Theorizing environmental injustice
ecologies of racial capitalism

Instructor: Arun Saldanha (saldanha@umn.edu). Meets Wednesdays, 2.20 - 5 pm, Bleg 255.
Workload: 50-150pp. reading/week; one or two 2-page reading reports; 20-page research paper

Aims

As climate change becomes central to the political agenda, the question arises what critical geography could contribute to theorizing social justice in its environmental dimension. This seminar will explore the tensions between the various approaches to conceiving such justice. Rather than read geographers as such, we will make critical-geographical sense of four books and a few additional texts. It will become clear that in capitalism’s assemblages of global warming, segregation, resources, and food distribution, the legacies of white settlement, slavery, empire, and Eurocentrism are still tangible.

Alfred Crosby’s classic Ecological Imperialism argues that the history of Europe’s global domination was and is at its basis a biological process, raising the specter of environmental determinism and its racist presumptions, but also pointing at important themes under-researched in the study of
colonialism. As criticisms of Crosby show, if social relations are left out of the picture many of the causes of environmental injustice will be obscured. One of the key proponents of ecosocialism, Joel Kovel demonstrates in *The Enemy of Nature* how Marxist theory provides a rigorous framework for understanding the planetary ecological crisis as intrinsically following from the destructive propensities of money under capitalism. Excerpts from Vandana Shiva’s *Earth Democracy* showcase the feminist contribution to theorizing global environmental justice.

Rob Nixon in *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* will allow us to explore specific themes in activism. It can be read as extending the critique of the racializing environmental effects of capitalism in the Global South and the US. A noteworthy statement in political theory from a liberal perspective is given in Stephen Gardiner’s *A Perfect Moral Storm*. Moral philosophy, as inaugurated by Immanuel Kant and recast through rational choice theory by John Rawls, is implicitly dominant in both activism and policy circles. Moral philosophy is at odds with Marxism, but as we will see through excerpts from Kristin Shrader-Frechette’s *Environmental Justice*, they both aim at critiquing and eliminating economic inequality, racism, and vulnerability to disaster. Exploring the political and stylistic tensions between the liberal and Marxist views on ecological crisis will go a considerable way in gaining conceptual resources to address what could be done to avert future environmental injustice.

**Required books**

The four course books can be bought at reduced prices online. Any edition will do.


Four further books are optional:
Meeting format

Each student responds to the readings with about three paragraphs by Monday night on the Moodle page for the course, which summarizes the most innovative arguments and formulates 2-4 questions you would like to discuss. Students take turns moderating the class discussion in pairs, for which they meet beforehand to discuss the format and questions. At our Wednesday meeting they take 10-15 minutes introducing not just the texts but also the authors: find out what their intellectual and institutional subject position is; make links to their other texts, authors, or courses; show us something on YouTube, bring old National Geographic magazines or art books, play a song giving a better idea of the topics or author. End with summarizing and framing the questions circulated. For the ensuing class discussion, which you moderate together with Arun, you’re encouraged to use different seminar formats: close reading, interactive exercises, relevant newspaper clippings, film excerpts, etc., anything that allows for the questions to be refined. At the end of class Arun spends 10-15 minutes introducing the themes of the coming reading(s). The ultimate aim of all discussions is to clarify the material so that all participants will be able to use it for their own ongoing conceptualizations of globalization, environment problems, and social justice.

Research paper

The research paper (20-25 pages at 1.5 spacing) is largely theoretical. It will expand on the readings and discussions insofar as it pertains to your own research. Roughly, you will devote a third of the paper to developing your specific theorization of environmental justice, building on some of the cases and concepts dealt with in the seminar, and two thirds on applying this framework to your particular area of study, building on wider literatures. Even if a project seems very little to do with climate change,
capitalism, or racism, the seminar demonstrates it is precisely then that these themes should be seriously considered! The paper is due in hard copy at the Geography office (414 Social Sciences) on **Sunday, December 22, 2013**, at the very latest, and simultaneously by email to saldanha@umn.edu.

**Reading schedule**

**I EUROPE AND THE BIOSPHERE**

**wk 1. September 5**
Introductions

**wk 2. September 11. From Pangaea to the Canaries**
*Crosy* *Ecological Imperialism*, chapters 1-6

**wk 3. September 18. What is a Neo-Europe?**
*Crosy* *Ecological Imperialism*, chapters 7-12

**wk 4. September 25. Capital, land, labor**
*Kovel* *Enemy of Nature*, part I

**wk 5. October 2 Is capitalism unnatural?**
*Kovel* *Enemy of Nature*, part II

**wk 6. October 9. Ecosocialismm ecofeminism, and their limits**
*Kovel* *Enemy of Nature*, part III
*Shiva* *Earth Democracy*, introduction and chapter 2

**II JUSTICE IN THE FACE OF EXTINCTION**

**wk 7. October 16. The ultimate challenge for moral philosophy: what is justice?**
*John Rawls* *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1971), chapters 1 and 2
*Gardiner* *Perfect Moral Storm*, introduction and parts A and B
wk 8. October 23. The ultimate challenge for moral philosophy: futures and calculation
Gardiner Perfect Moral Storm, parts C and D

wk 9. October 30. The ultimate challenge for moral philosophy: what is evil?
Gardiner Perfect Moral Storm, parts E and F and appendices

Shrader-Frechette Environmental Justice, introduction and chapter 6

III ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE BEYOND MORAL PHILOSOPHY

Nixon Slow Violence, introduction and chapters 1, 2, 5 and 7

Nixon Slow Violence, chapters 3, 4, 6, 8 and epilogue

wk 13. December 4. Environmentalism and Romanticism
Morton ‘Beautiful soul syndrome’, video links in Moodle (3 parts)
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nQgQiqG8KQ8
Morton Ecological Thought, introduction and chapter 2

wk 14. December 11. Communism against ecology?
Žižek ‘Ecological destruction and capitalism’ and excerpt from ‘Examined life’, video links in Moodle
http://kasamapproject.org/environment/275-7zizek-ecological-destruction-and-capitalism
http://www.jonathanwaring.net/2010/10/03/summing-up-zizek-and-environmentalism
Žižek Living in the End Times, introduction and interlude 4; afterword optional
Žižek ‘Joe Public v the volcano’ New Statesman
http://www.newstatesman.com/environment/2010/05/essay-nature-catastrophe
Optional: Saldanha ‘Some principles of geocommunism’, Geocritique
http://www.geocritique.org/arun-saldanha-some-principles-of-geocommunism
Some useful literature


Rosi Braidotti *The Posthuman* (Cambridge, Polity, 2013)

Donald A. Brown *Climate Change Ethics: Navigating the Perfect Moral Storm* (Abingdon, Routledge, 2013)


James Garvey *The Ethics of Climate Change: Right and Wrong in a Warming World* (London, Continuum, 2008)


Ryan Holifield, Michael Porter and Gordon Walker, eds. *Spaces of Environmental Justice* (Chichester, Wiley, 2007)


Winona LaDuke, *The Winona LaDuke Reader* (Minneapolis, Voyageur, 2002)


--------- *Biogea* trans. Randolph Burks (Minneapolis, Univocal, 2012)


Steve Vanderheiden *Atmospheric Justice: A Political Theory of Climate Change* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2010)


Chris Williams *Ecology and Socialism: Solutions to Capitalist Ecological Crisis* (Chicago, Haymarket, 2010)