

## Advanced Subject Part II: Paper 30 [2022-23]

### Title of Course:

'The Problem of Sustainability, 1500-1987'

### Name / Email of Convenor:

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### Course Description:

'Sustainability' is today almost universally seen as a good thing – although it is less easy to agree what it means. Paradoxically, sustainability is often both seen as something many in the world have only recently discovered, and as something that has been forgotten in the passage from 'traditional' societies to modernity. In other words, arguments about sustainability are simultaneously arguments about history. But what is the history of sustainability? This paper examines the long history of a problem-setting that we now think about as 'sustainability': how does society develop without destroying those parts of nature needed for its long-term survival? When and how have different societies and groups asked this kind of question, and what kinds of solution have they proposed? Today, there is a long list of candidates to explain our contemporary environmental crisis: Judeo-Christian beliefs about dominion over nature, the scientific revolution, the imperatives of capitalism, an over-weening faith in technology, or simply human nature as evolved over millennia. a collective. Are all or none of these true? What kinds of evidence would one need to know? The course will examine how the problem of 'sustainability' has been a repeated but malleable and contested aspect of politics for many centuries. It presents us with a long and fraught history of reframing the problem of what a society needs, and what it should be. Answers and conflicts have related to beliefs about the quality of evidence and the processes by which environmental crises are turned into stories about the progress of society. Each part of the course will consider how people, historically and now, make intuitive or logical judgements about the future according to the available information. This will allow us to think and debate more widely about issues of choice and chance in history, about bias, prediction and our use of information. The paper proceeds by addressing a series of 'episodes' in this history intertwining environmental, political, economic histories and the history of science. The course traces how an imagined 'state of nature' was related to government and empire. It begins with the struggles in the early modern state to control and secure a supply of resources; moving to cover developments in scientific thinking and investigation; the impact of and anxieties in European empires, and their colonial and settler societies; how the state of climate, soil and forests became areas of intense controversy in the United States and Europe in the nineteenth century; new problems and debates with the rise of fossil fuels, and how the state of the environment began to be employed to explain the decline of empire and civilization. In the twentieth century we will follow two major strands of argument. First is the impact of ecology on thinking about political communities and their long-term durability. Second are the fears of resource scarcity and dependency, on both a national and increasingly global level, especially intense in the geopolitics, economics and forecasting of oil. We will conclude with the 'energy crisis' of the 1970s, and debates around 'peak oil', consumer culture and international development up to arguments about 'degrowth' and the publication of the UN's Brundtland report on 'Sustainable Development' in 1987.

**Mode of Teaching:**

The course will involve considerable engagement with case studies, debates in political economy, forecasting techniques and visualizations of the future. Teaching This course is taught by a series of weekly lectures (16) across Michaelmas and Lent term, combined with six 2-hour source-based classes across three terms; and 4 supervisions per student, resulting in a total of 32 contact hours.

**Maximum Supervision Capacity:**

14 students.

**Teaching**

Lectures in Michaelmas Term

1. Introduction
2. Improvement and the commons in the pre-modern economy
3. Wood shortage
4. Everything as system: Enlightened nature and political economy
6. The Rise and Fall of Empires: nineteenth century anxieties
7. America's destiny: soil, slavery and the perils of the frontier
8. Empire Forestry: views from above and below Lectures in Lent term
9. The promise and peril of fossil fuels, c.1850-1930
10. Ecology and society c.1860-1940
11. Dust bowls and the promise of modernity
12. The dawn of the environmental age c.1945-1970
13. The Anthropocene: unlimited growth in a limited world
14. The 1970s Energy Crisis
15. Questioning growth
16. Problem solved or posed? Sustainable development.

Six seminars will examine and discuss primary sources, proceeding roughly in step with the issues and chronology of the lectures.

Supervisions will be taken in four blocks with essays set covering themes • 2-4 • 5-8 • 9-11 • 12-16

**Assessment**

There will be one three-hour unseen exam in which each candidate must answer three questions out of 24. Section A will cover all of the lecture topics (16) (mandatory to answer at least 1 from this section). A section B will contain in with cross-cutting and comparative questions (mandatory to answer at least 1 from this section)

**Sample Questions**

Why did so few places not have a 'wood shortage' debate in early modern Europe?

