

Brown University

Sociology 300
First Year Seminar

ENVIRONMENT AND SOCIETY – PRELIMINARY SYLLABUS

Wednesdays, 3:00pm-5:20pm
Smith-Buonanno Hall 201

Professor Ruth Simpson

Maxcy 402

Office Hours:

Telephone:

E-mail:

For reasons we will study in this course, most are accustomed to thinking of the environment as a natural entity—something best studied by biologists, geologists, and naturalists. Hopefully, by the end of this course, you will consider sociology just as essential for understanding the many ways humans act in and on the natural environment, and how they experience and respond to its effects. Indeed, some of the most central concepts of sociological thought—community, power, and inequality, for example—find expression in the ways we use, alter, create, and think about the natural environment. In this course we will study how we conceptualize nature and the human relationship with it, the effect of culture and capitalism on those conceptions, the role of scientific expertise in environmental disputes, and the social movements that have developed to take action on environmental issues—particularly health-related concerns. Along the way, we will also study how to think sociologically, and how to support a sociological argument with theory and evidence.

Course readings

Phil Brown and Edwin J. Mikkelsen. *No Safe Place: Toxic Waste, Leukemia, and Community Action*. University of California Press (1997).

Devra Davis. *When Smoke Ran Like Water: Tales Of Environmental Deception And The Battle Against Pollution*. Basic Books (2003).

Robert Gottlieb. *Environmentalism Unbound: Exploring New Pathways for Change*. The MIT Press (2002).

Lawrence S. Grossman. *The Political Ecology of Bananas: Contract Farming, Peasants, and Agrarian Change in the Eastern Caribbean*, The University of North Carolina Press (1998).

J. Timmons Roberts and Melissa M. Toffolon-Weiss. *Chronicles from the Environmental Justice Frontline*. Cambridge University Press (2001).

Elizabeth Shove. *Comfort, Cleanliness and Convenience: The Social Organization of Normality*. Berg Publishers (2004).

All of the above are available at the bookstore. In addition, you find assorted readings on WebCT.

Course structure and requirements:

Students will hand in a 1-2 page commentary each week, focusing on the reading. These commentaries should engage with the reading, but not summarize it. Rather, they should be an intersection of the author's ideas and the independent thoughts and ideas the reading inspired in you.

Each week, two students will provide a brief oral presentation that expands on their commentaries and that proposes a question for discussion. On the first day of class, we will discuss what makes a discussion question good (as well as what makes a discussion good).

Finally, each student will write a term paper in three stages. Each stage will be graded independently of the others.

I will compute your grade as follows:

General participation in discussion	10%
Oral presentation of readings	10%
Quality of weekly commentaries	10%
Term Paper, Part 1	20%
Term Paper, Part 2	20%
Term Paper, Part 3	30%

Schedule of Topics, Readings, and Assignments

- 9/3/08 **Introduction**
Giono, "The Man Who Planted Trees"
- 9/10/08 **What is sociology? What is environmental sociology?**
Mills, "The Sociological Imagination" (WebCT)
Catton & Dunlap, "Environmental Sociology: A New Paradigm" (WebCT)
Buttel, "Environmental Sociology: A New Paradigm?" (WebCT)
Buttel, "New Directions in Environmental Sociology" (WebCT)
Gramling & Freudenberg, "Environmental Sociology: Toward a Paradigm for the 21st Century" (WebCT)
Goldman & Schurman, "Closing the 'Great Divide': New Social Theory on Society and Nature" (WebCT)
- 9/17/08 **Conceptions of Nature**
Williams, "Ideas of Nature" (WebCT)
Levins & Lewontin, "Dialectics and Reductionism in Ecology" (WebCT)
Worster, "The Ecology of Order and Chaos." (WebCT)
Spirn, "The Authority of Nature: Conflict and Confusion in Landscape Architecture" (WebCT)
Merchant, selections from *The Death of Nature* (WebCT)
Wallace, selections from *The Wonderful Century: Its Successes and Failures* (WebCT)
Descola, selections from *In the Society of Nature* (WebCT)
- 9/24/08 **Culture, Consumption, and Natural Resources, Part 1**

Shove, *Comfort, Cleanliness, and Convenience* (pp. 1-92)
 Rees & Westra, "When Consumption does Violence Can there be Sustainability and Environmental Justice in a Resource-limited World?" (WebCT)

TERM PAPER PART 1 DUE

10/1/08 **Culture, Consumption, and Natural Resources, Part 2**

Shove, *Comfort, Cleanliness, and Convenience* (pp. 93-200)

Library Visit

10/8/08 **The Environmental Movement(s)**

Gottlieb, *Environmentalism Unbound* (Preface & pp. 1-143)

10/15/08 **The Environmental Movement(s) [continued]**

Gottlieb, *Environmentalism Unbound* (pp. 145-287)

10/22/08 **Experts, Laypersons, and Community Action, Part 1**

Levine, selections from *Love Canal: Science, Politics, and People* (WebCT)

Gibbs, selections from *My Story*
 (WebCT)

Assorted newspaper articles (WebCT).

10/23/08 Required Talk: Lois Gibbs (the talk will be in the evening the exact time and place TBA).

10/29/08 **Experts, Laypersons, and Community Action, Part 2**

Brown & Mikkelsen, *No Safe Place*

TERM PAPER PART 2 DUE

11/5/08 **Environmental Justice as a Social Movement**

Roberts & Toffolon-Weiss, *Chronicles from the Environmental Justice Frontline*

11/12/08 **Pollution, Disease, and Corporate Power**

Davis, *When Smoke Ran Like Water* (pp. 123-282)

11/19/08 **Pollution, Disease, and Corporate Power [continued]**

Davis, *When Smoke Ran Like Water* (pp. 1-122)

11/26/08 **No class (Thanksgiving)**

12/3/08 **The Global, the Local, and the Environment**

Grossman, *The Political Ecology of Bananas*

12/10/08 **Student-chosen topic**

Readings TBA

TERM PAPER PART 3 DUE