

PECO 5504 – Special Topics in Work and Labour II

Political economy work of nature

Winter 2026

Institute of Political Economy Economy

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Brightspace course page link

1. Course Description

This graduate seminar explores the intersections between labor theories and ecological processes in understanding extractive economies, with particular attention to Latin American contexts. The course challenges traditional political economy frameworks by examining nature not as a passive resource but as an active, transformative agent in capitalist production and accumulation.

The seminar is structured in two interconnected parts. First, we revisit classical debates in political economy, examining labor theory of value alongside feminist interventions on social reproduction and unpaid work. This foundation allows us to critically assess what is gained and lost when extending value theory to encompass nature's work. Second, we engage with ecological Marxist scholarship on metabolism, entropy, and ecological contradictions to understand how nature's material agency shapes and constrains extractive capitalism.

Throughout the course, we grapple with a central question: *Can we integrate the work of nature into a theory of extractivism?* Students will analyze how the labor-intensity of primary commodity economies - with their attendant social struggles - intersects with the challenges that "taming nature" poses for capital accumulation. We examine the institutional and political forms through which nature's work is organized, contested, and transformed within extractive relations.

This reading-intensive seminar emphasizes critical theoretical synthesis, with students developing integrated frameworks that bridge classical political economy and contemporary ecological thought. Through case studies of Latin American extractive processes, students will apply these theoretical tools to analyze concrete struggles over labor conditions, environmental governance, and natural resource conflicts."

2. Preclusions

none.

3. Learning Outcomes

Upon successful completion of this course, students will:

1. Students will be able to evaluate existing theoretical limitations critically and propose integrated frameworks that account for both labor-intensity and nature's material agency in primary commodity production.
2. Students will demonstrate understanding of entropy, metabolism, and materiality as analytical tools for examining how natural processes both enable and constrain capitalist accumulation in extractive contexts.
3. Students will critically assess what is gained and lost when extending value theory frameworks to encompass both reproductive labor and ecological work.
4. Students will evaluate the institutional and political forms through which nature's work is organized, contested, and transformed within extractive capitalist relations.

4. Texts & Course Materials

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

- Moore, Jason W. (2015). *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital*. London: Verso Books.
- Smith, Adam (1776). "Of the Real and Nominal Price of Commodities, or their Price in Labour, and their Price in Money." In *The Wealth of Nations*, Book I, Chapter 5.
- Ricardo, David (1817). "On Value." In *On the Principles of Political Economy and Taxation*, Chapter 1.
- Marx, Karl (1867). "The Labour Process and the Process of Producing Surplus-Value" and "The Rate of Surplus-Value." In *Capital*, Volume I, Chapters 7-9.
- Harvey, David (2018). "Value in Motion." In *Marx, Capital and the Madness of Economic Reason*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, Chapter 1.
- Rubin, Isaak Illich (1972). "The Dialectical Development of Marx's Theory of Value." In *Essays on Marx's Theory of Value*. Detroit: Black and Red, Chapter 15.
- Leff, Enrique (2015). *Political Ecology in Latin America: the Social Re-Appropriation of Nature, the Reinvention of Territories and the Construction of an Environmental Rationality*. *Desenvolvimento e Meio Ambiente*, 35, 65-88.
- Merçon, Juliana (2025). *Diverse values of nature and political ontology*. *Ecology and Society*, 30(2):13.

- Federici, Silvia (2012). "The Reproduction of Labour Power in the Global Economy and the Unfinished Feminist Revolution." In *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle*. Oakland: PM Press, pp. 91-111.
- Mies, Maria (1986). "Social Origins of the Sexual Division of Labour." In *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale: Women in the International Division of Labour*. London: Zed Books, Chapter 4.
- Mitchell, Katharyne, Marston, Sallie A., & Katz, Cindi (Eds.) (2004). "Introduction: Life's Work: An Introduction, Review and Critique." In *Life's Work: Geographies of Social Reproduction*. Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 1-26.
- Mezzadri, Alessandra (2021). Feminist global political economies of work and social reproduction. *Review of International Political Economy*, 28(4), 837-857.
- Hall, Sarah Marie (2022). For feminist geographies of austerity. *Gender, Place & Culture*, 29(2), 271-292.
- Gago, Verónica (2017). "The Neoliberal Tactic." In *Neoliberalism from Below: Popular Pragmatics and Baroque Economies*. Durham: Duke University Press, Chapter 1.
- Galeano, Eduardo (1973). *Open Veins of Latin America: Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent*. New York: Monthly Review Press. [Selected chapters: "Lust for Gold, Lust for Silver" and "The Contemporary Structure of Plunder"]
- Hoyos, Héctor (2019). "Negative Political Ecology: Recent Latin American Fiction and the Literatures of Extraction." In *Things with a History: Transcultural Materialism and the Literatures of Extraction in Contemporary Latin America*. New York: Columbia University Press, Chapter 3.
- French, Jennifer & Heffes, Gisela (Eds.) (2023). *The Latin American Ecocultural Reader*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.

