SISU 349: Global Cities, Justice, and the Environment
Topics in Global Inequality, Development, Environment & Health
School of International Service
American University
Spring 2017

Professor: Dr Malini Ranganathan
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Office location: SIS 301
Office phone: x6901

Class time: Thursdays 11.20am-2.10pm
Class location: MGÇ 324
Office hours: Wed 2-4pm and Thurs 430pm-530pm
sign-up only—please use http://tinyurl.com/jk365ms to sign up. If none of these times work, please email me.

“Radical means simply grasping things at the root”
-Angela Davis

“Pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will”
-Antonio Gramsci

COURSE DESCRIPTION AND OBJECTIVES
This course investigates our rapidly expanding urban world with an explicit focus on the history, politics, and policy challenges of urban environments. We will go beyond alarmist narratives and standard “best practice” fixes. Instead, we will develop historical explanations for contemporary urban environmental inequalities marked by race, ethnicity, class, zip code, gender, religion, and other intersecting axes of social and spatial difference. We will draw from geography, sociology, urban studies, environmental studies, and anthropology, among other fields to build a strong foundation in urban political ecology. Urban political ecology is an interdisciplinary and radical field that deploys critical social theory, political-economic analysis, and history to explain unequal access to urban space, environmental resources such as clean air and water, and infrastructure. The field’s frontiers are increasingly being pushed to create progressive options (policy and beyond) for healthier, more sustainable, and more inclusive cities. Crucially, urban political ecology has begun to decolonize knowledge by interrogating the limits of Northern intellectual traditions (e.g. classical European social theory) and to take seriously the contributions of Southern theory, indigenous perspectives, and critical race theory. The ultimate objective of the course is for students to come away with a critical “toolkit” for thinking, writing, and acting on complex social and ecological problems in our cities and urban regions.
TEACHING PHILOSOPHY
I am an urban geographer who brings a critical social theory lens to my teaching, research, and writing. Pedagogically, this means that I encourage students to problematize dominant paradigms, especially those that are subtle and taken-for-granted; understand that uneven power relations come in many forms; and make connections between history and the present. My scholarship is positioned in solidarity—though not uncritically—with marginalized groups and their struggles. I believe that a critical theory approach better equips students for practical and ethical careers. I strive to create a classroom that is inclusive, diverse, and committed to naming and fighting racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination.

EMAIL AND OFFICE HOURS
Read the syllabus carefully. Ask questions regarding logistics and assignments in class or via email (malini@american.edu) ahead of deadlines. I encourage you to sign-up and come to my office hours at least once during the semester to discuss your assignments and your interests. If you cannot make my office hours, please email me so that we can find another time to meet.

LEARNING OUTCOMES
By the end of this course, successful students should have gained the following:

- Appreciation for why history (e.g. of colonialism, capitalism, socialism, segregation, post-war suburbanization, market-driven reform) matters so much in our understanding of and actions to address contemporary urban environmental problems
- Fluency with critical social theories (e.g. Marxian, Foucaultian, postcolonial, critical race theory, feminist, etc), in urban political ecology and environmental justice (EJ) scholarship
- Transnational sensitivity towards urban problems including those present in the DC area and across the US
- Greater confidence and sophistication in writing and public speaking, particularly the art of crafting and defending an argument (note that potential employers of SIS students highly value “critical thinking” and “oral and writing skills”)
- Familiarity with multiple qualitative methods used by scholars, practitioners, and activists to research urban environmental inequality, including ethnographic research, case study research, archival research, surveys, oral history, mapping, and photo/video documentary

REQUIRED BOOKS AND COURSE RESERVES
The following texts are required and are available for purchase at AU’s Student Bookstore or online (where they may be cheaper). All other required readings will be posted on the course Blackboard site. To access the course Blackboard site, go to https://blackboard.american.edu, login, and click on the course tab. Beyond the required books above, all readings are available under “Course Reserves”. You can search by author last name to find the readings assigned for the week.


