GEO425 Political Ecology: From critique to transformation*

Spring semester 2026

Core elective module

Time and place

Wednesday 10:15-13:00, room 25-H-38

Lecturers

Sierra Deutsch (SD; sierra.deutsch@geo.uzh.ch): module responsible
Nitin Bathla (NB; nitin.bathla@geo.uzh.ch)

Guests

Jinat Hossain (JH; GIUZ/UNIBE)
Annina Michel, (AM; GIUZ/PHSG)
Johanna Jacobi (JJ; ETHZ)
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Language

English

Syllabus

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* Image source: ChatGPT-4, prompt: “Can you create a picture from “Political Ecology: From critique to transformation”; created 06.11.2024

1. Course description

Despite global efforts to stop and reverse climate change, biodiversity loss, and growing social inequality, these processes only seem to be accelerating. The urgency to address these issues has now led to a global call for 'transformative change,' but what exactly does this mean and how can we make sure it is different than all the other failed solutions? To tackle these glaring contemporary issues, this course invites students to critically explore the structures of power that maintain the status quo and hinder meaningful transformation. Specifically, the course provides students with critical theoretical insights into socioecological relations, the production of knowledge about these relations, and the power dynamics inherent in governing these. It focuses on key debates and critiques within the interdisciplinary field of political ecology and on challenges arising from land and natural resource governance, access, and use. With these critiques in mind, the final sessions of the course focus on some of the current approaches to, and critical debates surrounding, societal transformation initiatives.

The course will be run as an intensive seminar: lectures and close reading of key texts will be complemented by classroom discussions and smaller exercises. The course will illustrate practical applications of theoretical concepts through case studies and offer students the option to apply course concepts in a service-learning project. The course will also guide students through the process of writing a seminar paper on a selected topic of interest related to course material.

2. Preconditions and learning outcomes

In order to be able to participate you need to have completed a Bachelor thesis. Upon completion of the course, you will

- be able to articulate key theories and debates in political ecology,
- have specialized in one topic and within it formulated arguments of environment-society relations,
- be able to relate abstract concepts to concrete problems,
- have improved your skills in presenting scientific debates in discussions, papers and talks.

The module can be repeated once.

3. Course examination and workload

Achievement	Description	Single/team	Grading	Weight
Reading reflections	written	single	pass/fail[†]	1/3
Service-learning/Research paper	written	single	1-6	2/3
TOTAL achievements				**1**

Activity	Workload [%]
Presence during the sessions	30
Reading and discussion of texts (incl. reflections)	30
Paper proposal outline	15
Service-Learning/Research paper writing	25
TOTAL activities	**100**
	6 ECTS

We expect **attendance** in all classes. If an absence is unexpected and unavoidable (e.g. in cases of illness or accident), then please email the lecturers with sufficient notice.

[†] For each of the compulsory texts a short reflection has to be written. Each reflection will be graded as "pass" or "fail". The cumulation of passes will be graded with a mark (number of passes/11*5+1 = mark).

Students who commit **plagiarism** in their seminar papers will automatically fail the course. They will not be allowed to resubmit a new seminar paper. In accordance with the University of Zurich's legal standards we reserve the right to pursue disciplinary measures against authors of plagiarism. The definition of plagiarism is based on the guidelines elaborated by the University's Lehrkommission. Universität Zürich (2007, accessed: 17 February 2021):
http://www.uzh.ch/dam/jcr:00000000-591f-4c87-ffff-ffffe62562b4/20110314_LK_Plagiarism.pdf

4. Tasks

Reading texts

This is a postgraduate level (MSc) course, so you are expected to engage in more autonomous work than in earlier levels of study (i.e. BSc/BA), and this involves reading avidly and engaging actively. You are expected to read compulsory texts for the classes during the semester (see workload above). These compulsory readings can be found on OLAT and are underlined in the bibliography list below. They will give you an entry point into the lecture topic, and importantly, they will form the basis for class discussions. To make the best out of this course, it is important that you engage deeply with these texts (making notes about your thoughts, about unclear passages…), and that you engage actively in the debates that will be fostered in small group and class discussions.

A list of further readings is also proposed for every teaching week based on the theme covered. You can find this list in a separate file on OLAT. These readings are also recommended as points of departure for the seminar paper you will write towards the end of the course.

You will also find useful advice here to help you read actively and critically on our OLwA online course (www.olwa.ch): https://www.geo.uzh.ch/microsite/olwa/olwa/en/html/unit3_kap33.html
There are political ecology handbooks that you will find useful (i.e. the Routledge Handbook of Political Ecology, and the International Handbook of Political Ecology).