5. Course Calendar

Week	Date	Topics/Activities	Deliverables Due	Weekly Hours
1	Jan 9	Course Introduction Classical Political Economy Foundations	• Begin annotated bibliography entries (ongoing)	6 hours
2	Jan 16	Labor Theory of Value Nature's Value Debates	• Portfolio setup & first concept map • Annotated bibliography entries	7 hours
3	Jan 23	Feminist Theories of Work Social Reproduction	• Case study selection & pair formation • Discussion leadership begins	7 hours

Week	Date	Topics/Activities	Deliverables Due	Weekly Hours
4	Jan 30	Value Theory Connections: Labor and Nature	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Peer review: concept maps • Case study research proposal 	7 hours
5	Feb 6	Ecological Marxism Introduction Metabolic Rift Theory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Policy brief case selection • Second concept map 	7 hours
6	Feb 13	Entropy and Metabolism Nature's Agency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Policy research outline • Presentation preparation 	8 hours
—	Feb 16-20	READING WEEK	No classes - Research time	—
7	Feb 27	Student Presentations Begin Nature's Work in Practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Portfolio mid-point check • Presentations (pairs 1-2) 	8 hours
8	Mar 6	Student Presentations Continue Theoretical Applications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individual consultation (policy brief) • Third concept map • Presentations (pairs 3-4) 	9 hours
9	Mar 13	Final Presentations Synthesis/ Discussions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Policy brief draft • Final presentations • Begin infographic work 	8 hours
10	Mar 20	Institutional Forms Political Ecology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Peer review workshop (policy briefs) • Final infographics due • Concept map peer review 	8 hours
11	Mar 27	Extractivism and Resistance Future Directions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Final policy brief due • Podcast/video creation 	8 hours
12	Apr 3	Course Synthesis Final Reflections	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Final portfolio submission • Course evaluations 	7 hours

6. Evaluation

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

Component	Weight	Key Deliverables
Theoretical Synthesis Portfolio	30%	Digital portfolio + concept maps + 3-minute podcast/video
Case Study & Debate	25%	Research presentation + debate + infographic
Policy Brief	25%	2,500-word stakeholder analysis
Participation & Discussion	20%	Seminar facilitation + annotated bibliography

Theoretical Synthesis Portfolio (30%)

Students develop a digital portfolio documenting their theoretical learning journey throughout the semester, including annotated bibliography entries, bi-weekly concept maps connecting labor and ecological theories, and a final 3-minute podcast or video synthesizing key integrated concepts from the course.

Case Study Presentation & Debate with Infographic (25%)

Working in pairs, students research and present a 20-minute analysis of a specific extractive process examining nature's agency, engage in a structured 15-minute debate with peers using course concepts, and produce a final infographic that synthesizes their case analysis and incorporates insights from the debate discussion.

Policy Brief & Stakeholder Analysis (25%)

Students write a 2,500-word policy brief addressing a contemporary Latin American extractive conflict for a specific stakeholder audience (government agency, NGO, community organization, or international body), demonstrating practical application of the course's integrated labor-nature theoretical framework to real-world governance challenges.

Seminar Participation & Discussion Leadership (20%)

Students actively contribute to weekly seminar discussions, take turns facilitating class sessions with prepared discussion questions, and maintain ongoing annotated bibliography entries that demonstrate critical engagement with course readings and emerging theoretical connections.

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/>”

The university offer the following resources for students struggling:

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