Universität Zürich[UZH]

Department of Geography

GEO425 Political Ecology: From critique to transformation



Spring semester 2027

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 Coordinator**
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Guests

Flurina Gradin (FG; ETHZ/HSG)
Xavier Balaguer Rasillo (XR; GIUZ)
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Language

English

Syllabus

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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 explore course concepts through a creative output or 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, talks, and/or other media.

The module can be repeated once.

3. Course examination and workload

Achievement	Format	Grading	Weight [%]
Reading reflections	written	pass/fail[1]	30
Semester project			
Proposal	written	1-6	15
Creative output OR service-learning component	open format/ service + written description	1-6	20
Final Paper	written	1-6	35
TOTAL achievements			**100**

Activity	Workload [%]
Presence during the sessions*	30
Reading and discussion of texts (incl. reflections)	30
Semester project	40
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.

[1] 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/8*5+1 = mark).

4. Plagiarism and use of AI

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: https://www.ius.uzh.ch/dam/jcr:00000000-100f-6f7c-ffff-ffff869554ef/LK_Plagiarism.pdf

All submitted tasks must contain an AI statement as follows: State whether you used Generative AI Tools and which one(s) 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. Any use of AI in the course must adhere to the GIUZ guidelines: https://www.geo.uzh.ch/dam/jcr:d974607c-fff7-41fd-99e6-00f57fcfebec/AI_Guidelines_v1_2025.pdf.

****Hallucinated references or using AI to generate text without proper citation will be treated as plagiarism****

5. 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 listed 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 through the reading reflections, and that you engage actively in the debates that will be fostered in small group and class discussions.
You can find additional advice for reading actively and critically on this OLwA online course (www.olwa.ch): https://www.geo.uzh.ch/microsite/olwa/olwa/en/html/unit3_kap33.html

The **compulsory texts** are listed below, and you can find them as pdf's on OLAT. We sometimes offer suggestions for additional reading here and you can also find a list of further suggested texts on OLAT. These texts allow for a deeper dive into certain topics and may give you inspiration for your paper. Additionally, political ecology handbooks that you may find useful include the Routledge Handbook of Political Ecology and the International Handbook of Political Ecology.

Week 1: Introduction

- Read Syllabus
- Martin, A., 2020. Biodiversity: Crisis, conflict and justice. In Environmental Justice (pp. 132-147). Routledge. (no reading reflection required)
- Suggested additional reading: Wickberg, A., 2026. The great AI acceleration: Problems of scale in artificial intelligence and the Anthropocene. Environmental History, 31(3), pp. 592-603.

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.

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.

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.
- 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.

Week 5: Nocturnal Ecologies and Environmental Justice

- Bathla, N., Heller, S. and Backhaus, N., 2026. Nocturnal rewilding on a Luminous Planet: The politics of urban illumination as infrastructure ecology. *Urban Political Ecology*, p.30497515261483525.

Week 7: Spaces of urban-wilderness enmeshment

- Ojalammi, S. and Blomley, N., 2015. Dancing with wolves: Making legal territory in a more-than-human world. *Geoforum*, *62*, pp.51-60.

Week 8: 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.

Week 11: Alternative economies

- TBD

Week 12: Transformative change

- Deutsch, S., Michel, A.H. Backhaus, N., Billeter, A., Gutbrodt, B., Keller, R., Liechti, K., McCarty, M., Nelson, R.C., Qualls, C.R. ("Saa Taan Eesh"), Stauffer, C. and Urquhart, G.B. In press. Re-visibilizing rather than "reconnecting": Holding indigenous, local, and academic knowledge systems in parity to co-develop a generalized guide for rethinking human-natures. *Global Sustainability*.
- Suggested additional reading: Turnhout, E. and Lahsen, M., 2022. Transforming environmental research to avoid tragedy. *Climate and Development*, pp.1-5.

Reading reflections

For each of the compulsory texts (available on OLAT) you will write a short reflection (350-400 words). 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 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.

Reading reflections must be submitted in English and **.doc(x) format** on OLAT by **10:00 Tuesday morning** before the session for which the text is assigned.

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.

