

PECO 5502
Geography of Commodities
Winter 2026
Institute of Political Economy

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Brightspace course page link

1. Course Description

This graduate seminar examines the political ecology of commodities, analyzing how natural resources become integrated into global capitalist circuits of production and accumulation. Through critical engagement with political ecology scholarship and case studies of specific commodities (copper, salmon, oil, bananas, wine, water), students will develop advanced analytical capabilities to assess the social, environmental, and geographical transformations resulting from resource extraction and commodity production.

2. Preclusions

none.

3. Learning Outcomes

Upon successful completion of this course, students will:

- Demonstrate mastery of core theoretical frameworks in political ecology and their application to commodity geography.
- Critically analyze the processes through which nature is commodified and the resulting socio-environmental consequences at multiple scales.
- Evaluate competing perspectives on resource governance, distribution of wealth, and environmental justice in commodity-producing regions.
- Synthesize interdisciplinary scholarship to develop original arguments about commodity geographies.
- Communicate complex geographical concepts through discipline-appropriate written and oral formats at graduate level.

4. Texts & Course Materials

List required, supplementary, reserve, other readings/sources, and availability (e.g., ARES, bookstore, etc.)

- Bustos et al (2023) Introduction: Suturing the veins. Routledge Handbook Latin America and the Environment.
- Himley, Havice, Valdivia (2022). Critical Resource Geography: An Introduction. The Routledge Handbook Critical Resource Geography.
- Bakker, K. & G. Bridge (2022). Material Worlds Redux: Mobilizing Materiality within Critical Resource Geography. Ch. 4 of The Routledge Handbook Critical Resource Geography.

- Prudham, S. (2009) Commodification, ch. 9 in a companion to Environmental geography (123-142)
- Bustos-Gallardo, B. (2022). Anadromous Frontiers: Reframing Citizenship in Extractive Regions. The Salmon Industry in Los Lagos, Chile. Ch 31 of The Routledge Handbook Critical Resource Geography.
- Boyd, W., Prudham, W. S., & Schurman, R. A. (2001). Industrial dynamics and the problem of nature. Society and Natural Resources, 14(7), 555-570. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08941920120686>
- Finn, J. L. (2023). Tracing the veins: Of copper, culture, and community from Butte to Chuquicamata. Univ of California Press. Ch 1 (1-29) 2 (29-72)
- Yafa, S. (2006). Cotton: The biography of a revolutionary fiber. Penguin. Intro (1-9) ch. 1 (9-25) 6 (118-146) 8 (173-201)
- Bridge, G. (2011) Oil. Polity Press. Ch. 1 & 2.
- Bakker, K. (2012). Water: Political, biopolitical, material. Social studies of science, 42(4), 616-623.
- Page, B. (2005). Paying for water and the geography of commodities. Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers, 30(3), 293-306.
- Fridell, 2014. Coffee. Polity Press. Ch 1 and 5
- Christophers, B. (2016). For real: Land as capital and commodity. Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers, 41(2), 134-148.
- Deborah Naybor (2015) Land as fictitious commodity: the continuing evolution of women's land rights in Uganda, Gender, Place & Culture, 22:6, 884-900, DOI:10.1080/0966369X.2014.917275
- Bustos-Gallardo, B., Bridge, G., & Prieto, M. (2021). Harvesting Lithium: water, brine and the industrial dynamics of production in the Salar de Atacama. Geoforum, 119, 177-189. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2021.01.001>
- "Students are not required to purchase textbooks or other learning materials for this course."

5. Course Calendar

week	Date	Theme	Concept	Readings	Evaluation checkpoints
1	Jan 9	Introduction - Political ecology	Nature is political	Bustos et al (2023) Introduction: Suturing the veins. Handbook Latin America and the Environment.	Sign up for class discussion leadership
2	Jan 16	Creating worlds-creating resources	resource making	Himley, Havice, Valdivia (2022). Critical Resource Geography: An Introduction. The Routledge Handbook Critical Resource Geography.	Book selection
3	Jan 23	materiality	real/ formal subsumption of nature	Bakker, K. & G. Bridge (2022). Material Worlds Redux: Mobilizing Materiality within Critical Resource Geography. Ch. 4 of The Routledge Handbook Critical Resource Geography.	
4	Jan 30	commoditization	commoditization	Prudham, S. (2009) Commodification, ch. 9 in a companion to Environmental geography (123-142)	At least 2 workshop outcomes completed

