Water and the Politics of the Anthropocene

C&ES 375, Soc 496
Meets with Soc 875
Fall 2017

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Email: snalatout@wisc.edu

Office Hours: Tuesday 2:00-4:00
Or, by appointment

Meets:
Tuesdays and Thursdays
9:30-10:45—Agriculture Hall 10

Course Description:

For decades, water has been turned into the exclusive domain of technical-rational discourses including engineering disciplines, biophysical sciences, and economics. Emphasis on efficiency legitimized institutional arrangements that turned water into an object of discipline, surveillance, control, capture and regulation. Recent attempts at broadening the reach of the 'global economy' solidified such trends, shifting emphases towards conceptualizing water as a commodity, as well as the creation of new water markets.

Yet, water’s importance as a site for constructing political and cultural identities and for the management of power relations, on the local (becoming a marker of gender, ethnicity and race), national (legitimizing diverging national narratives of inclusion and exclusion) and transnational (shaping inter-state relations) scales had gone largely unnoticed. In this upper undergraduate and graduate course, we will try to bridge this gap by drawing on literature from science and technology studies (turning to the sociology of environmental knowledge, and studies of infrastructures), environmental studies (examining the potentials and limits of the language of water sustainability and water as a shared environment), geographic theories of space and territoriality (stressing the importance of space and place in water relations and governance, and the political economy of water), environmental sociology and sociology and anthropology of development (examining water development as it shapes North/South relations, and the view from global environmental justice).

I have in mind a number of bodies of water to focus on, but students are invited, as a matter of fact encouraged, to suggest water bodies that are important to them as well.

Context for discussing these particular themes: the Anthropocene

Class Content:

The main goal of the course is to understand the linkages between water and the Anthropocene. How does our conception of water and the different ways we organize our use of it (scientific, socio-political, and institutional) participate in producing the new epoch of the Anthropocene with its climates, social systems, and politics? The weekly themes of this semester will reflect on water and its encounter with different social systems.
In discussions about *What is water?*, we will touch on the different conceptions of water and distinguish between pre-modern and modern understandings—in one, water is connected to social and cultural contexts and in the other water is abstracted into a chemical molecule H2O. How do these different conceptions of water lead to different ways of organizing, using, and delivering it?

In another theme we take on the Anthropocene and discuss the different ways it is conceived by biophysical scientists, especially geologists, and social scientists and humanists. We link the emergence of the Anthropocene with capitalism, colonialism, and the scientific and industrial revolutions.

We move on to connect both, water and the Anthropocene, in one conceptual framework. For that we use the cases of rivers of the Anthropocene.

We also critically investigate different approaches to water governance in the Anthropocene, from state-centered approaches to market-oriented approaches. We discuss the pros and cons of each approach.

In addition to these themes, we touch on water wars (case of Cochabamba), water justice (Flint and Standing Rock), social movements (Palestine/Israel, India, and others), infrastructure (in concepts and in practice, like in dams and canals), and we discuss the relationship of water and its infrastructure with the emergence of empires and colonialism.

**Readings**

Readings will be posted on class site on Canvas unless noted otherwise.

**Learning Objectives:**

1. Develop conceptual and practical knowledge of the Anthropocene as a theme that links together a technoscientific approach to the changing climate, as well as the social, economic, and political developments through the last two centuries.

2. Develop new social scientific and humanistic concepts for talking about water resources.

3. Develop an understanding of the different research and practical questions that different social studies of the water seek to answer.

4. Develop an appreciation for interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary perspectives on the water.

5. Develop a critical analytical ability that does not take biophysical or social studies narratives on water for granted.

6. Following on number 5 above, acquire the ability to analyze water narratives as hybrid narratives that speak for multiple interests, be those economic, institutional, cultural, political, geographic, or scientific.

7. Appreciate the concept that narratives about water imply alternative attempts at organizing the world we live in. They are *POLITICS* by other means.
8. Finally, have an appreciation for water justice as an important outcome of analyses and interventions.

9. Develop an appreciation for the complexities surrounding discussions of water justice in the Anthropocene.

**Class Rules & Information:**

1. Class will be run as a seminar. Its success will depend on your participation. So, attendance is mandatory for all sections.

2. Students are expected to adhere to the university’s standards of academic integrity. For more information, please visit: [https://www.students.wisc.edu/doso/academic-integrity/](https://www.students.wisc.edu/doso/academic-integrity/)

3. Your work will be screened for instances of plagiarism. Ignorance of what constitutes plagiarism cannot exempt you from the consequences. To educate yourself, see: [https://writing.wisc.edu/Handbook/Acknowledging_Sources.pdf](https://writing.wisc.edu/Handbook/Acknowledging_Sources.pdf)

4. **Communication:** best way to reach me will be at my office during office hours or via emails. I will try my best to respond to your emails within 24 hours. *If you do not get a response by the end of 24 hours, please send me a reminder.* It will mean that I either did not receive your email or that I got distracted by other responsibilities and that your email might have gotten buried under other urgent requests.
Assignments & Grading

1. **Response Papers: 45%**

Over the course of the semester, you are required to submit *three reading response papers*. At the beginning of a four- or three-week period, you will be given a prompt—for a total of three prompts in the semester. You will need to keep the prompt in mind while reading for the next three weeks. Prompts for the most part will ask you to respond by drawing on the next three or four weeks’ readings and lectures—see the document on writing a reading response. Those have to be spaced out according to the following directions:

- Reading-response 1: Prompt introduced January 30 and Due on Canvas by February 25
- Reading-response 2: Prompt introduced February 27 and Due on Canvas by March 25.
- Reading-response 3: Prompt introduced March 6 and Due on Canvas by April 22.

