

**Topics in Latin American Politics:
Political Ecology and Extractivism in the Americas**

**POL 360
Fall 2025**

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Office Hours:
TW 12:30-1:30 Sidney Smith 6024
And by appointment

Course Description

This third year course introduces students to Political Ecology approaches to the study of Latin American politics. The course examines historical and contemporary state-society-nature relations, with an emphasis on extractivism, development, and attempts to resist exclusion, inequality, and environmental racism. Case studies of note include the formation of the petrostate in Venezuela and Ecuador, mining sectors in Chile and Bolivia, and agribusiness in Brazil and Argentina.

Learning Objectives

This course introduce students to key concepts and dynamics in Latin American politics through the lens of political ecology. Our work this semester aims to:

- Highlight the specificity of political ecology against other disciplinary, methodological, and ethical approaches in the social sciences;
- Introduce, contextualize, and problematize approaches to development that rely on resource extraction and export;
- Enhance our deep and critical reading skills;
- Build research skills through independent archival research;
- Practice and hone written communication skills through a research paper.

Assessment

Marks for this course will be determined via a combination of response papers, a midterm exam, and a final exam. Exams will be conducted via quercus.

Assignment	Weight	Due Date
Toxic Tour Group Project		
Meetings with Prof	5 pts (2.5 each)	First and second half of semester
Proposal	5 pts	September 17
Revised Proposal	5 pts	October 1
Presentation	5 pts	November 26
Final Report	15 pts	December 2
Debrief	5 pts	December 2
Response Paper	15 pts	November 5
Midterm Quiz	20 pts	October 15
Final Exam	25 pts	TBD

Toxic Tour Group Project See details at end of syllabus.

Midterm Quiz Based on the readings, lectures, and other materials from the first half of the course. A study guide will be circulated the week before the quiz.

Response Paper (5 pages double spaced)

Prompts for the midterm essay will be distributed a week prior to the due date. Topics for the essay will cover all course material covered until November 5th. Students will be required to cite their sources, drawing only from assigned texts. While lectures can be cited as sources, students are encouraged to do so sparingly.

Final Exam Based on the readings, lectures, and other materials from the second half of the course. The final quiz will be comprehensive, and a study guide will be circulated the week before the quiz.

Note on Attendance

While we will not be taking attendance in lectures, please note that success in this course depends on your presence and participation. You are expected to attend class, and invited to make use of office hours. Important announcements and adjustments to the course schedule will be announced in class and might not be replicated in other venues.

Grading Rubric

A: Excellent work, with clear, challenging, original ideas supported by sufficient, appropriate, logically interpreted evidence. ‘A’ quality work should engage the reader in the inquiry, convincingly answer opposing views, be well organized, and free of significant flaws. An ‘A’ paper should be not just good but outstanding in ideas and presentation.

B: Good to very good work, with a clear thesis supported by sufficient, appropriate evidence, organized and interpreted logically. The ‘B’ paper may have some outstanding qualities but be marked by significant flaws which keep it from being an ‘A’; or it may be all-around good work, free of major problems but lacking the deeper insight necessary for excellence.

C: Satisfactory work, but not yet good. The ‘C’ paper meets the basic requirements of a thesis supported by interpretation of specific evidence, but it needs work in thinking and/or presentation. There may be a lack of clarity, the evidence may not always be sufficient and appropriate, or the interpretation may have logical flaws. The paper may have organizational or mechanical problems that keep it from being good. The ‘C’ paper may be good in some respects but poor in others, or it may simply be adequate but not noteworthy overall.

D: Barely passing work that shows effort but is so marred by serious problems that it cannot be considered a satisfactory paper. Papers without a readily identifiable thesis are liable to be graded ‘D’.

No Pass: Failing work—for example, a hasty, sloppy paper that shows little or no thought, effort, or familiarity with the text.

Please Note: Poor mechanics detract from your grades, but good mechanics by themselves do not make a good paper. Sloppy grammar, punctuation, and spelling tax the goodwill of your reader, which all effective writing is careful to respect. These problems won’t be overlooked, since they affect the communication of thought— but thoughtful work is the most important.

Email Policy

For the purposes of this course, the primary use of email will be to share information such as announcements of events of note or news stories relevant to the course material and to schedule meetings for more individualized matters. Email is a poor medium for discussing or clarifying substantive questions that come up in lectures or reading. Face to face (even if on-screen) interactions are much better for this sort of work. Please ask substantive questions in class or during office hours.

I do my best to respond in a timely fashion (usually within 48 hours) to all student emails. Please do not expect an immediate response, especially on evenings and weekends. Please be sure that any questions you have are not already answered in the syllabus. I may not respond to nor acknowledge questions that can be answered in the syllabus.