5	feb-06	salmon	resource frontier	Bustos-Gallardo, B. (2022). Anadromous Frontiers: Reframing Citizenship in Extractive Regions. The Salmon Industry in Los Lagos, Chile. Ch 31 of The Routledge Handbook Critical Resource Geography.	Reading plan
			Nature as opportunity/obstacle	Boyd, W., Prudham, W. S., & Schurman, R. A. (2001). Industrial dynamics and the problem of nature. Society and Natural Resources, 14(7), 555-570. https://doi.org/10.1080/08941920120686	
6	feb-13	copper	ecological contradictions	Finn, J. L. (2023). Tracing the veins: Of copper, culture, and community from Butte to Chuquicamata. Univ of California Press. Ch 1 (1-29) 2 (29-72)	
—	Feb 16-20	no classes			
7	feb-27	cotton	resource frontier and landscape transformation	Yafa, S. (2006). Cotton: The biography of a revolutionary fiber. Penguin. Intro (1-9) ch. 1 (9-25) 6 (118-146) 8 (173-201)	Progress check
8	mar-06	oil	geopolitics of resources	Bridge, G. (2011) Oil. Polity Press. Ch. 1 & 2.	At least 6 workshop outcomes completed
9	mar-13	water	materiality	Bakker, K. (2012). Water: Political, biopolitical, material. Social studies of science, 42(4), 616-623.	Draft thesis statement
				Page, B. (2005). Paying for water and the geography of commodities. Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers, 30(3), 293-306.	
10	mar-20	coffee	core-periphery	Fridell, 2014. Coffee. Polity Press. Ch 1 and 5	
11	mar-27	land	Fictitious commodity	Christophers, B. (2016). For real: Land as capital and commodity. Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers, 41(2), 134-148.	Peer review workshop
				Deborah Naylor (2015) Land as fictitious commodity: the continuing evolution of women's land rights in Uganda, Gender, Place & Culture, 22:6,	

				884-900, DOI:10.1080/0966369X.2014.917275	
12	Apr 3	lithium	eco-regulation	Bustos-Gallardo, B., Bridge, G., & Prieto, M. (2021). Harvesting Lithium: water, brine and the industrial dynamics of production in the Salar de Atacama. <i>Geoforum</i> , 119, 177-189. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2021.01.001	Book review Final submission

6. Evaluation

This course will have the following components to assess the performance of its students:

Component	Weight	Description
Book Review	40%	Full book analysis of chosen commodity
Weekly Workshops	40%	Practical activities (10 total)
Participation & Reading Engagement	20%	Discussion contributions + reading responses

- 1. Book Review:** Students select **one complete book** from the course bibliography focusing on a single commodity. They must read the entire book (not just excerpts) and write a **critical review** that demonstrates political ecology analytical skills.

Students choose from:

- Bridge, G. (2013). *Oil* - Polity Press
- Koeppl, D. (2009). *Banana: The fate of the fruit that changed the world* - Plume
- Lichatowich, J. (1999). *Salmon without rivers* - Island Press
- Mintz, S.W. (1985). *Sweetness and power: The place of sugar in modern history* - Penguin
- Prudham, S. (2005). *Knock on wood: Nature as commodity in Douglas-Fir Country* - Routledge
- Frydell, G. (2014). *Coffee* - Polity Press
- Ryan, O. (2012). *Chocolate nations: Living and dying for cocoa in West Africa* - Zed Books
- Yafa, S. (2006). *Cotton: The biography of a revolutionary fiber* - Penguin
- Finn, J.L. (2023). *Tracing the veins: Of copper, culture, and community*

The timeline of this assignment is as follows:

Week	Checkpoint	Activity
Week 2	Book selection	Students announce choice via email; professor confirms no duplicates/provides guidance

Week	Checkpoint	Activity
Week 5	Reading plan	Submit brief outline showing planned reading schedule (which chapters by when)
Week 8	Progress check	Optional individual consultations (10 min via Zoom); discuss emerging ideas
Week 10	Draft thesis statement	Submit 1-paragraph argument + 3 key sources from course they'll engage
Week 12	Peer review workshop	Exchange draft introductions + one analytical section; provide structured feedback
Week 15	Final submission	Complete review due

2. Weekly workshops. Students complete **10 workshops** across 12 content weeks (Weeks 1-4, 5-12, excluding reading week).

