Global Capitalism and the Anthropocene

MPhil Paper Guide 2020-2021
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Course Description

Scientists have proposed that the Earth is entering a new epoch in its geological history – the Anthropocene. In this new epoch, humans are shaping environmental change on a planetary scale. The ecological devastation and climatic transformation that mark the arrival of the Anthropocene, from the mass extinction of species to rapid global warming, have coincided with capitalism’s historical rise to global dominance. Critically rethinking the relationship between capitalism and planetary vitality is a core part of the project to reimagine the social sciences in the Anthropocene. Leveraging insights from across diverse academic disciplines, this paper examines the ecological and institutional foundations of global capitalism. The paper asks how capitalism has been made through and from nature and how nature has been transformed by capitalism. And it explores the uneven ecological, geographical, and socio-economic dynamics of global capitalist development.

We begin by examining theoretical interpretations of capitalism as a historically distinctive socio-economic order and ask how our understanding of capitalism might need to be reconfigured in an age of radical environmental instability. These theoretical foundations are then applied to the development of global capitalism, focussing on specific historical and contemporary examples. The examples studied range from the 19th century guano trade, to modern global meat production, and the linkages between stock markets and tectonic movements. In the final part of the paper we examine practical strategies, approaches, and intellectual frameworks for thinking about reconfiguring capitalism in the 21st century. We explore debates around the future of economic growth and assess emerging proposals for a Green New Deal.

The course will consist of seven seminars of 1.5 to 2hrs in length. The readings below are divided into core and further reading. It is expected that students will have read all of the core readings thoroughly in advance of each seminar. The further reading is useful for students that are conducting presentations or writing essays on specific topics. Students will present in class and will receive written feedback on their presentations. Presentations will not be formally assessed. Formal assessment will be in the form of an essay submitted at the end of term.

General background reading

Week (1) What is capitalism?

Core reading


Further Reading


Week (2) Capitalism and the Anthropocene

Core reading


Further Reading


**Week (3) Making the Anthropocene economy**

**Core reading**


**Further reading**

Week (4) The finance-nature nexus

Core reading


Further reading


Week (5) Fuelling and feeding global capitalism

Core reading


Further reading


**Week (6) The future of growth**

**Core reading**


**Further reading**


**Week (7) The Green New Deal**

**Core reading**

Further reading

- Dale, G. (2019). Degrowth: with or against the Green New Deal?.