Background and Refreshers

Ideally students will arrive prepared with a degree of background in Latin American politics and history. Advanced knowledge of Latin American history is a much-encouraged plus, but not a

prerequisite for enrollment. Readings and lectures are intended to be accessible to newcomers and specialists alike. As always, the best way to get around any problems that might arise due to gaps in the knowledge we come to the course with is to ask questions, to ask them often, and to ask them without fear.

Students less familiar might consider referencing general histories of Latin America such as:

John C. Chasteen (2011) *Born in Blood and Fire* (New York: W.W. Norton)

Tulio Halperin Donghi (1993) *The Contemporary History of Latin America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press)

Eduardo Galeano (1997) *Open Veins of Latin America* (New York: Monthly Review Press)

Robert Gwynne and Cristobal Kay (1999) *Latin America Transformed* (New York: Routledge)

Additional Resources

A very (very, very) partial list of potentially useful links for more information on the history and present of extractivism and research in political ecology. I expect many of you have your own preferred sources, which I encourage you to share on the course Discussion Board this semester.

University of Toronto's United Nations and Intergovernmental Organization Research Guide – <https://guides.library.utoronto.ca/igo> -- your one-stop source for NGO and IGO reports, datasets, and agreements (includes a Google custom search!).

Environmental Conflict Atlas – <https://ejatlas.org/> – crowd-sourced global resource on ongoing and resolved environmental conflicts.

Mining.com – <https://mining.com> – comprehensive and global mining industry journal.

Mining Watch Canada – <https://miningwatch.ca> – activist website and organization focusing on the impact of Canadian mining companies throughout the world.

Mining Injustice Solidarity Network – <https://mininginjustice.org/> -- Toronto-based organization working to educate the public on the impact of mining on peoples and places in Canada and throughout the world.

Washington Office on Latin America – www.wola.org – US-based think tank and lobbying organization focusing on human rights issues in the Americas.

North American Council on Latin America – www.nacla.org – Academic and non-Academic journal dedicated to news and analysis on contemporary Latin American affairs.

Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales, FLACSO – <http://www.flacso.org> – network of Latin American researchers and research institutions.

General Readers on Political Ecology:

Raymond L. Bryant, ed. (2015) *The International Handbook of Political Ecology*
Malden, MA: Edward Elgar Publishing.

Tom Perreault, Gavin Bridge, James McCarthy, eds. (2015) *The Routledge Handbook of Political Ecology*. New York: Routledge.

Schedule of Readings and Topics

Please note that all readings are available on the U of T library website, or through a search on Google Scholar.

This schedule is subject to revision in response to current events.

1.

September 3 – Intro to the seminar, its themes, and its participants (and a very brief intro to the Latin American region)

Antonio Voce, Leyland Cecco, and Chris Michael. 2021. ‘Cultural genocide’: The shameful history of Canada’s residential schools – mapped. *The Guardian*.
<http://www.theguardian.com/world/ng-interactive/2021/sep/06/canada-residential-schools-indigenous-children-cultural-genocide-map>

Watch:

Edward Burtynsky (2018) *Anthropocene: The Human Epoch* *Available online via media commons

2.

September 10 – Political Ecology Approaches

****Deadline for Toxic Tour Group Sign-up****

Enrique Leff (2015) “Encountering Political Ecology: Epistemology and Emancipation” in *The International Handbook of Political Ecology*, Raymond L Bryant, ed. Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar, 44-56. (Ebook available through library website).

Rebecca Elmhirst (2015) “Feminist Political Ecology” in *The Routledge Handbook of Political Ecology*. Tom Perreault, Gavin Bridge, James McCarthy, eds. New York: Routledge (Ebook available through library website).

Joan Martínez-Alier (2012) Environmental Justice and Economic Degrowth: An Alliance between Two Movements. *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, 23:1, 51-73.

Suggested:

Andrea Spikin and Jorge Rojas Hernández (2016) "Climate Change in Latin America: Inequality, Conflict, and Social Movements of Adaptation" *Latin American Perspectives* 43(4): 4-11.

Juanita Sundberg (2008) "Placing Race in Environmental Justice Research in Latin America" *Society and Natural Resources* 21: 569-582.

Arturo Escobar (2006) "Difference and Conflict in the Struggle over Natural Resources: A Political Ecology Framework" *Development* 49(3): 6-13.

3.

September 17 – Extractivism

Murat Arsel, et al (2016) "The Extractive Imperative in Latin America" *The Extractive Industries and Society* 3(4): 880-887.

Castriela Esther Hernández Reyes (2019) "Black women's struggles against extractivism, land dispossession, and marginalization in Colombia." *Latin American Perspectives* 46(2): 217-234.

