encounter difficulties and I can provide you with a copy. If you cannot find it in the library, you may be able to find it just by searching on the web as some journals are open access.

Burawoy, M. (2003). For a sociological Marxism: the complementary convergence of Antonio Gramsci and Karl Polanyi. *Politics & Society*, **31**(2), 193–261.

Burkett, P. (1996). Value, capital and nature: Some ecological implications of Marx's critique of political economy. *Science & Society*, 332-359.

- Carton, W., & Andersson, E. (2017). Where forest carbon meets its maker: Forestry-based offsetting as the subsumption of nature. *Society & Natural Resources*, **30**(7), 829-843.
- Carney, J. (2008) Reconsidering Sweetness and Power Through a Gendered Lens. *Food and Foodways*, **16**:2, 127-134.
- Chagnon, C. W., Durante, F., Gills, B. K., Hagolani-Albov, S. E., Hokkanen, S., Kangasluoma, S. M., ... & Vuola, M. P. (2022). From extractivism to global extractivism: The evolution of an organizing concept. *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, **49**(4), 760-792.
- Dale, G. (2008). Karl Polanyi's The Great Transformation: perverse effects, protectionism and Gemeinschaft. *Economy and Society*, **37**(4), 495–524.
- Fraser, N. (2014). Can society be commodities all the way down? Post-Polanyian reflections on capitalist crisis. *Economy and Society*, **43**(4), 541–558.
- Goldstein, J. (2013). Terra economica: waste and the production of enclosed nature. *Antipode*, **45**(2), 357–375.
- Mann, G. (2009). Should political ecology be Marxist? A case for Gramsci's historical materialism. *Geoforum*, **40**(3), 335–344.
- McMichael P. (2008). Peasants make their own history, but not just as they please. *Journal of Agrarian Change*, **8**(2–3), 205–228.
- Moore, J. W. (2014). The end of cheap nature or: How I learned to stop worrying about 'the' environment and love the crisis of capitalism. In: Suter, C., & Dunn-Chase, C. (Eds). *Structures of the world political economy and the future global conflict and cooperation*, pp 285-314.
- O'Connor, J. (1988). Capitalism, nature, socialism a theoretical introduction. *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, **1**(1), 11–38.
- Prudham, S. (2020). The social metabolism of Karl Polanyi's fictitious nature. C. Berndt, J. Peck., & N. Rantisi (Eds.), *Market/Place. Exploring Spaces of Exchange*, 171-189.
- Rey-Araújo, P. M. (2024). The “temporal rift” and the temporalities of the capitalist social metabolism. *Antipode*, **56**(6), 2412-2432.
- Thompson, E. P. (1971). The moral economy of the English crowd in the 18th Century. *Past and Present*, **50**: 76-136.
- Watts, M. (2012). A Tale of two gulfs: life, death, and dispossession along two oil frontiers. *American Quarterly*, **64**(3), 437-467.

SCHEDULE

January 9	Introduction
January 16	Polanyi ([1944] 2001), introductory materials, Part One, and Part Two: I (i.e., to the end of Chapter 10 “Political Economy and the Discovery of Society”) plus Dale (2008) and Prudham (2020). Also recommended: O’Connor (1998). A copy of my chapter is available on my website .
January 23	Polanyi ([1944] 2001), to the end plus Moore (2014). (Also recommended: Burawoy (2003)).
January 30	Thompson, Preface, Introduction, and Part 1 (Windsor), i.e. to page 115 plus Thompson (1971)
February 6	Thompson, to the end plus Goldstein (2013) and Mann (2009)
February 13	Mintz whole book plus Carney
February 20	Reading Week, no class meeting
February 27	Arboleda whole book plus Chagnon et al. (2022)
March 6	Fitting whole book plus McMichael (2008)
March 13	Guthman whole book plus Watts (2012)
March 20	Steckley to the end of Chapter 4 plus Fraser (2014)
March 27	Steckley to the end plus Carton & Andersson (2017) Note: Class meeting rescheduled due to conflict with the Association of American Geographers Annual Meeting in Detroit. Alternate date and time TBA
April 3	Saito to the end of Chapter 4 plus Burkett (1996)
April 10	Saito to the end plus Rey-Araújo (2024)