Was 'sustainability' an invention of forestry?

'The classical economists were unconcerned about diminishing resources'. Why?

'Why did early modern rulers become interested in the 'legibility' of resources?'

'Early modern environmental concerns were above all an issue of under-, not over-use'. Discuss.

Why did soil fertility become a matter of anxiety in Europe and America between the 1820s and 1860s?

How did the experience of empire raise new anxieties about the sustainability of empire?

'Ecology was the sociology of nature.' Discuss.

Was the problem with oil its ubiquity or scarcity?

'The environmental age began in 1948.' Discuss.

How did one become an 'environmental expert' in the period 1945 to 1975?

Was the 'energy crisis' in the 1970s USA self-inflicted?

Assess the importance of systems theory in the rise of post-war thinking about sustainability.

'A moral critique of consumption has always been central the political effectiveness of arguments about resource scarcity'. Discuss.

What, if anything, is different between the 'sustainability' of Georg Hartig and the 'sustainable development' of Gro Harlem Brundtland?

### **General Indicative Reading List**

Paul Warde, *The invention of sustainability. Nature, destiny and action, 1500-1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018)

David Arnold, *The problem of nature. Environment, culture and European expansion* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996)

Margaret Schabas, *The natural origins of economics* (Chicago, 2005)

Carolyn Merchant, *The death of nature. Women, ecology and the scientific revolution* (London, HarperCollins, 1980).

William Beinart, & Lotte Hughes, *Environment and Empire*, (Oxford, 2007)

Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, *The Shock of the Anthropocene* (London: Verso, 2015)

Ramachandra Guha, *Environmentalism. A global history* (1999)

Clarence Glacken, *Traces on the Rhodian shore. Nature and culture in western thought from ancient times to the end of the eighteenth century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967)

Jeremy Caradona, *Sustainability. A history* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014)

John McCormick, *The global environmental movement. Reclaiming paradise* (London: Belhaven Press, 1989)

Tamara L. Whited, *Forests and peasant politics in modern France* (New Haven, 2000)

Ravi Rajan, *Modernizing Nature. Forestry and imperial eco-development 1800-1950* (Oxford, 2006)

Alison Bashford, *Global Population: History, Geopolitics, and Life on Earth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014)

José Augusto Padua "'Annihilating Natural Productions": Nature's Economy, Colonial Crisis and the Origins of Brazilian Political Environmentalism (1786–1810), *Environment and History* 6 (2000)

- John E. McNeill and Peter Engelke, *The Great Acceleration. An environmental history of the Anthropocene since 1945* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014)
- Joachim Radkau, *Nature and power. A global history of the environment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008)
- Sarah T. Phillips, *This land, this nation. Conservation, rural America and the New Deal* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007)
- Libby Robin, Sverker Sörlin and Paul Warde (eds), *The future of nature. Documents of global change* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013)
- Paul Warde, Libby Robin and Sverker Sörlin, *The environment. A History of the Idea.* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018)
- Björn-Ola Linnér, *The Return of Malthus: Environmentalism and Post-War Population-Resource Crisis* (Isle of Harris: White Horse Press, 2003)
- John Bellamy Foster, *Marx's ecology. Materialism and nature* (New York, 2000)
- Gregory A. Barton, *Empire forestry and the origins of environmentalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002)
- James Beattie, *Empire and imperial anxiety. Health, science, art and conservation in south Asia and Australasia, 1800-1920* (Basingstoke, 2011)
- Steven Stoll, *Larding the lean earth. Soil and society in nineteenth-century America* (New York, 2002)
- Corey Ross, *Ecology and power in the age of empire. Europe and the transformation of the tropical world* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017)
- Sharon E. Kingsland, *Episodes in the History of Population Ecology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985)
- Jenny Andersson and Egle Rindzeviciute, eds, *The struggle for the long-term in transnational science and politics. Forging the future* (New York, 2015)
- Stephen J. Macekura, *Of limits and growth. The rise of global sustainable development in the twentieth century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015)
- Paul Sabin, *The Bet: Paul Ehrlich, Julian Simon, and our Gamble over Earth's Future* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013)
- Sabine Höhler, *Spaceship Earth in the Environmental Age 1960-1990* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2015)
- Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy, Political Power in the Age of Oil* (New York: Verso, 2011)