RECOMMENDED BOOKS
Over the course of the semester, I will keep updating a list of suggested readings, films, websites, and other materials pertaining to the course (and please do make suggestions!). Here is a preliminary list of recommended (not required) books outside of the ones I am assigning for the course:

RECOMMENDED LONG-FORM BLOGS ON RACE, JUSTICE, AND CITIES
The Atlantic: https://www.theatlantic.com/
The Atlantic City Lab: http://www.citylab.com/
The Boston Review: http://bostonreview.net/ particularly its recent special issue: https://bostonreview.net/forum-i#
The Guardian’s Story of Cities: https://www.theguardian.com/cities/series/the-story-of-cities
N+1 Magazine: https://nplusonemag.com/online-only/
The Nation: https://www.thenation.com/
Society and Space Open Site: http://societyandspace.org/

ASSIGNMENTS, GRADING, AND DUE DATES

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assignment</th>
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<th>Due Date</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Class participation</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>Throughout the semester</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weekly prompt responses (5 x 5%)</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>By 6 pm on Bb the Wednesday before class, 5x during the semester on Bb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading discussion facilitation</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>1x during the semester</td>
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<tr>
<td>Team-written Washington, DC blog</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>February 23 by 5pm on Bb</td>
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<tr>
<td>Final research paper 1-page outline</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>March 30 by 5pm printed out</td>
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<tr>
<td>Final research paper</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>May 4 by 5pm on Bb</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
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Class participation (20%)
This is a reading heavy course. It is unlikely that you will earn an A-range grade in this course if you do not come prepared to discuss the weekly readings and prompts. Most class sessions will comprise of a mixture of lecture, discussion, and group work in which you will be expected to make informed contributions. I will occasionally collect in-class writing assignments to check-in on your progress.

Weekly prompt responses (5 x 5% = 25%)
For each set of weekly readings below (there are 11 altogether), I have provided a prompt in bold. During the course of the semester, you are required to submit a response to 5 of the 11 prompts on Bb. One week can be the same week in which you are the reading discussion leader (see below). Your response must be
Your final paper has two deliverables:

- Questions should be answered: (more on this later)

- Creative title, a critically analyzing the us or abroad, critically assessing both the root causes and its potential paths forward. Your paper should include a theoretical perspective and contemporary dynamics of the urban environmental justice issue of your choice either in the US or abroad, and a conclusion that summarizes the main points in the paper. The following questions should be answered:
  - What are the historic and political-economic origins of this problem? Draw on at least two theoretical and historical ideas covered in class in your analysis.
  - Who or what is most gravely affected by this problem and how?
  - Who is involved in making major decisions around this problem, and what kind of discursive or knowledge frameworks are used in framing the problem? Are these knowledge framings helping or hindering the problem?
  - What, if anything, is being done through policy interventions, activism, education, media, donor funding, etc to address this problem, and what are the effects?

Your final paper has two deliverables:

- **Outline (5%)** [Due March 30, by 5pm printed out in class]. Your 1-page outline should discuss your final paper idea and sketch of your argument (more on this later) and list at least 3 scholarly references on a 2nd page. During the last few classes, we will break into small groups to get feedback on your outlines.

- **Final draft (25%)** [Due May 4, by 5pm on Bb]. Your final paper (12-15 double spaced pages not including references, 1” margins, 12 pt font) should integrate the four bullet points above and make a central argument. A grading rubric delineating the relative importance of the quality of your prose, clear articulation of your argument, effectiveness of your citations, and grammatical
accuracy will be handed out in advance. **I highly encourage you to visit me during office hours in April with a working draft of your final paper.**

**GRADING AND LATE POLICY**

- Late assignments will be penalized by one half grade (from instance from a B+ to a B) for every additional day beyond the due date **except** for the reading responses which will not be accepted at all beyond the weekly due date. Here is the system I use to assign grades:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade Range</th>
<th>Letter Grade</th>
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<tr>
<td>93-100</td>
<td>A</td>
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<td>90-92</td>
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<td>87-89</td>
<td>B+</td>
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<td>83-86</td>
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<td>77-79</td>
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**OTHER COURSE POLICIES**

- **Integrity.** Refer to AU’s Code of Academic Integrity at [http://www.american.edu/academics/integrity/](http://www.american.edu/academics/integrity/) for definitions of plagiarism and the University’s policies.

