

ENVS/IR 331 GLOBAL ECOLOGICAL CRISIS Fall 2009
Instructor: Glenn Fieldman, Assistant Prof. ENVS
Office HSS 330, 405-2431 Hours: MW 11:30-12, M 2-3, T 10-12
glenn@sfsu.edu

SYLLABUS

This course is about the political and economic forces and structures that shape our relations with the non-human world on which we depend. The recently released Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (a summary of which you are asked to read) states unequivocally that the global ecosystem to which we belong is in deep trouble; our purposes this semester are to explore whether and how the global political/economic system in which we live is responsible, and to examine its potential for addressing the crisis.

Since the dawn of the agricultural revolution between 5 and 10 thousand years ago, humans have affected nature profoundly and often adversely. Until recently, however, these impacts were primarily local and limited. Now, they are global; as more of the earth is exploited for human activity local impacts are universalized; nearly every part of the earth is affected. As the scale of human activity has increased, the chemistry of the whole atmosphere and the oceans has been changed.

This is not a science course, but it is important that you have some background knowledge of environmental problems and their relationship to the global political economy. The text *Limits to Growth, the 30 year update*, explains how economic and population growth are characteristic of our political/economic system and have resulted in problems like climate change. We will spend the first 2 weeks or so discussing what is now agreed to be a global crisis, with this book as the main text during that time. Please read it (and all the assigned readings) promptly so that you will be able to participate effectively in class discussions. (To get additional background on the state of the planet, the annual *State of the World* volumes, issued by Worldwatch, are useful. The SFSU library has them all; take a look at 2005, 2006, 2007, or 2008).

Beginning around the third week, we will begin to tackle the main subject matter of this course, which is the global political economy of the environment. Although we refer to “the *global* political economy” (GPE) in which nearly everyone participates as wage worker or owner, producer and consumer, one of the primary characteristics of the present system is that is deeply and profoundly *unequal*, whether it is incomes, consumption levels, vulnerability to crisis, or power to influence decisions that is being measured. The environmental crisis will affect everyone sooner or later, but people’s vulnerability to it is unequal, as is their responsibility for creating it. We will show how the GPE was shaped, first by colonialism, and more recently by “First World” developed nations, who have been the dominant players in shaping global rules and institutions (e.g., the World Bank and International Monetary Fund), and explain how the unequal power and wealth in the GPE have in turn generated what is not only an environmental crisis, but a *social crisis*.

Whether the GPE in its present form can be made “sustainable” or not (and by the way, what does “sustainability” mean?) is contested. Some believe that it can, given enough time and the right technologies—or that minor modifications can do the job. Scientists, reporting their findings on the unfolding environmental crisis, argue however that what we *don’t* have is time. Arguably, the *increasing* numbers of people on our planet who lack adequate calories are probably not willing to wait either. Moreover, critics point out that although the world is much richer now than it was decades ago, the number of desperately poor people has not gone down very much if at all, and the deterioration of crucial ecosystems is progressing at an increasing rate. Global environmental agreements have done little to stem the damage. Accordingly, we will spend considerable time in this class on the so-called “social green” viewpoint, which is that what we need is not just environmental agreements, but reforms to the political economy itself, and substantial ones. The texts by Andrew Simms and Susan George, although different in the way they approach the subject matter, are both exemplars of social green thought—a main characteristic of which is its emphasis on global inequality, which is manifested not just as a divide between rich and poor *nations* but a divide between *people* (although it is true that the majority of poor people reside within poor nations). It is impossible to understand the deadlock in international negotiations to address environmental problems such as climate change without recognizing this division, so

considerable time both in class and in reading will be spent on it.

Each year the nations of the world meet at a conference in November or December in an attempt to craft an agreement that will prevent dangerous climate change (increasingly, the words “climate catastrophe” are heard). Since this year’s meeting will take place toward the end of our semester, what transpires at the negotiations will be a useful “real-world” backdrop to our concluding discussions about protecting the environment in a deeply divided world. You are asked to subscribe to the online magazine *Earth Equity News*, (available free of charge from www.climatecrisiscoalition.org). This service covers a number of environmental issues, but climate change and climate politics, both national and global, are front and center, and there will be in-depth coverage of the international climate meeting in Copenhagen. You should read *at least* the article summaries 3 x per week.