Prompts will be discussed in class when they are introduced (see above for the dates) and posted in appropriate boxes on class website on Canvas.

These reading response papers should at least be 3-4 pages long. They should be submitted to the appropriate dropbox on Canvas. **PLAN AHEAD.** Submission needs to be done by 11:59 PM the evening of the due date (see above).

- Response paper 3: 10%
- Response Paper 4: 15%
- Response Paper 5: 20%

2. **Term Paper: 30%**

Students will start thinking soon about a body of water they would like to write about. We will workshop some of the ideas throughout the semester to help one another sharpen our approach to the case we chose. Please review my “term paper guidelines” for information and let me know if you have questions. We will have ample opportunity to discuss this.

3. **Participation: 15%**

This course is run as a seminar and participation is not only expected, but necessary. Please review the document, “participation guidelines”, and let me know if you have any questions.

4. **Class lead: 10%**

Class discussions will be led by one or more students each time. Please check my the document, “leading a class discussion” on Canvas and let me know if you have any questions.

**Grading Scale:** Maximum grade is 100 (for all assignments)

A=93-100; AB=88-92; B=83-87; BC=78-82; C=70-77, D=60-69; F=Below 60

**Course deadlines at a glance:**

Important University deadlines: [https://registrar.wisc.edu/dates_deadlines.htm](https://registrar.wisc.edu/dates_deadlines.htm)
**January 31:** last day to drop courses or withdraw without DR or W grade notation on transcript

**February 2:** drop a Fall term course and receive 100% tuition adjustment

**February 25:** First response due

**March 23:** last day to drop courses without need for Dean’s approval

**March 25:** Second response due

**April 22:** Third response due

**May 3:** Term paper due

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**SCHEDULE OF CLASSES**

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<th>READINGS AND EXPECTATIONS</th>
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<td>Jan 23</td>
<td>Intro &amp; Logistics</td>
<td>Canceled</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jan 25</td>
<td>Intro &amp; Logistics</td>
<td>Why water and the politics of the Anthropocene?</td>
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<td>How is the course run? Goals, expectations, and style?</td>
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**Week 2: Jan 30**  
**What is Water?**

**Required:**  

**Week 2: Feb 1**  
**What is Water?**  

**Recommended:**  
Linton, chapters 5 and 6, 7, 8, and 9

Week 3: Feb 6:
The Anthropocene!

**Required:**
Smithsonian video on the Anthropocene (3 minutes):


Noel Castree. 2016. Scientists have finally decided we are in the “age of humans”. [https://qz.com/771439/scientists-have-finally-decided-we-are-in-the-age-of-humans/](https://qz.com/771439/scientists-have-finally-decided-we-are-in-the-age-of-humans/)

Week 3: Feb 8:
Or, is it the Anthropocene?


**Recommended:**


Week 4: Feb 13:
Water and the Anthropocene: the case of rivers I

**Required:**

Week 4: Feb 15:
Water and the Anthropocene: the case of rivers II

**Required:**
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<th>Politics of knowledge: the case of water abundance and scarcity I</th>
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<td>Politics of knowledge: the case of water abundance and scarcity II</td>
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<td>Week 6: Feb 27:</td>
<td>Water governance and the State</td>
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<td>Week 6: Mar 1:</td>
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Week 8: Mar 6
Water Governance: privatization

Required:
Tony Allan. Virtual Water: A Strategic Resource—Global Solutions to Regional Problems


Week 8: Mar 8
Water wars

Required:
Watch: *Even the Rain*. (it’s on Netflix—we can organize a screening together over snacks one evening?)

Week 9: Mar 13
Water, race, and identity: Flint

Required:

Evan Osnos, The Crisis in Flint Goes Deeper than the Water, January 20, 2016,

Week 9: Mar 15
Water, race, and identity: Standing Rock

Required:
Christopher F. Petrella, “Standing Rock, Flint, and the Color of Water,” November 2, 2016,

https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/31/magazine/the-youth-group-that-launched-a-movement-at-standing-rock.html?_r=0

http://edgeeffects.net/ceremony-at-standing-rock/
Week 10: Mar 20
Water and social movements

Required:


Week 10: Mar 22
Water and social movements

Required:

Week 11: April 3
Water and Infrastructure: Concepts and cases—Dams and Canals

Required:


Week 11: April 5
Water and Infrastructure: Dams and Canals

Required:


Recommended:


**Week 12: April 10**  
**Water and Infrastructure: Fluid Technologies**


**Week 12: April 12**  
**Water and Infrastructure: Fluid Technologies**


**Week 13: April 17**  
**Water and empire**


**Week 13: April 19**  
**Water and empire**

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**Week 14: April 24 & 26**
Presentations

**Week 15: May 1**
Presentations

**May 3:**
Concluding discussion