- **Electronics.** Recently published research shows that student learning is reduced when laptops are allowed during lectures partly because social media and browsing have become addictions. Conversely, taking notes the old fashioned way through pen and paper promotes deeper and more lasting engagement with the material (and temporary relaxation for your eyes): [http://www.newyorker.com/tech/elements/the-case-for-banning-laptops-in-the-classroom](http://www.newyorker.com/tech/elements/the-case-for-banning-laptops-in-the-classroom). While I do not embrace a wholesale “no laptop” policy in the classroom (and clearly recognize the utility of the Internet in both teaching and learning), I strongly encourage you to keep your laptops and tablets in your bag until you need them for in-class exercises or for referring to the readings. I reserve the right to call on students behind their laptop screens at random. Cell phone use of any kind is not permitted once class has begun.

- **Disability accommodations.** The University has an extensive support system for various learning styles and needs, and I am keen to accommodate these needs in my class. Please bring a letter from the Disability Office and let me know if you need any classroom or learning accommodations.

- **Emergency preparedness.** In the event of an emergency, AU will implement a plan for meeting the needs of all members of the university community. Should the university be required to close for a period of time, we are committed to ensuring that all aspects of our educational programs will be delivered to our students. These may include altering and extending the duration of the traditional term schedule to complete essential instruction in the traditional format and/or use of distance instructional methods. Specific strategies will vary from class to class, depending on the format of the course and the timing of the emergency. Faculty will communicate class-specific information to students via AU e-mail and Blackboard, while students must inform their faculty immediately of any absence. Students are responsible for checking their AU e-mail regularly and keeping themselves informed of emergencies. In the event of an emergency, students should refer to the AU Student Portal, the AU Web site ([http://www.prepared.american.edu](http://www.prepared.american.edu)) and the AU information line at (202) 885-1100 for general university-wide information, as well as contact their faculty and/or respective dean’s office for course and school/college-specific information.
### OUTLINE OF TOPICS AND DUE DATES

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Topic</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>January 19</td>
<td>Course Introduction: Urban Environments in the 21st Century</td>
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<tr>
<td>January 26</td>
<td>The Industrial Working Class and the Modern City</td>
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<tr>
<td>February 2</td>
<td>The Colonial City: Segregation, Discourse, and Health</td>
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<tr>
<td>February 9</td>
<td>Urban Racial Segregation, Gentrification, and the Housing Crisis in the US</td>
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<td>February 16</td>
<td>Environmental Racism and Environmental Justice</td>
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<tr>
<td>March 16</td>
<td>No class – <em>Spring Break</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>March 23</td>
<td>Urban Water and Sanitation Politics</td>
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<tr>
<td>March 30</td>
<td>Urban Transit Politics <em>Final research paper outline due, printed out</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>April 6</td>
<td><em>In class film</em></td>
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<td>April 13</td>
<td>Urban Waste Politics</td>
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<td>April 20</td>
<td>What Kind of Urban Politics?</td>
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<td>April 27</td>
<td>Wrap-up Discussion – Final class</td>
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<tr>
<td>May 4</td>
<td><em>Final research paper due on Bb</em></td>
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**WEEKLY SCHEDULE OF READINGS**

Each set of readings and each weekly prompt response must be completed **before** the date indicated below. Please note that I have deliberately placed readings in a particular order so as to maximize logic and learning. “Further readings” are **optional** and are meant as deeper dives into the theme at hand. Note: for links, you might have to copy and paste the link into your browser in case it does not open upon clicking or you get a 404 error message. All links were current as of Jan 9, 2017.