A note on the budget situation:

The state legislature and governor have balanced California’s state budget by cutting about \$26 *billion* from state spending. All CSU campuses have been severely affected, with the CSU budget reduced by over half a billion dollars. All faculty and staff are required to take furlough days (days when we do not work); we are not paid for those furlough days, which amounts to a pay reduction of about 10%. The SFSU administration has designated four of those furlough days during the fall semester; one of those days (Monday, October 26) will affect this class; the campus will be closed. In addition, ENVIS faculty are taking furlough days during the week of October 12. This class will not meet that week, for a total of three class meetings that will not be held. Additional faculty furlough days (a total of 9 for each faculty member over the semester) will be taken on days when this class does not meet, although be aware that at least one of my remaining furlough days will affect Tuesday office hours. You’ll be notified by e-mail about this. The remaining furlough days will not affect you directly, although (if they are on a Friday or some other day when I’m not in class) I will not be grading papers that day, so your assignments may not be returned as promptly as you would like. Faculty have been asked to sign an agreement that we will not work on furlough days. I hate this whole situation and so do other faculty members with whom I have spoken. I am very upset about losing precious class time. The world and its problems are becoming increasingly complex, a 15-week semester seems too short as it is. However, CSU faculty have long been overworked and overpaid. We have already given up a raise that our union had negotiated; now our salaries are cut as well, even as our workload has gone up *again*: advising desperate students who can’t get courses, having additional dept. meetings to cope with course cancellations that affect curriculum, etc. etc.

What the furloughs mean for you: While there will be less classroom time than usual this semester, this does not mean that the amount of material you need to learn is any less than it would otherwise be. It is up to your professors to find ways to ensure that your courses and eventually, your degrees are as meaningful as they always have been. So you will need to take more responsibility for learning outside the classroom. I have assigned out-of-class film viewing to compensate for some of the missing class time; you may also receive some additional reading assignments. You are expected to use the time you do not spend in class working on your papers, doing your reading and watching the assigned films, which you may do online. All assigned texts and films will be the basis for exam questions, even if we do not discuss them in class.

What is expected from students:

- 1) **Midterm and final essay examinations (60% of grade)** Note: You will not be allowed to make up missed exams unless you can document a **dire emergency**, e.g., a death in your immediate family.
- 2) **A 6-page (minimum; not more than 8 pages) single-spaced paper on a global or international environmental problem and its causes (in many cases there are arguments about causes: are they local or located within the GPE; is it a problem that technology can solve or is the solution political/economic) and/or an evaluation of its solution or proposed solution; 40% of grade—10% abstract, 30% final version). Your paper should include at least 3 academic sources (journal articles and/or books. The SFSU library offers access to many journals online; you can locate them either through the library’s databases or by using Google Scholar).** Because this class concerns global political economy and international relations, your paper should focus on an international issue (for ex., the World Bank’s environmental policy, the mechanisms of the Kyoto treaty, an international NGO corporate campaign for an environmental cause, the international and social consequences of trade in biofuels, etc.).

Your paper should present some conclusions about what you have found. For example, some environmentalists argue that international pressure on corporations from consumers and/or investors has resulted in substantial change in their practices, and will result in a market-driven “greening” of the planet. A paper on this subject should try to come to some conclusions about those claims. **Note: your grade will not depend on which conclusions you come to (as I have indicated, arguments and conflicting claims are abundant) but on the quality of your research, how well you support your conclusions, and the quality of your writing.**

Please submit your proposed topic to me **by e-mail** for an initial review by Wednesday, October 7; your submission should be in the form of a brief description (abstract) plus at least 3 of the sources (two of which must be academic sources) you plan to use. By a “brief description,” I mean that you should not only name your topic, but set out a question that your research proposes to answer—e.g., “Have the ‘corporate campaigns’ undertaken by Rainforest Action Network and other environmental orgs. been effective in....?” or “Do the current lending practices of the World Bank indicate that it has changed its ways according to its intentions to ‘go green’?” Then, you should explain in your abstract what methods you intend to use to answer your question—for example, “I will review the World Bank’s lending for fossil fuel projects since 2000.”

An abstract is brief, but it’s an important part of writing your paper. Basically, a good abstract is a road-map that will help you write the final version. The abstract submission requirement means that you need to start thinking about your topic and question and do some preliminary literature searching **right away**. You may have to read several pieces of “background” literature (these background pieces don’t have to be academic sources; you may find that you get enough background from assigned texts) in order to find a topic/question. If you are struggling to frame a question, see me during office hours or e-mail me—**but I expect you to have done enough background reading to find at least a topic of interest beforehand.**

PLEASE NOTE:

1) You MUST submit your abstract for review before you write your paper. Any final paper submitted without a prior abstract submission will not be accepted. Moreover, the abstract is worth 10% of your final grade.

