

AK1204 Environmental History – course analysis, spring term 2020

Overview of the course

Title: Environmental History

Course code: AK1204

Credits: 7.5 hp

Examination: INL1 (essay, 7.5 hp, A-F)

Number of students: 16

Activities: lectures, seminars, lab, weekly assignments, oral and written presentations, final workshop

Course leader: Roberta Biasillo, Division of History of Science, Technology and Environment

Other teachers: Jesse Peterson, Ethemcan Turhan, Daniele Valisena, Marco Armiero

Examiner: Per Högselius, Division of History of Science, Technology and Environment

Description of the course evaluation process

In addition to the regular course evaluation, students were, at the end of each session, given room to express their opinions on the design and content of the session and the course. Students also sent emails with suggestions that in most cases were incorporated into the course while it was given.

Description of meetings with students

During the course the course leader allocated 2.5 hours to individual meetings with students. The students were provided with a link to a doodle where they could book their time slots. All of them showed up at least once and the course leader regularly assisted them via mail.

Course design

16 March	Introduction to the course. What is history and what is the environment?	E.H. Carr, What is history? Penguin Books, 1990, pp. 7-30. Sverker Sörlin and Paul Warde, Making the Environment Historical – An Introduction, in S. Sörlin, Nature's End, 1-19.	Roberta Biasillo
19 March	How to do environmental history?	Worster, Donald. "Appendix: doing environmental history." The Ends of the Earth: Perspectives on Modern Environmental History (1988): 289-307.	Roberta Biasillo
23 March	Environmental history of modern migration	M. Armiero and R. Tucker, Introduction, migrants in environmental history, in Environmental history of Modern Migrations (2017): 1-16.	Roberta Biasillo
26 March	Tools and methods	Rutherford, Stephanie. "A Resounding Success? Howling as a Source of Environmental History." in Methodological Challenges in Nature-Culture and Environmental History Research. Jocelyn	Jesse Peterson

		Thorpe, Stephanie Rutherford, and L. Anders Sandberg, eds. Routledge, 2016: 43-54. Thorpe, Jocelyn. "It Matters Where You Begin. A (continuing) Journey Towards Decolonizing Research." in <i>Methodological Challenges in Nature-Culture and Environmental History Research</i> . Jocelyn Thorpe, Stephanie Rutherford, and L. Anders Sandberg, eds. Routledge, 2016: 130-143.	
30 March	Mobility in imperial settings	Crosby, Alfred W. "Ecological Imperialism: The Overseas Migration of Western Europeans as a Biological Phenomenon." In <i>The Ends of the Earth: Perspectives on Modern Environmental History</i> , edited by Donald Worster, 103-17. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988. William Beinart and Karen Middleton, <i>Plant Transfers in Historical Perspective: A Review Article</i> , <i>Environment and History</i> , Vol. 10, No. 1 (February 2004), pp. 3-29.	Roberta Biasillo
2 April	Source analysis for environmental historians	Watch the the director's cut of the movie "In the Shadow of Ebola" by environmental historian Gregg Mitman (among others) and explore the website	Roberta Biasillo
6 April	Migration and climate (change)	Chris Methmann & Delf Rothe (2014) <i>Tracing the spectre that haunts Europe: the visual construction of climate-induced migration in the MENA region</i> , <i>Critical Studies on Security</i> , 2:2, 162-179. Mike Davis, "The Poor Eat Their Homes", in: M. Davis, <i>Late Victorian Holocausts. El Nino Famines and the Making of the Third World</i> , Verso, New York, 2002, 61-90.	Ethemçan Turhan
9 April	Digital humanities projects	Video on Digital Humanities by environmental historian Wilko Graf von Hardenberg	Roberta Biasillo
16 April	COVID-19, climate change and migration	"Climate Change, Migration and COVID19", webinar by Alex Randall.	Roberta Biasillo
20 April	Internal migration in Brazil	Angus Wright, <i>Environmental degradation as a cause of migration: precautionary tales from Brazil</i> , in <i>Environmental history of Modern Migrations (2017)</i> :159-176	Daniele Valisena
23 April	Italian miners in Belgium	Daniele Valisena and Marco Armiero, <i>Coal Lives: body, work and memory among Italian miners in Wallonia, Belgium</i> , in <i>Environmental history of Modern Migrations (2017)</i> : 88-108	Daniele Valisena

