Critical Environmental Studies of the Contemporary Middle East and North Africa  
(graduate, Karen Rignall, Georgetown, 2013)

This seminar introduces students to how political ecology, an interdisciplinary field that critically explores the political dimensions of nature/society relations, can shed light on the key environmental challenges facing the contemporary Middle East and North Africa (MENA). For decades, scholars have examined the management of strategic resources such as oil and water primarily from international relations or political economy perspectives. In this course, we bring other academic approaches to bear on these discussions and explore how people grapple with environmental challenges in their everyday lives. The course expands the range of environmental questions usually addressed in the scholarship to include: desertification and land degradation in arid lands, the contemporary practice of pastoralism, agricultural production, urban environments, and environmental history.

Under the banner of political ecology, geographers, anthropologists, and environmental scientists have developed a diverse array of methods and theories to ask critical questions about human-environment interactions. By conducting community-level field studies and foregrounding local perspectives on environmental change, political ecologists have given us the critical tools to ask new questions about the environment in the Middle East and North Africa. How do environmental narratives -- the stories that explain the reasons for environmental degradation -- get formed? What political interests do they reflect? What does the evidence tell us about the reasons for and extent of environmental problems in the MENA region? What are the different ways to interpret the evidence -- and the political interests at stake in various interpretations? How do power and inequality shape the ways different groups of people experience environmental stress?

In this discussion-based seminar, we will use case studies, ethnography, and other sources to develop our own critical language for analyzing the environmental challenges facing the contemporary Middle East and North Africa. Most weeks, I have paired region specific readings with foundational texts from political ecology. At the end of the course, students will develop an understanding of the major environmental questions in the region from the perspective of many different relevant actors: from governments, to farmers, marginalized urban dwellers, pastoralists, and others.

Assignments

Class presentation (20%; 200 points): Students will make two in-class presentations (with partners) during the semester that provides a critical perspective (not a summary) on the week's readings. They will primary responsibility for leading class discussion after the presentation; I expect a handout with some key points as well as some starter discussion questions (no required length but concise is better).

Class participation and attendance (20%; 200 points): I will give real grades for class participation. Be advised that I look for thoughtful contributions to the class rather than frequent but insubstantial comments. I also place importance on discussion that refers back to the texts; the point is not to have mastery of the empirical data in the texts but to have read closely enough that you can refer back to particularly provocative or important passages to support a point or serve as the basis of a question. An addition element of the class participation grade will be in class presentations of your final research project. The length of time for each presentation will depend on enrollment and we will discuss the parameters for the presentations in class.

Paper proposal (10%; 100 points): 2-3 page paper proposals and an additional annotated bibliography (minimum of 5 sources) will be due a third of the way through the semester. I will grade and offer detailed feedback. These proposals should serve as the basis for the final paper; if there is substantial change in the paper topic, students are required to see me in office hours. I recommend you see me in office hours anyway; it is a good opportunity to work through ideas for your papers.

Final paper of 15-20 pages (50%; 500 points): The final paper should be a well-argued research paper that addresses a key environmental issue in the Middle East or North Africa using either political ecology approaches directly or another clear theoretical framework to guide the argument. While it may not be possible to use primary sources extensively, I expect this research to use diverse sources creatively.

Policies

Absences: Students may miss two classes for any reason (medical, personal) without penalty. However, you do need to contact me, preferably by email and before your absence, if it is planned and as soon as possible if it is unplanned. For subsequent (unexcused) absences, I will reduce the course participation grade.

Grading scale: There are 1000 total points for this class. Final letter grades for the course will be determined using a declining 10% scale: 900 pts. or more=A; 800-899=B; 700-799=C; 600-699=D; fewer than 600=F. Participation carries much weight in this class (200 pts. or 20%).

Ethics and university policies: Please see http://gervaseprograms.georgetown.edu/honor/system/ for more information regarding Georgetown University ethics.

I do not accept late assignments.
Wednesday, January 9 (Week 1): Course introduction

Monday, January 14 (Week 2): Foundations of political ecology


Fairhead, James, and Melissa Leach. 1996, Misreading the African Landscape. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Intro, Chapter 1, 2, and 3.


Optional (no requirement to discuss in class):


January 21 - No class

January 28 (Week 3): Historical perspectives on Middle Eastern environments


February 4 (Week 4): Contemporary political economy from a political ecology perspective


Optional:


**February 11 (Week 5): Strategic resources--oil**


**February 18 - no class**

**February 25 (Week 6): Strategic resources--water**

**Assignment: Paper proposals due**


**March 4 Spring break**

**March 11 (Week 7): Strategic resources--land and agriculture**


March 18 (Week 8): Contemporary narratives of land degradation


Optional:


March 25 (Week 9): Transformations in rural livelihoods (pastoralism)


**April 1 Easter break**

**April 8 (Week 10): States, governance, and environment**


Braverman, I. 2009 *Planted Flags: Trees, Land, and Law in Israel/Palestine.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. *Intro, Chapter 4*


Optional:


**April 15 (Week 11): Conservation and tourism**


Optional:


April 22 (Week 12): Urban environments


Optional:


**April 29 (Week 13): Paper presentations**

**Assignment:** Final paper due

This week, students will make short presentations of their final paper.

**ADDED READING:**
Waterbury, John