The compulsory texts are listed here, and you can find them as pdf's on OLAT. A list with other texts (also on OLAT) shall give you inspiration for your paper, or if you are interested in knowing more about a certain topic.

Week 1: Introduction

- Read Syllabus
- Martin, A., 2020. Biodiversity: Crisis, conflict and justice. In Environmental Justice (pp. 132-147). Routledge. (no reading reflection required)

Week 2: Capitalism, authoritarianism, and the environment

- Deutsch, S., 2021. Populist authoritarian neoliberalism in Brazil: making sense of Bolsonaro's anti-environment agenda. Journal of Political Ecology 28(1): 823-844. https://doi.org/10.2458/jpe.2994

Week 3: First conservation attempts: Fortress conservation, neoliberal conservation and governmentality

- Büscher, B., Sullivan, S., Neves, K., Igoe, J. and Brockington, D., 2012. Towards a synthesized critique of neoliberal biodiversity conservation. Capitalism nature socialism, 23(2), pp.4-30. https://doi.org/10.1080/10455752.2012.674149

Week 4: Failed conservation and "radical" solutions: New Conservation, Half Earth, Convivial Conservation

- Collins, Y.A., Macguire-Rajpaul, V., Krauss, J.E., Asiyanbi, A., Jiménez, A., Bukhi Mabele, M. and Alexander-Owen, M., 2021. Plotting the coloniality of conservation. Journal of Political Ecology 28(1): 968-989. https://doi.org/10.2458/jpe.4683
- Schleicher, J., Zaehringer, J. G., Fastré, C., Vira, B., Visconti, P., Sandbrook, C. 2019. Protecting half of the planet could directly affect over one billion people. Nature sustainability. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41893-019-0423-y

Week 5: Nocturnal Ecologies and Environmental Justice

- Bathla, N., and Backhaus, N., 2026. Light Masterplanning at the Frontiers of Neoliberal Urbanisation: Plan Lumière and the Uneven Illumination of Zurich's Post-industrial Transformation (Forthcoming, EPD: Society and Space)

Week 6: Spaces of urban-wilderness enmeshment

- Bathla, N., 2024. Inhabiting more-than-human ecologies of Extended urbanization: Unruly leopards amidst urban-wild enmeshment in the Northern Aravalli region. Geoforum, 156, p.104123.

Week 8: Feminist political ecology: Complexities with climate vulnerabilities to adaptation in the Global South

- Elmhirst, R. 2011. Introducing new feminist political ecologies. Geoforum, 42(2), 129-132. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2011.01.006

Week 9: The ontological debate: What is "nature"?; Indigenous Peoples' stewardship perspectives

- Theriault, N., Leduc, T., Mitchell, A., Rubis, J.M. and Jacobs Gaehowako, N., 2020. Living protocols: remaking worlds in the face of extinction. Social & Cultural Geography, 21(7), pp.893-908. https://doi.org/10.1080/14649365.2019.1619821

Week 12: Environmental justice in nature conservation

- Svarstad, H. & Benjaminsen, T. A. 2020. Reading radical environmental justice through a political ecology lens. Geoforum 108: 1–11. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2019.11.007

Week 13: Agroecology/Food democracy

- Dryzek, J.S., Bächtiger, A., Chambers, S., Cohen, J., Druckman, J.N., Felicetti, A., Fishkin, J.S., Farrell, D.M., Fung, A., Gutmann, A. and Landemore, H., 2019. The crisis of democracy and the science of deliberation. Science, 363(6432), pp.1144-1146. https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aaw2694
- McGreevy, S.R., Rupprecht, C.D., Niles, D., Wiek, A., Carolan, M., Kallis, G., Kantamaturapoj, K., Mangnus, A., Jehlička, P., Taherzadeh, O. and Sahakian, M., 2022. Sustainable agrifood systems for a post-growth world. Nature sustainability, 5(12), pp.1011-1017. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41893-022-00933-5

Week 14: Transformative change

- Turnhout, E. and Lahsen, M., 2022. Transforming environmental research to avoid tragedy. *Climate and Development*, pp.1-5. https://doi.org/10.1080/17565529.2022.2062287

Reading reflections

For each of the compulsory texts (available on OLAT) you will write a short reflection (approximately 1 page). The purposes of these reflections are to give you an opportunity to process the theoretical interventions and concepts in the texts, prepare ideas for class discussions, and to compose a permanent record of your thoughts related to the course. Reflections should generally include the aspects below, but can take a variety of forms. For example, you may include extracts from the text with commentary; interweave your critiques and reflections into the summary; or add comments on personal experiences, field research, or current events related to course materials. Try to avoid mechanistic collections of extracts from the texts. Rather, use the reflections as a means for development of your own ideas and impressions. **DO NOT use any type of AI to write your submitted summary of the text.** This will be considered plagiarism.

