

Global Environmental History

Contact Info | Required Readings | Course Breakdown

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Required Readings

Christophe Bonneuil & Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, *The Shock of the Anthropocene*
W. Jeffrey Bolster, *The Mortal Sea: Fishing the Atlantic in the Age of Sail*
Andreas Malm, *Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam Power and the Roots of Global Warming*
J. R. McNeill & Peter Engelke, *The Great Acceleration: An Environmental History of the Anthropocene since 1945*

Grade Breakdown

Attendance & Participation: 20%
Book Reports (300 words each): 10%
Book Discussion Leadership: 10%
Book Discussion Summary: 10%
Digital Collaboration: 25%
“Anthropoescentic” Essay: 25%

The Anthropocene

According to J. Donald Hughes, “the task of environmental history is the study of human relationships through time with the natural communities of which they are a part, in order to explain the processes of change that affect that relationship.” Easier said than done, perhaps, but environmental history—quite likely better than any other subdiscipline or approach to history—is more perceptive of human interconnections in the world community, or of the interdependence of humans and other living beings on the planet; indeed, environmental history typically supplements and complicates traditional economic, social, and political forms of historical analysis.

This course aims to introduce environmental history in its global perspective, noting that nature transcends human borders and boundaries and thereby offers new regional and conceptual spaces for historical study. In this capacity, environmental history makes an important contribution to historical praxis. Donald Worster once remarked that environmental history was “part of a revisionist effort to make the discipline far more inclusive in its narratives than it has traditionally been.” Throughout our readings and discussions, we will be pressed into inquiring about the role of non-human actors in history and how we might engage with their agency, rather than relegating them to the backdrop of the human drama.

And then we need to globalize this history. To what extent (and to what value) can historians work comparatively

across traditional political boundaries using the physical environment as their bellwether? Is it profitable to examine a “macro” past, following nature through time and place?

Welcome to the Anthropocene. We live in an epoch wherein human actions are radically and irreversibly transforming the very makeup of the planet’s biosphere, lithosphere, hydrosphere, and atmosphere. This course intends to merge the very large and broad geographical scales of global environmental collapse—as embodied in climate change, ocean acidification, biodiversity loss—with the contemporary discourse on the Anthropocene as an organizing tool for engaging with collapse.

The idea of the Anthropocene—currently being debated by geologists—is that we have entered into the epoch of humanity. Our species, it argues, has imposed a profound and irrevocable effect on the planet and its systems. We are now engrained: carved into the stratigraphic biography of the planet. Our class will interrogate the significance of this discourse, interpret its potential origin points, challenge its narrative, and wrestle with the kinds of scale that the Anthropocene demands of historians who seek to understand it.

Schedule

- 16 September:
"The 'Anthropocene'"
- 23 September:
The Shock of the Anthropocene
- 30 September:
Digitally Remastering the Anthropocene
- 7 October:
The Mortal Sea
- 14 October:
Digital Research Discussion
- 21 October:
Fossil Capital
- 28 October:
The Climate of History
- 4 November:
The Great Acceleration
- 18 November:
Status update & troubleshooting

Participation

Seminars will begin on time; punctuality is expected. Critical to a successful seminar is students' preparation. Students should come to class prepared to discuss the assigned topics, having identified key arguments and questions, and ready to share their reflections on how the arguments are presented and supported.

Note that students are required to participate in class discussion; attendance alone does not suffice. Students who attend but do not contribute to the class discussion on a regular basis should not expect to receive a passing grade for this portion of the class.

Book Reports

Students will prepare a short (300 word max) response paper on each of the four monographs. Since it is impossible to summarize much of anything in so little space, the reports should instead reflect on course themes and how the book informs those. These reports should also avoid evaluating the books. Rather: the short writing assignments should engage. Consider them a springboard to a think-piece. Students may focus on single issues or ideas that inspired their own curiosity. These book reports are due 48 hours before the book will be discussed in class.

Book Discussion Leadership & Summary

Our four book sessions are open to graduate students and faculty from across campus and beyond. The larger group possesses wider variety of backgrounds and perspectives, which should stimulate a more vibrant discussion. Starting with Bolster's *The Mortal Sea*, students in the course will take turns leading discussion on the remaining three course books. Students will be responsible for directing traffic, making connections between disparate veins in the conversation, and bringing leading questions to the group for interpretation and debate. No formal presentation is necessary, though the student will be required to identify a few key themes worth discussing. Students will also take turns producing a podcast report of the session's proceedings (though not on the same book for which they directed the discussion). These podcasts should be kept to under ten minutes. They should summarize the central features of the book and the tenor of the conversation. Think of them as a report for people who were unable to attend. The podcast summaries should be completed within a week of the book discussion.

Digital Collaboration

This is a work in progress. Starting with a Sherman field trip on 30 September, students should brainstorm some kind of collaborative project that will yield some kind of digital analysis of some aspect of the Anthropocene and its history.

"Anthroposcenic" Essay

Students will write an independent essay on the Anthropocene and its history, using some visual cue as a starting point. While I expect that the piece should treat course themes and provide an historical perspective on the Anthropocene, students are invited to adopt a less formal writing style and to imagine a broader audience for their work. Essays should be kept to under 2500 words.

The Rules

Deadlines Deadlines are firm. They may be extended on an individual basis if good reasons for missing the deadline are provided. The following are not good reasons for extensions: scheduling difficulties with other classes, work, or other activities; overwork; computer breakdowns; inability to find resources; illness without a doctor's note.