Working Group on Mining and Human Rights in Latin America (2014) *The Impact of Canadian Mining in Latin America and Canada's Responsibility: Executive Summary*.
http://www.dplf.org/sites/default/files/report_canadian_mining_executive_summary.pdf

Watch:

Hija de la Laguna (Daughter of the Lake – Ernesto Cabellos, 2015)
https://librarysearch.library.utoronto.ca/permalink/01UTORONTO_INST/14bjeso/alma991106209670806196

4.

September 24– Dependent Development and/as Extraction

****Toxic Tour Proposal Due Before Class on Quercus****

Andre Gunder Frank. 2014. The Development of Underdevelopment. In *The Globalization and Development Reader: Perspectives on Development and Global Change*. Malden: Wiley-Blackwell.

Linda Farthing and Nicole Fabricant (2018) "Open Veins Revisited: Charting the Social, Economic, and Political Contours of the New Extractivism in Latin America" *Latin American Perspectives* 45(5): 4-17.

Cristóbal Kay (2018) Modernization and Dependency Theory. From *The Routledge Handbook of Latin American Development* Julie Cupples, Marcel Palomino-Schalscha, and Manuel Prieto, eds. New York: Routledge, pp 15-28.

Suggested

Interview with Arturo Escobar on post-development in Latin America

<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/openeconomy/latin-america-in-post-development-era-interview-with-artu/>

5.

October 1 – Carbon Democracy

****Revised Proposal Due before Class on Quercus****

Timothy Mitchell (2009) “Carbon Democracy” *Economy and Society* 38(3): 399-432.

Imre Szeman and Caleb Wellum (2023) “Carbon Democracy at 10: An Interview with Timothy Mitchell” *Cultural Studies* 37(3): 351-369.

6.

October 8 – Extractive Cities and the Urbanization of Nature

****Site visit to Evergreen Brickworks (details TBD)****

Martín Arboleda (2016) “In the Nature of the Non-City: Expanded Infrastructural Networks and the Political Ecology of Planetary Urbanisation” *Antipode* 48(2): 233-251.

Niko Block (2017) “Toronto’s Buried History: The Dark Story of How Mining Built a City” *The Guardian* <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2017/mar/03/toronto-hidden-history-how-city-built-mining>

Download and participate in the Mining Injustice Solidarity Network’s “Toxic TO” Tour of the Toronto: <https://mininginjustice.org/tour/>

7.

October 15 – Midterm Exam (in class)

8.

October 22 – ‘Progressive’ Extractivism

Maristella Svampa (2015) Commodities Consensus: Neoextractivism and Enclosure of the Commons in Latin America *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 114(1): 65-82.

Thea Riofrancos (2017) “*Extractivismo* Unearthed: A Genealogy of a Radical Discourse” *Cultural Studies* 31(2-3): 277-306.

Gudynas, Eduardo (2010) 'The New Extractivism of the 21st Century: Ten Urgent Theses about Extractivism in Relation to Current South American Progressivism.' *Americas Program Report*. Washington, DC: Center for International Policy. <http://postdevelopment.net/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/NewExtractivism10ThesesGudynas10.pdf>

Suggested

Karen Siegel (2016) "Fulfilling Promises of More Substantive Democracy?: Post-Neoliberalism and Natural Resource Governance in South America." *Development and Change*. 47(3): 495-516.

9.

October 29 – reading week, no class

10.

November 5 – Political Ecology after Extractivism

****Response paper due before class on Quercus****

Sebastián Ureta and Patricio Flores (2022) *Worlds of Gray and Green: Mineral Extraction as Ecological Practice*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

10.

November 12 – Alternatives and Aftermaths

Kingsbury, Donald, Teresa Kramarz and Kyle Jacques (2018) "Populism or Petrostate?: The Afterlives of Ecuador's Yasuní-ITT Initiative" *Society and Natural Resources* 32(5): 530-547.

Petrocultures Research Group (2016) *After Oil*.

**The entire book is well worth the read, however for our purposes please focus on pages 9-30, 55-74. Available at:

<https://afteroil.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/After-Oil.pdf>

Suggested:

Environmental Governance Lab, U of T "We did it!"

<https://wedidit2050.ca/>

Kim Stanley Robinson (2020) *The Ministry for the Future*. Orbit Books.

11.

November 19

No class; prep day

12.

November 26

Presentations

Toxic Tour Group Project
POL 360
Fall 2025

What: Working in groups of 5, you are tasked with building a ‘Toxic Tour’ in the GTA. The purpose of this project is to not only engage in original, *in situ* research in our surroundings, but to also register the impacts of extraction and development as they span multiple sites and encounters using a political ecology approach. The project also encourages students to think of socio-natural relationships beyond immediate sites of resource extraction, working through topics such as supply chains, waste and recycling, and labour power.

