

HIST 1970G

The Recent History of Life on Earth: The Anthropocene

Fall 2014
Brown University
Thurs 4:00-6:30
Barus & Holley 141

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Office hours: M 1:00-2:00
W 10:00-11:00
and by appt.

This seminar will explore the valence of the “Anthropocene” as an historical era. The Anthropocene has been proposed as a new human-driven geologic age that began in the late eighteenth century with the increased exploitation of fossil fuels. As theorized, it is defined by escalating carbon dioxide levels and consequent climate change. It is predicted that climate change will cause great threats to ecosystem and social sustainability, and even extinction. Since then, theorists in the Cultural Studies have taken the concept as inspiration for a post-humanist critique.

Thinking historically about the Anthropocene is a different project than establishing its validity as a geologic age or using it in cultural theory. Historians must be informed by both these bodies of thought, but are constrained by our method of research (qualitative and empirical), our method of analysis (narrative), and the difficulties of writing histories of the present. Many processes and events with lasting repercussions are yet unrecognized and we do not yet have the perspective to see if we’ve crossed watersheds demarcating a new epoch.

The Anthropocene may or may not be a valid concept for history or geology. Different parties may define it in contradictory ways. You may leave this class embracing, rejecting, or being agnostic to the idea. Your final position is less important than the process of exploration.

Environmental history can be many things. The emphasis on this class will be on the impact of environmental change on human life, and to a lesser extent, on that of other species. Establishing the causes and trajectories of environmental change, including climate change, itself is not our prime concern. Rather, we will be concerned with the implications of generalized environmental change for people. Because impact will be greatest among those with fewer entitlements (as Sen described the cushions against food shortage), we will concentrate on poor people, by region and class. While the concept of the Anthropocene deals with humans as one unit, our effort will be to differentiate between their experiences.

Historians have proven adept at analyzing twentieth-century environmental changes through narrative. The body of literature about multi-faceted human relations with the environment over the past 150 years is rich. By engaging with this literature, we will learn about the economic, political, and social dynamics that structured the impact of environmental change. We will draw on these models in our work on contemporary history.

For individual research projects, we take the opportunity of writing first drafts of contemporary environmental history. Students will splice narratives of cultural, economic, political, and social history with readings of environmental data. They will contribute

provisional histories of the ways that the changing environment is felt in people's experiences as well as in intra-human and inter-species relationships.

WRIT DESIGNATION

This seminar is listed as a WRIT writing intensive course. The short writing assignments are designed with several goals: to give you practice in analysis of historians' writing, to enhance participation in discussion, and to structure your work on the final project.

GOALS

This seminar requires interdisciplinary reading and research, and so you will develop a sense of what historians take from and bring to conversations with practitioners of other disciplines. You will also practice the craft of history, including the reading of primary sources and works by historians, the identification of pertinent primary and secondary sources, analytical writing, and discussion. You will produce a research project according to the conventions of the historical discipline that includes close attention to primary sources and narrative analysis of the dynamics of change in broader contexts. By the end of the course, you will develop a critical position on the concept of the Anthropocene as an age of human history.

ASSIGNED CONTENT

Available for purchase in the Bookstore:

McNeill, John. *Something New Under the Sun: An Environmental History of the Twentieth-Century World*. New York: Norton, 2000.

Ruddiman, William. *Plows, Plagues, and Petroleum: How Humans Took Control of Climate*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005.

Davis, Mike. *Late Victorian Holocausts: El Niño Famines and the Making of the Third World*. New York: Verso, 2000.

Journal articles available in electronic format and Ebooks are not linked to the syllabus or website. Please use the bibliographic information provided to look them on on the Brown library website.

REQUIREMENTS

Book review: You will write a review of one assigned book of your choice, either William Ruddiman's *Plows, Plagues, and Petroleum* or Mike Davis's *Late Victorian Holocausts: El Niño Famines and the Making of the Third World*. The review should be 1200-1500 words long. For an historian's reflection on how to write a book review, see:

Bruce Mazlish, "The Art of Reviewing," *Perspectives*, February 2001.

<http://www.historians.org/perspectives/issues/2001/0102/0102vie1.cfm>

A rubric for this assignment is posted on Canvas. **Due 10/12.**

Vignettes of the Unfolding Anthropocene: This is a primary source project: You must seek out and edit a set of primary sources on recent and unfolding environmental change. The set may include data from the geospatial, physical or biological sciences to document the process and extent of change. It may include poetry or memoir. A descriptive narrative, interview, or reflection that conveys the experience of environmental change and, if possible, its meaning is required. You may submit it as an HTML, a Word document, or a PDF. For a sample set of Vignettes, and more information about this assignment, check Canvas. **Due 11/2.**

You will meet with me either shortly before or shortly after your Vignettes are due to discuss them and your unfolding research project.