Weekly Workshop Evaluation Checklist:

Each week, professor/TA evaluates using simple checklist:

Submission Quality:

- ☐ Submitted on time
- ☐ Follows format instructions
- ☐ Demonstrates reading comprehension
- ☐ Shows analytical thinking (not just description)
- ☐ Visual/creative components (if required) are clear and purposeful

In class Participation:

- ☐ Attended session
- ☐ Contributed to discussions
- ☐ Participated in breakout activities
- ☐ Respectful and constructive engagement

Result:  Counts toward 10 |  Needs revision |  Does not count

Students who receive  have **48 hours to revise** based on feedback.

Formative Feedback Moments:

To ensure students understand expectations before too many workshops accumulate:

Week 3 Check-in:

- Professor reviews all Week 1-2 submissions
- Provides individual written feedback highlighting strengths and areas for improvement
- Class discussion: "What makes an excellent workshop submission?"

Week 7 Mid-point Review:

- Students receive individualized report showing:
 - Workshops completed: X/5
 - Current trajectory: "On track for 7.0" / "Needs 5 more"

- Qualitative feedback on patterns (strengths to maintain, areas to develop)

This formative approach helps students adjust before it's too late.

3. Participation and reading engagement. Students sign up (individually or in pairs) to co-facilitate one week's discussion with professor:

Responsibilities:

- Prepare 3-4 discussion questions
- Lead one 15-minute segment
- Synthesize breakout group findings
- Connect readings to weekly activity

Grades

In accordance with the Carleton University Calendar, the letter grades assigned in this course will have the following percentage equivalents:

A+ = 90-100	B+ = 77-79	C+ = 67-69	D+ = 57-59
A = 85-89	B = 73-76	C = 63-66	D = 53-56
A - = 80-84	B - = 70-72	C - = 60-62	D - = 50-52
F = Below 50			

WDN = Withdrawn from the course

ABS = Student absent from final exam

DEF = Deferred (see below)

FND = (Failed, no Deferred) = Student could not pass the course even with 100% on final exam

Please note, however, that at the graduate level, a final grade of less than B- at the end of the term is considered a failure. As a result, the grading scheme will be as follows:

A: Excellent, high quality, and very insightful work; reveals a very solid engagement with the course materials and an outstanding capacity to articulate their significance; excellent communication skills (written/oral); highly sophisticated analytical and critical thinking skills. A+ grades will be reserved for exceptional work that is of publishable quality; A- marks indicate that there is space for improvement in certain identifiable respects even within an overall strong performance.

B: Some good insights but with some significant shortcomings too; the capacity to understand and meaningfully engage with the course materials is visible, but the quality of the work is uneven and presents some important flaws or omissions. Some ideas could be more fully articulated, explained, illustrated, or developed.

C: At the graduate level, this is considered a fail. This means that the works does not meet the overall expectations for the assignment, including that it fails to meet the basic guidelines for the assignment, or that it reflects poor analytical or communication skills.

Standing in a course is determined by the course instructor subject to the approval of the Faculty Dean. This means that grades submitted by the instructor may be subject to revision. No grades are final until they have been approved by the Dean. Standing in the course will be shown by alphabetical grades.

Deferred Assignments and/or Grades

In the interest of fairness to all students, any assignment turned in late without an extension will be subject to a penalty proportional to the work expected and tardiness. Please reach out early and let me know if you are having, or anticipate having, problems completing course assignments on time. I am here to help you get the assistance you need to succeed in this course. Extensions may be granted in the event of extenuating circumstances. I want to help you get into the habit of turning in work on time.

If, due to illness or circumstances beyond your control, you are unable to submit essential assignments before the end of the term, only official deferrals petitioned through the Office of the Registrar will be honoured.

c. Final Grade Approval

“Standing in a course is determined by the course instructor subject to the approval of the Faculty Dean. This means that grades submitted by the instructor may be subject to revision. No grades are final until they have been approved by the Dean.”

7. Statement on Academic Integrity

University regulations stipulate that any allegation of plagiarism, cheating, or other violation of conduct rules will be thoroughly reviewed. Academic dishonesty in any form will not be tolerated. To learn more about Carleton’s policy on academic integrity (including what constitutes plagiarism, potential penalties, and procedures) see: <https://carleton.ca/FASS-FPA-teaching-regulations/course-outlines/#sect3>.

On Plagiarism: The University Academic Integrity Policy defines plagiarism as “presenting, whether intentionally or not, the ideas, expression of ideas or work of others as one’s own.” This includes reproducing or paraphrasing portions of someone else’s published or unpublished material, regardless of the source, and presenting these as one’s own without proper citation or reference to the original source. Examples of sources from which the ideas, expressions of ideas or works of others may be drawn from include but are not limited to: books, articles, papers, literary compositions and phrases, performance compositions, chemical compounds, artworks, laboratory reports, research results, calculations and the results of calculations, diagrams, constructions, computer reports, computer code/software, material on the internet and/or conversations.