Why: Toxic Tours have been utilized by activist networks around the world to give outsiders first-hand exposure to socio-environmental conflicts. While the geographical focus of the course is on ‘the Americas,’ this project encourages students to take an expansive view of the role of extractive industries and development, keeping in mind also that extractivism is a globe-spanning material and ideological complex. Given Political Ecology’s multi-disciplinary, multi-sited, and potentially multi-species approach, the emphasis in the toxic tour will be on power relations across social and ecological relations. As such, the project aims to draw attention to the politics both of uniquely place-based dynamics as well as larger networked and potentially global concentrations of abundance, risk, and resistance.

How: Use the example of the Mining Injustice Solidarity Network’s Toxic TO as a (very well done) rough guide. Students may choose to be creative with their toxic tours in order to convey information and experience in thought-provoking and informative ways, for example in utilizing soundscapes or other sensory experiences, unique archives, or engagements with speculative futures. Remember: Toxic Tours are not only meant to convey information, they are also invitations to see the world differently and calls to different forms of action.

Some potential starting points (this is by no means an exhaustive list)

- Ashbridges Bay water treatment plant
- Ontario Place
- Ontario line construction
- Hidden ravines/buried rivers
- Indigenous reclamation
- Leslie Spit/Tommy Thompson Park
- Ontario Food Terminal
- Garbage and recycling facilities
- Power plants
- Retail spaces selling mined/forested products
- Condominium development and housing
- Labour migration
- Docklands
- Island Airport
- Mining regulators

Students should meet with their groups as soon as possible. We will have brief in class discussion on activist tactics and specifically on toxic tours and participant research throughout the semester. We will also explore roles and responsibilities of effective group research and writing, as well as necessary elements in preparing for oral presentations. At the outset of your collaboration it may help to assign roles (I would also suggest rotating these roles as the semester progresses so everyone has an equal opportunity). Some sample roles:

- Facilitator
- Note taker
- Task master
- Vibe checker
- Devil's advocate

*while you will all be responsible for research, it may be beneficial during meetings to assign specific tech-workers and screen users in order to minimize screen distractions

When (key dates and benchmarks):

1. Two meetings with prof (5 pts total, 2.5 pts each)

At least one member of each group is required to meet with the professor at two points during the project. First, during crafting of the proposal, groups should consult with the professor on topics, concepts, and cases in order to get started on the best foot possible. Then, during the second half of the semester (after reading week), group representatives are required to provide the professor with a status report on research, writing, and group dynamics.

The mark for this will be assigned to the group as a whole.

2. Proposal (5 pts; 2 pages, double spaced)

The proposal introduces the topic for the toxic tour and makes the case for why it is relevant to the course. Proposals should clearly identify the place or process the tour will follow and highlight no less than three concepts introduced in the class to help in the research and composition of the tour.

The mark for this will be assigned to the group as a whole.

3. Revised Proposal (5 pts, ~5 pages, double-spaced)

The revised proposal should directly respond to any comments or questions from the initial proposal. It should also provide more detailed background for the project, and propose stops or sites for the tour. This paper is expected to incorporate concepts and texts from course reading, but will also require extensive use of media or other 'grey literature' sources.

Examples of the sorts of topics or approaches worth considering for this assignment may include (note: this is not a checklist):

- Discussion and selection criteria for potential 'stops' along the toxic tour
- Historical background and causes
- Consequences and current conditions

- State responses
- Civil Society responses
- Private Sector responses
- Comparison to other cases

The mark for this will be assigned to the group as a whole.

4. Presentation (5 pts, 5 minute in-class presentation)

Using Google Maps, Google Earth, or a similar platform, groups will outline a route with a *minimum of 5 stops* or points of the project's intervention, introducing, describing, and discussing a point of interest for the highlighted stop. This is meant to be a brief introduction to the project – due to time constraints not every group member will be able to present.

The mark for this will be assigned to the group as a whole.

5. Final Report (15 points, 10 pages double-spaced)

The Final Report for the class and project will be the more fleshed out version the brief introduction presented in class. It should incorporate elements from the proposal as well as explorations of the map's stops and narrative descriptions. In the report students should also relate the specific content and context of their toxic tour to concepts from course readings, lectures, and discussions. The Final Report should be more academic in tone than the presentation, incorporating both peer-reviewed and grey literature sources.

The mark for this will be assigned to the group as a whole.

6. Debrief document (5 pts, 2-3 pages double-spaced)

The professor will circulate a template for you to assess and reflect upon your research, your work, and the work of your group in this project. This is not a simple response paper, but is rather your chance to tie up your work, extend any points you were not able to include in previously submitted materials, and account for the labour you have invested in the finished podcast. Please note that debrief papers may also be used to weigh group members' contributions to the project as a whole.

The mark for this will be assigned to group members on an individual basis.

Resources:

Mining Injustice Solidarity Network Toxic Tour (info)
<https://mininginjustice.org/tour/>

Recording and Playing Tours on Google Earth
<https://support.google.com/earth/answer/148174?hl=en>