Late assignments will be penalized 10% a day to a total of 20%. Late work will not be accepted more than two weeks after the deadline. In addition, late papers will be graded without comment.

Because assignments can get lost, and because questions of authorship sometimes arise, you are advised to keep your research notes and copies of your rough drafts of written work, even after it has been marked and returned. Make sure you keep backup files stored safely.

A Note on Style History is very much a craft, especially in its delivery. Clarity of thought and clarity of prose are acquired skills that take time and work. Students should take great care to ensure that these skills are well represented in their written submissions. Good writing matters; precision counts. Typos, misspellings, and poor syntax/grammar are an expression of insufficient effort, and will result in substantial reductions in marks.

Style and format must conform to Chicago Style, using footnotes or endnotes (the former is preferred) rather than internal citation systems. It is highly recommend that students have access to (and make use of) a style guide. I can recommend Kate Turabian, *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*, or the *Chicago Manual of Style*, both of which are widely available. Alongside a good dictionary and thesaurus, a style guide is a critical reference tool for serious historians.

The Fine Print

E-mail Policy It is the policy of the Faculty of Humanities that all email communication sent from students to instructors (including TAs), and from students to staff, must originate from the student's own McMaster University email account. This policy protects confidentiality and confirms the identity of the student. Instructors will delete emails that do not originate from a McMaster email account.

Course Modifications The instructor and the university reserve the right to modify elements of the course during the term. The university may change the dates and deadlines for any or all courses in extreme circumstances. If either type of modification becomes necessary, reasonable notice and communication with the students will be given with the explanation and the opportunity to comment on changes. It is the responsibility of the student to check their McMaster e-mail and course websites weekly during the term to note any changes.

Support Services McMaster University provides a variety of support services to help students manage their many demands:

1. Reference librarians offer invaluable research assistance
2. The Centre for Student Development (CSD) provides assistance with personal as well as academic matters. <http://csd.mcmaster.ca/>

It is highly recommended that you make use of these services before

problems or questions become irremediable disasters.

STATEMENT OF ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

You are expected to exhibit honesty and use ethical behaviour in all aspects of the learning process. Academic credentials you earn are rooted in principles of honesty and academic integrity. Academic dishonesty is to knowingly act or fail to act in a way that results or could result in unearned academic credit or advantage. This behaviour can result in serious consequences—e.g., the grade of zero on an assignment, loss of credit with a notation on the transcript (notation reads: "Grade of F assigned for academic dishonesty"), and/or suspension or expulsion from the university. It is your responsibility to understand what constitutes academic dishonesty. For information on the various types of academic dishonesty, please refer to the Academic Integrity Policy, located at:

<http://www.mcmaster.ca/academicintegrity>

The following illustrates only three forms of academic dishonesty:

- 1) Plagiarism—e.g., the submission of work that is not one's own or for which other credit has been obtained.
- 2) Improper collaboration in group work.
- 3) Copying or using unauthorized aids in tests and examinations.

Hybrid Vigor

In the 1960s, Barry Commoner imposed his commitment to an academic “hybrid vigor” on the graduate students working at his Center for the Biology of Natural Systems at Washington University. Seminars were creative affairs that brought together an interdisciplinary collection of scholars, intent on working in an open, collaborative environment. Commoner and his colleagues and students engaged in a firm belief that intellectual advances came from bringing together top scholars whose interests didn’t quite match.

This course means to adopt a similar enterprise. Working from the premise that interacting with scholars of various backgrounds strengthens our grasp of the material under study (by forcing us to communicate it more plainly), while benefiting from the insight of their disparate perspectives, we shall ground our efforts in applying historical methodologies to interdisciplinary questions. This is particularly apt for a course in environmental history; in a provocative 1996 essay, J. M. Powell argued that environmental history was not a subdiscipline of history, but rather an interdisciplinary methodology. Rather than falling between the interstices of traditional disciplines, however, our project involves building creative and sturdy bridges between them. Note that creativity is not a talent; it is a way of operating.

In order to stress this intellectual flexibility, I have invited a variety of scholars to join us to discuss the larger course themes as they pertain to the four monographs we are reading. I will share with them the communal readings in order to establish a departure point for our shared dialogue. In addition to practicing hybrid vigor, I hope this format will also help inspire students to identify research projects that consciously consider multiple disciplinary audiences.

A NOTE ON HISTORICAL ENGAGEMENT

My research and the topics and questions that interest me typically stress making history relevant in twenty-first century political and cultural discourse. That is to say, I engage in a kind of contemporary history in which I try to bring valuable historical context to current debate. Here’s the rub: while many of the themes that drive my research are grounded in presentist issues, I am—first and foremost—an historian. In this class, so are you. Your reflections on course readings, your research inquiries, and your papers should reflect good historical analysis and you should not be tempted to drift into philosophical or political assertions of what “ought” to be. Historians look backward on what “was” as a means of contributing to a larger discussion about the human condition, not as a means of forecasting an ideal future. In spite of the numerous siren calls that present themselves over the course of this semester, it is imperative that you cling to history as a discipline, methodology, and mode of inquiry.

How Poetry Comes to Me

It comes blundering over the
Boulders at night, it stays
Frightened outside the
Range of my campfire
I go to meet it at the
Edge of the light

— Gary Snyder