27 April	Workshop on final assignment	Draft of the final assignment	Roberta Biasillo
4 May	Workshop on final assignment	Draft of the final assignment	Roberta Biasillo

General intended learning outcomes of the course were presented and discussed in class; each class was opened by the introduction of the ILO and a lot of attention was given to design a coherent course and to provide useful information to draft the final assignment.

Classes included different activities and formats and several instructors with different approaches and background; past, present and future issues were combined and connected; students' interests and ideas were included and some changes in the initial plan depended on students' requests. A specific focus on the ongoing pandemic was added to make the course more responded to present debates.

Students' workload

All students made effort to attend classes despite the transition to the online format. They came prepared to the classes and asked questions about aspects of the readings they did not fully grasp.

Students' results on the course

The students generally performed exceptionally well and were given high grades, usually A or B. Two students dropped out after a few classes. The others, however, followed the course with a lot of participation and enthusiasm. The shutdown of the campus created some difficulties, though.

Students' answers to open questions

What was the best aspect of the course?

- Very good course leader/main teacher, Roberta. Knowledgeable and engaged. Permitting but precise. It was unpretentious and she made sure to let all students speak, develop and get answers to their questions, without letting go of quality demands.
- The course contents.
- The course opened to me a new aspect of history which is combined with the environment. The course is very beneficial for understanding the importance of the environment in economic, social, cultural, political etc. cases. I understood that the place of humans and the things humans have are not separable from nature.

What would you suggest to improve?

- Some texts were pretty hard to understand.
- To get feedback on weekly assignments handed in and at the same time clearer instructions and requirements for grades in the final essay.
- I can suggest to allocate more time for course project feedback.

What advice would you like to give to future participants?

- Read the texts well in advance of the deadlines. When you do the final essay, read different sources from different institutions so that possible personal agendas can be found. Pay attention.
- Students' curiosity and active participation in the class will help them to internalize the subjects of the class.

Is there anything else you would like to add?

- Roberta did a fantastic work!
- Thank you for conducting the class successfully!

Summary of students' opinions

I worked with interesting issues: +2/+3

The course was challenging in a stimulating way: +2

I was able to practice and receive feedback without being graded: +2

The assessment on the course was fair and honest: +2

I was able to learn by collaborating and discussing with others: +2/+3

I was able to get support if I needed it: +2

Overall impression

Both the students and the instructors made their best to stimulate conversations and debate, in spite of the problem that they found themselves not to be physically on campus. The quality of the questions the teachers got during the classes and the quality of the final assignments were surprising and not expected at the beginning. The cooperation between the main instructor and the other teachers worked smoothly.

Analysis

Stronger area:

- 1) the way in which each class was designed: there was always (apart from two workshops and one lab) an introduction to the topic, a 45 min interactive lectures (with video and discussions around the readings) + activities to be carried out all together or in small groups;
- 2) students were always allowed and invited to step in and give short presentations;
- 3) collaboration among the different instructors worked very well and involved discussions between teachers in advance the contents of their classes.

Weaker areas:

- 1) according also to students' comments, a few readings were a bit hard to approach and we should consider carefully how to select readings next time;
- 2) more attention to students' weekly assignments should be given but it is challenging timewise for the teachers to give prompt written feedback to students on all their assignments.
- 3) International students have harder time to attend and complete the course.

Prioritized course development

In the long term, if these conditions persist, blended learning activities should be considered since the early phase of the course design.