Annotated bibliography: This bibliography of 15 items on a topic of unfolding environmental change should identify research that will identify secondary materials, from history and other disciplines that will allow you to write an analysis of your Vignettes. **Due 11/9.**

Research Paper: Your research project will be to conduct an historical analysis of the case set out in your Vignettes. The resulting paper, of 3500-5000 words, should be well grounded in secondary research and should follow the models of historical writing featured in this seminar. You may submit it as an HTML, a Word document, or a PDF. Your Vignettes should be accessible through appendices or hyperlinks. Your paper will be posted on Canvas and your fellow students may draw on it for their final exam. **Due 12/4.**

Research Showcase: You will summarize your “Corner of the Anthropocene” project in a verbal presentation during the week of the semester. If necessary, we will schedule an additional meeting to accommodate the entire class.

Final Exam: Your final exam assignment is to write an essay based on course readings and one or two of your classmates’ research projects. It is due on Canvas at the normally scheduled exam period. **Due 12/14.**

All written assignments will be submitted on Canvas.

Regular attendance is required. If you miss a meeting for any reason, illness and religious observance included, you must inform me before the meeting and arrange a make-up discussion with me of the reading assignment.

Please bring copies of all assignments to the class meeting. We will be referring to them in discussion. You may read electronic formats, but it is unrealistic to attempt to do justice to extensive readings on an I-Phone or similarly small device. You may use a tablet or laptop in class to consult readings or take notes. Your complete mental and social presence in the seminar is imperative. Do not use Google during discussion unless the class agrees on the need for additional information. Consulting email, social media, or phone messages during class is strictly forbidden.

ASSESSMENT

Book review	20%	Vignettes	20%
Annotated Bibliography	5%	Research Paper	35%
Final	20%		

Participation in discussion is taken into effect at the end; good participation will boost borderline grades. A lack of attendance or participation will detract, perhaps significantly, from grades earned through written assignments.

THE ACADEMIC CODE

Participation and evaluation in this course is subject to the Brown University academic code: <http://www.brown.edu/academics/college/degree/policies/academic-code> -

Few professional experiences make your professors happier than when students come to office hours to discuss ideas. Please stop by. All you need is one intriguing question and we can spin it into a nice interaction, into deeper learning.

RECOMMENDATIONS ABOUT BACKGROUND

This course has no prerequisites. Students from all fields of study can bring something useful to this seminar. Since the matrix of our writing and discussion are defined by the discipline of history, students lacking experience are encouraged to read introductions to the field. Your own research project is organized around making distinctions between primary and secondary sources. If you need a primer on those categories, see

Mary Lynn Rampolla, *A Pocket Guide to Writing in History* (Boston: Bedford/ St. Martin's).

(I have the 7th edition (2012), which dedicates chapter 2 to primary and secondary sources, but any edition of this book is fine.)

For further discussion of the discipline, you can choose from many reflective descriptions of the field. There are many, but I have listed a range below. Should there be interest, we can arrange an extra optional meeting to discuss one or more of the following:

- John Lewis Gaddis, *Landscape of History* (2002). This book is useful for this course because Gaddis believes in the affinities between history and the natural sciences. Along the way he nearly caricatures social science, but one can bracket that tendency. For Gaddis, doing history is a matter of recognizing patterns and narrating them. He does not attend to the relationship between power and knowledge.
- Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History*. (1989). This book is a reflection of what it at stake in telling stories about the past, from the point of view of the culture wars of 1980s America. I value its descriptions of practical realism, of qualified objectivity, and of workable truths.
- Keith Jenkins, *Rethinking History* (1991/2003). Here is a radical position on the constructedness of history and resulting multiplicities of analysis. However, Jenkins thinks the enterprise still has value and invites everyone to write history.

COURSE SCHEDULE

Week 1 9/4 Introduction and Theory

Read: Steffen, W., Crutzen, J., & McNeill, J. R. "The Anthropocene: are Humans Now Overwhelming the Great Forces of Nature?" *Ambio* 36 (2007): 614-621.

This meeting will begin with introductions. We will then break to read this article and reconvene after 45 minutes for discussion.

Part I: Introductory Analyses of the Human Impact on Climate

Week 2 9/11 Recent Climate Change Becomes a Popular Issue

Professor Emeritus Thompson Webb III will be our guest in discussion.

View: *An Inconvenient Truth*. Directed by Davis Guggenheim. DVD. Los Angeles: Paramount, 2006.

Read: Kolbert, Elizabeth. *Field Notes from a Catastrophe*. New York: Bloomsbury USA, 2006.

Justin Gillis, "[U.N. Draft Report Lists Unchecked Emissions; Risks](#)" *The New York Times* August 26, 2014.

Purchase of Kolbert's book is optional. The text was originally published as three-part article "The Climate of Man"(4/25/2005, 5/2/2005, 5/9/2005) accessible through Brown's subscription to the New Yorker.