Examples of plagiarism include, but are not limited to:

- any submission prepared in whole or in part, by someone else, including the unauthorized use of generative AI tools (e.g., ChatGPT);
- any submission prepared in whole or in part, by someone else;
- using ideas or direct, verbatim quotations, paraphrased material, algorithms, formulae, scientific or mathematical concepts, or ideas without appropriate acknowledgment in any academic assignment;
- using another's data or research findings without appropriate acknowledgement;
- submitting a computer program developed in whole or in part by someone else, with or without modifications, as one's own; and
- failing to acknowledge sources through the use of proper citations when using another's work and/or failing to use quotations marks.

Plagiarism is a serious offence that cannot be resolved directly by the course's instructor. The Associate Dean of the Faculty conducts a rigorous investigation, including an interview with the student, when an instructor suspects a piece of work has been plagiarized. Penalties are not trivial. They can include a final grade of "F" for the course.

We will discuss plagiarism in more detail in class and review methods for proper attribution and referencing of others' work.

On the Submission of Original Work: Please note that in this course, as in many others at Carleton, **you are not permitted to submit substantially the same piece of work more than once for academic credit.** For example, it is expected that you are not handing in the same final report for credit in multiple courses. That said, you are encouraged to continue to develop ideas and analysis you began to explore earlier or may be exploring elsewhere, and many course assignments are in fact designed to facilitate your ongoing thinking and writing on developing topics of interest. If you would like to refer to or draw upon any of your own past work or work you are undertaking in another course, please just cite this work as you would any other source. Along with plagiarism, we will discuss this issue more in class. If you have questions or concerns about using your prior work, do not hesitate to reach out to me directly to discuss them at any time.

In this course, you are expected to do your own reading and work. You may use platforms of **artificial intelligence** to complement your research, systematize queries and edit your writing. **HOWEVER**, you need to include in every submitted work a statement on how and what AI assistant you use: *"For the writing of this book review, I use Grammarly for wording editing, Chat GPT for author's biographical notes and mindmapping."* Use beyond this scope will be considered a violation of academic integrity and treated as such. AI platforms allowed for this course are: Grammarly for writing, Research Rabbit and Scispace for book review and ChatGPT for author's bios.

8. Statement on Student Mental Health

"As a student you may experience a range of mental health challenges that significantly impact your academic success and overall well-being. If you need help, please speak to someone. There are numerous resources available both on- and off-campus to support you. For more information, please consult <https://wellness.carleton.ca/>"

Instructors may also wish to list of some or all the following resources:

Emergency Resources ([on and off campus](#))

- Suicide Crisis Helpline: call or text 9-8-8, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.
- For immediate danger or urgent medical support: call 9-1-1

Carleton Resources

- Mental Health and Wellbeing: <https://carleton.ca/wellness/>
- Health & Counselling Services: <https://carleton.ca/health/>
- Paul Menton Centre: <https://carleton.ca/pmc/>
- Academic Advising Centre (AAC): <https://carleton.ca/academicadvising/>
- Centre for Student Academic Support (CSAS): <https://carleton.ca/csas/>
- Equity & Inclusivity Communities: <https://carleton.ca/equity/>

Off Campus Resources

- Distress Centre of Ottawa and Region: call 613-238-3311, text 343-306-5550, or connect online at <https://www.dcottawa.on.ca/>
- Mental Health Crisis Service: call 613-722-6914 or toll-free 1-866-996-0991, or connect online at <http://www.crisisline.ca/>
- Empower Me Counselling Service: call 1-844-741-6389 or connect online at <https://students.carleton.ca/services/empower-me-counselling-services/>
- Good2Talk: call 1-866-925-5454 or connect online at <https://good2talk.ca/>
- The Walk-In Counselling Clinic: for online or on-site service <https://walkincounselling.com>

9. Requests for Academic Accommodations

Carleton is committed to providing academic accessibility for all individuals. You may need special arrangements to meet your academic obligations during the term. The accommodation request processes, including information about the *Academic Consideration Policy for Students in Medical and Other Extenuating Circumstances*, are outlined on the Academic Accommodations website (students.carleton.ca/course-outline).

You should provide any **additional information** on your requirements for short-term informal accommodations.

- If you require supporting documentation for short-term considerations, you may only request the [Academic Consideration for Coursework form](#). You may **not** request medical notes or documentation.
- Consult the [Academic Consideration Policy for instructors](#) information page for more detail