To pass, each submission must contain **ALL four** of the following aspects:

1) The most important messages of the text and your personal takeaways.
2) Your reflection on the text. This could be structured around, for example:
   - What did you find most surprising and why?
   - What did you already know?
   - How does the text connect to your own experiences and prior knowledge?
   - How does the text relate to other course materials and class discussions?
3) What is something you would like to know more about or explore further?
4) AI statement (see guidelines above)

Semester Project

You will choose one or more topics and texts presented in the course as a basis for the semester project, with graded parts consisting of a proposal/outline, an exploration component, and a final paper. For the exploration component, you may choose from two options:

Option 1. Creative Output
You will choose a current news story, local policy, or organization in Zürich/Switzerland to explore through a creative project (e.g. podcast, alternative newscast, comic strip, film, art installation, skit, etc.; see further guidelines on OLAT) and analyze based on your chosen topic(s).

Option 2. Service-Learning
You will choose a local organization to be your service-learning partner (see further guidelines and sample service-learning project papers on OLAT). Students who choose this option will be expected to volunteer with their partner organization for a minimum of four hours (all at once or spread out), using mainly participant observation. You will then use your experiences with the organization as a case study to explore your chosen topic(s) in your final paper.

Process

The course program is organized to assist you through the process of developing and finalizing your semester project through the following milestones:

1. Brainstorming. Prepare the following for the brainstorming session:

All	Option 1. Creative Output	Option 2. Service-Learning
3 possible topics +… AND	case studies (current news story, local policy, organization)	possible service-learning partners (i.e. local organizations)
Initial ideas for…	your creative output	the service-learning component

2. Proposal. Based on the outcome of the brainstorming session, you will submit an outline/proposal for your semester project with the following required components:

- Title
- Reflection on what the paper is about, including how it relates to political ecology
- Problem statement and research question
- Which topic(s) from the course you will engage
- Case study/Service-learning partner and justification
- Plan for creative output/service (see guidelines document)
- Bibliography w/minimum of 8 peer-reviewed references

After receiving feedback in the feedback session, you will start working on your creative output/service and paper.

3. Creative output/Service description showcase. In the final two weeks of the course, you will share your creative output/service description with the class. The format of your part of the showcase will reflect the format of your output and should not require additional preparation beyond the output itself. The showcase itself will not be graded but should rather be seen as an opportunity to share and learn from each other in a relaxed environment.

4. Research paper. The research paper should be comprised of approximately 3,000 words *without bibliography* and be drafted as a scientific paper (i.e. as in a scientific journal, including abstract and keywords), and must include the following:

- A brief reflection on your project/service, including:
  - Why you chose the particular format (creative output) or service (service-learning)
  - What you found most difficult about the project
  - What you would have done differently
  - How you envision the project impacting your future studies/career
- An AI statement as described above

6. Program

W	Date	Wednesday 10:15-13:00
Part I: Foundations of Political Ecology		
1	24.02.27	Introduction: What is (urban) political ecology? AI from a political ecology lens (SD, NB)
	Tuesdays 10:00AM	*For all sessions: read the compulsory texts and write a reflection, upload it until Tuesday 10:00AM before the respective session*
2	03.03.27	Capitalism, authoritarianism, and the environment (SD)
Part II: Political Ecology in Context		
3	10.03.27	First conservation attempts: Fortress conservation, neoliberal conservation and governmentality (SD)
4	17.03.27	Failed conservation and "radical" solutions: New Conservation, Half Earth, Convivial Conservation (SD)
5	24.03.27	Who owns the night? Nocturnal rewilding and environmental justice (NB)
	31.03.27	*Easter break, no class*
6	07.04.27	Brainstorming semester projects (SD, NB) *See preparation instructions above*
7	14.04.27	Spaces of urban-wilderness enmeshment: Comparison of megafauna conservation in India and Switzerland (NB)
8	21.04.27	The ontological debate: What is "nature"? (SD) Values of nature/relational values (RZ) Indigenous Peoples' stewardship perspectives (SD, NB)
	22.04.27 midnight	*Submit project proposal/ Research paper outline on OLAT*
Part III: Approaches to Transforming Socio-ecological Relations		
9	28.04.27	In-person project proposal/outline feedback
10	05.05.27	Field Excursion: Walking through transformations in Zurich Balgrist (FG) (10:45 – 12:15)
11	12.05.27	Alternative economies (XB)
12	19.05.27	Transformative change (SD) Evaluation
	25.05.27 midnight	*Submit creative output/service description (see guidelines)*
13	26.05.27	Project showcase day 1
14	02.06.27	Project showcase day 2
	16.06.27 midnight	*Submit paper on OLAT*