2) PLAGIARISM ON ANY ASSIGNMENT MAY RESULT IN ZERO CREDIT FOR THAT ASSIGNMENT, DEPENDING ON HOW MUCH IS PLAGIARIZED. LATE PAPERS WILL LOSE ONE-HALF LETTER GRADE PER DAY THEY ARE LATE. PAPERS ARE DUE MONDAY DECEMBER 7. NO PAPER WILL BE ACCEPTED AFTER DEC. 14.

I may suggest after seeing your abstract that you get writing help. If you need writing help: contact the Learning Assistance Center (drop in at HSS 348, call (415) 338-1993, or e-mail lac@sfsu.edu.)

If you have a disability and need accommodation, please contact me. The Disability Programs and Resource Center is available to facilitate reasonable accommodations. The DPRC, located in SSB 110, can be reached by telephone at 338-2724 (voice/TTY) or by e-mail at dprc@sfsu.edu.

You will not pass the course if you do not attend regularly; readings complement but do not duplicate lectures. There is quite a bit of reading because course content includes both necessary background on the nature of the problems themselves *and* subject matter that is specific to IR (the books, however, are enjoyable to read). Your contributions to discussion will make the class much more interesting and stimulating for everyone, including me, so please feel free to speak up and ASK QUESTIONS! I will keep scientific terminology to a minimum and explain terms like “greenhouse effect,” but if I do refer, for example, to “ozone” and you’re not sure what it is or why it’s important, ASK!

Required Readings: Meadows et al, *Limits to Growth, the 30-year update*; Revkin, *The Burning Season*; George, *Another World is Possible If....*; Simms, *Ecological Debt, 2nd ed.*; .and (at least) the article summaries from *Earth Equity News* (www.climatecrisiscoalition.org) three times per week. All books are on sale at the university bookstore. Films and articles from the Internet have been assigned below; it is

possible that I will add one or two others during the semester. These films and readings are also required.

APPROXIMATE SCHEDULE

- 8/26-9/9** **Global environmental crisis.** Exponentially growing economy and population vs. ecological limits. Why we risk overshoot; ecological and economic consequences of overshoot. Read *Limits to Growth* 1-5, Revkin foreword and Chs. 1-2, Simms 1-2, and view the following film online, available from “Films on Demand” via the SFSU library website: “Who’s Destroying the Forest,” #39439.
- 9/7** **Labor Day, no class**
- 9/8** **Furlough Day. Campus closed. No Tues. office hours this week.**
- 9/11** **Last day to drop.**
- 9/14-21** **Human societies and the environment: a brief historical overview.** Finish LTG and read Revkin, 3-5.
- 9/22** **Last day to add with a permit**
- 9/25** **Deadline to apply for fall 09 graduation**
- 9/23-10/5** **Historical origins of global capitalism.** Revkin Ch. 6, Simms 3-5.
- 10/7** *Abstracts due to glenn@sfsu.edu
- 10/7** **Creating the “third world.”** Complete all reading assigned to this point.
- 10/12-14** **Faculty furlough days.** No class meetings or office hours this week. But watch “India: the Struggle for Independence,” segments 4-6, from Films on Demand, and read “World Slavery and Caribbean Capitalism: The Cuban Sugar Industry, 1760-1868, by Dale Tomich. Available online; use Google Scholar or the library database.
- 10/20-22** **Creating the third world, continued.** Read Revkin, 7-8.
- 10/26** **Campus closed (furlough day).** Review for midterm on 10/28.
- 10/28** **MIDTERM**
- 11/11** **Veterans’ Day. Campus closed**
- 11/2-16** **Imperialism by another name? The contemporary global political economy.** Finish Revkin and Simms. Also read: Walden Bello, “The Savage Costs of the Food Crisis” (6/2/08) at www.thenation.com, and Christopher Swann, “World Bank, Promising to go Green...” in the Republican American online (do a Google search using Swann’s name); and the “IMF Skit Script” from Duke University (do a Google search for IMF Skit Script).
- 11/18-12/7** **Global environmental negotiations.**
- 11/23-27** **Thanksgiving break. No class.** Read George, Parts I and II.
- 12/9** **Final papers due.**
- 11/30-12/14** **Environmental negotiations; breaking the climate deadlock. Another path?** Finish George book. Also read: “Cutting the knot—climate protection, political realism and equity as requirements....” by Tom Athanasiou et al. Locate article through Google Scholar.
- 12/21, Monday** **FINAL EXAM (10:45-1:15)**