Week 3 9/18 A Deep History of Human Impact

Read: Ruddiman, William. *Plows, Plagues, and Petroleum: How Humans Took Control of Climate*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005.

Find and read a review of the book. Prepare to summarize it in discussion.

Part II: Historians on the Late Holocene

Week 4 9/25 Histories of Industrial Revolutions

Read: McNeill, John. *Something New Under the Sun: An Environmental History of the Twentieth-Century World*. New York: Norton, 2000: xxi-xvi, 3-17.

Brooke, John L. *Climate Change and the Course of Global History: a Rough History* (2014). New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014: 467-528.

Class will meet on Rosh Hashanah. Students who observe this holiday will be excused.

Week 5 10/2 Capital, Empire, and Climate

Read: Davis, Mike. *Late Victorian Holocausts: El Niño Famines and the Making of the Third World*. New York: Verso, 2000

Find and read a review of the book. Prepare to summarize it in discussion.

Week 6 10/9 Lithosphere

Read: McNeill, John. *Something New Under the Sun*, 21-49.

Showers, Kate. *Imperial Gullies: Soil Erosion and Conservation in Lesotho*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2005: 135-234.

Walker, Brett. *Toxic Archipelago: A History of Industrial Disease in Japan*. Seattle: University of Washington, 2011: 108-136.

10/12 Due: Written review of Ruddiman or Davis

Week 7 10/16 Atmosphere

Read: McNeill, John. *Something New Under the Sun*, 50-117.

Thorsheim, Peter. "Death Comes from the Air." Chapter 10 in *Inventing Pollution: Coal, Smoke, and Culture in Britain since 1800*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2006: 159-172.

View: <http://www.carbonmap.org>

Week 8 10/23 Hydrosphere

Read: McNeill, John. *Something New Under the Sun*, 118-191.

Worster, Donald. "Empire: Water and the American West," in *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity, and the Growth of the American West*. New York: Pantheon, 1985: 257-326.

Alatout, Samer. Hydro-Imaginaires and the Construction of the Political Geography of the Jordan River: The Johnston Mission 1953-56," *Environmental Imaginaries of the Middle East and North Africa* Diana Davis and Edmund Burke III, editors. Athens: Ohio University Press 2011: 218-245.

Week 9 10/30 Biosphere

- Read:** McNeill, John. *Something New Under the Sun*, 192-266.
- Langston, Nancy. "Gender Transformed; Endocrine Disruptors in the Environment." Chapter 7 in *Seeing Nature through Gender* Virginia J. Scharff, editor. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2013:129-166.
- Walker, Brett. *Toxic Archipelago*, 137-175.
- Melillo, Edward. "The First Green Revolution: Debt Peonage and the Making of the Nitrogen Fertilization" *American Historical Review* (2012): 1028-1060.

Due 11/2: Vignettes of the Unfolding Anthropocene

Part III: A Sampling of the Anthropocene in the Humanities and Social Sciences

Week 10 11/6 Narrative Analysis

- Read:** McNeill, John. *Something New Under the Sun*, 269-356.
- Brooke, John, *Climate Change and the Course of Global History: a Rough History*, 529-579.
- Due 11/9:** Annotated Bibliography

Week 11 11/13 Theories of the Anthropocene beyond Humans

- Read:** Chakrabarty, Dipesh. "The Climate of History: Four Theses" *Critical Inquiry* 35(2009): 197-222. DOI: 10.1086/596640.
- Malm, Andreas and Hornborg, Alf. "The geology of mankind? A critique of the Anthropocene narrative," *The Anthropocene Review* 1(2014: 62-69. DOI: 10.1177/2053019613516291
- Van Dooren, Thom. "Fledgling Albatrosses: Flight Ways and Wasted Generations," *Flight Ways: Life and Loss at the Edge of Extinction*. New York: Columbia, 2014. 21-44.
- Optional:** Haraway, Donna. "Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Chthulucene: Staying with the Trouble," (Video) <http://vimeo.com/97663518>

Week 12 11/20 Theories of the Anthropocene between Humans

- Read:** Moore, Jason. "The Capitalocene, Part I: On the Nature and Origins of Our Ecological Crisis," pp. 1-5.
http://www.jasonwmoore.com/uploads/The_Capitalocene__Part_I__June_2014.pdf
- Ribot. Jessie. "Cause and response: vulnerability and climate in the Anthropocene" *Journal of Peasant Studies* (2014): forthcoming, online only. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2014.894911>
- Rudiak-Gould, Peter. "Climate Change and Accusation: Global Warming and Local Blame in Small Island State," *Current Anthropology* (2014): forthcoming, online only.

Week 13 11/ 27 THANKSGIVING BREAK

Week 14 12/4 Research Showcase

Due: Research Project

Week 14 12/14 Reading Period

Due: **12/14** Final Essay due at **2:00pm**