Reading reflections must be submitted **in English and pdf format on OLAT by 10:00 on the Tuesday morning** before the session for which the text is assigned. Please **name your reading reflection files in the following format**: Last name_FirstInitial_RR(week #) (e.g. Muller_S_RR2). Grading of the reflections will be pass/fail and will be based on the quality of the reflections and to what extent they demonstrate a close reading of the text, critical thinking and imagination, and the capacity to relate the materials to class discussions and your own experiences. To pass, each submission must contain **ALL** of the following aspects:

a) Summary of the text:
   - What are the most important messages of the text?

  - What are your personal takeaways?

b) Your reflection on the text:
  - What are two things that you found surprising and why?
  - What are two things that you already knew?
  - What is something you would like to know more about or explore further?

c) AI statement
  - State whether you used ChatGPT or other Generative AI Tools to complete the assignment. If you choose to use such technologies, you must also indicate where and how you have used it (by listing the prompts you have used) and how it helped you in completing the assignment. **Using AI to generate text without proper citation will be treated as plagiarism.**

Semester Project

Option 1. Research paper

Based on the topics and texts presented in the course, you should find a topic you want to focus on in your paper. You will think about and write down 3 possible essay topics and bring these along to the session where we discuss the outlines (see program). Following the decision on a topic, an outline has to be submitted. This should contain the following information on 1-2 pages:

- Title and reflection on what the paper is about, including how it relates to political ecology
- Problem statement and research question
- How the topic relates to those covered in the course
- Aims of the paper
- Bibliography w/minimum of 10 peer-reviewed references

After receiving feedback on the outline of the paper you start working on your paper, which should be drafted as a scientific paper (i.e. as in a scientific journal, including abstract and keywords), comprised of approx. 5'000 words without bibliography, and include an AI statement as described above.

Option 2. Service-learning project/paper

As an alternative to the research paper, you may do a service-learning project/paper (see further guidelines and sample service-learning project papers on OLAT). Students who choose this option will be expected to find a local organization to volunteer with for a minimum of four hours (all at once or spread out), using mainly participant observation. You will then apply a concept or concepts from the course to your experiences with the organization as a case study to explore the concept(s). For the session where we discuss possible topics (see program), you will bring 3 possible concepts with examples of organizations from which to explore these. Following the decision on an organization and topic, an outline has to be submitted (see program). This should contain the following information on 1-2 pages:

- Title and reflection on what the paper is about, including how it relates to political ecology
- Problem statement/Service-learning organization and research question
- How the topic relates to those covered in the course
- Aims of the paper
- Bibliography w/minimum of 5 peer-reviewed references

After receiving feedback on the outline of the paper you start working on your paper, which should be drafted as a scientific paper (i.e. as in a scientific journal, including abstract and keywords), comprised of approx. 5'000 words without bibliography, and include an AI statement as described above.

5. Program

W	Date	Wednesday 10:15-13:00
Part I: Foundations of Political Ecology		
1	18.02.26	Introduction: What is (urban) political ecology in the "Anthropocene"? (SD, NB)
	Tuesdays noon	*For all sessions: read the compulsory texts and write a reflection, upload it until Tuesday noon before the respective session*
2	25.02.26	Capitalism, authoritarianism, and the environment (SD)
Part II: Political Ecology in Context		
3	04.03.26	First conservation attempts: Fortress conservation, neoliberal conservation and governmentality (SD)
4	11.03.26	Failed conservation and "radical" solutions: New Conservation, Half Earth, Convivial Conservation (SD)
5	18.03.26	Who owns the night? Nocturnal ecologies and environmental justice (NB)
6	25.03.26	Spaces of urban-wilderness enmeshment: Comparison of megafauna conservation in India and Switzerland (NB)
7	01.04.26	Brainstorming service-learning or research paper topics (SD, NB) *Bring along 3 possible topics (in written form)*
	08.04.26	*Easter break, no class*
8	15.04.26	Feminist political ecology: Complexities with climate vulnerabilities to adaptation in the Global South (JH)
Part III: Approaches to Transforming Socio-ecological Relations		
9	22.04.26	The ontological debate: What is "nature"? (SD) Indigenous Peoples' stewardship perspectives (SD, NB)
10	29.04.26	Field Excursion: Walking through transformations in Zurich Balgrist (FG) (10:45 – 12:15)
	29.04.26	*Submit paper outline on OLAT*
11	06.05.26	Outline Feedback
12	13.05.26	Environmental justice in nature conservation (AM)
13	20.05.26	Agroecology/Food democracy (JJ)
14	27.05.26	Transformative change (SD) Evaluation
	10.06.26 midnight	*Submit paper on OLAT*