**Jan 19 – Course Introduction: Urban environments in the 21st Century**

In our present moment of climate change skepticism at the federal level, coupled with the realization that urban regions concentrate enormous environmental and climate risks, inequalities, and opportunities, it would appear that all eyes are on “the urban”. In this introductory class, we consider the place of cities and “the urban imaginary” in recent global and domestic policy conversations, as well as what environmental justice and political ecology lenses brings to the table.


**HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS**

**Jan 26 – The Industrial Working Class and the Modern City**

This and the following lecture will provide a broad historical sweep of the evolution of urban environments in the west and the people who produced them. In the mid 1800s, Karl Marx and his friend Frederick Engels wrote a good deal about the working class in Europe’s bourgeoning industrial cities. We learn from them how the “capitalist mode of production” sought to extract “surplus value” (profit) from labor power, only to leave those same laborers with low wages and without decent housing and sanitation. Marxist theories were used to understand how modern cities were made through the harnessing of “nature” (food, fuel, water, raw materials, etc) by human labor, a process Marx called “metabolism”. These themes of the industrial working class and the modern city got taken up in literary works, especially that of Charles Baudelaire, who wrote about the effects of urban renewal on Paris’ poor. Many of these historical observations on urban poverty, natural resource exploitation, inequality, and the problems of capitalist urbanization and the urbanization of nature continue to be rele vant today. **Weekly prompt 1: What is the modern city? What is the modern city’s relationship to “nature”?**


*Further readings:*

Lefebvre, H. 2016. *Marxist Thought and the City*. Translated by R Bonono. Minneapolis: University of
Feb 2 – The Colonial City: Segregation, Discourse, and Health

In this lecture, we turn to the colonial city. Much of what we observe in cities in the Global South today can be traced to processes of capitalist urbanization, as well as enduring legacies of the colonial encounter (why is it called the colonial encounter?). Here, Orientalist knowledge and discursive frameworks aimed at controlling the native “other” become particularly important. In this lecture, we move beyond Marxian explanations and turn to the role of discourse, knowledge, and subjectification in shaping urban environments as read through postcolonial and critical race theory. We draw in particular from the contributions of theorists Edward Said, Frantz Fanon, Stuart Hall, and Michel Foucault. Weekly prompt 2: Why was discourse so central to racialized planning in colonial cities? How does such discourse matter today?


Further readings:

Feb 9 – Urban Racial Segregation, Gentrification, and the Housing Crisis in the US

We turn now to how racial segregation played out in American cities in the 20th century and how it continues to affect space, housing, and resources. The terms “de jure” and “de facto” segregation are often used to describe the difference between Jim Crow policies in the American south and economically and culturally driven segregation in the north. The former refers to legally mandated segregated housing, schools, public facilities, etc. The latter refers to class-based processes and personal prejudice that ultimately produced similar and enduring outcomes of racial segregation in the American north. In this lecture we will also discuss debates surrounding gentrification so as to set the stage for future lectures. Weekly prompt 3: Given the deliberate role of federal and local agencies in racial segregation in the post-war period even in the US north, does the differentiation between de jure and de facto segregation make sense?

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The debate on gentrification rages on. Read the following two as a debate:

Further readings:
A resource for redlining maps: https://dsl.richmond.edu/panorama/redlining/#loc=4/36.71/-96.93&opacity=0.8&text=intro

Feb 16 – Environmental Racism and Environmental Justice
The rise of environmental justice as an activist movement and, subsequently, as a field of policy and scholarly analysis, was contemporaneous with the latter years of the Civil Rights movement. In South Africa, environmental justice became an important language of urban activist struggles during the latter years of apartheid rule. While as a scholarly field, environmental justice retains important differences with urban political ecology, particularly in the former’s “liberal” conception of justice (what exactly does this mean?), its overarching goals strongly overlap with those of urban political ecology. In this lecture, we embark on a comparative analysis of environmental injustices in cities of the Global North and South. Weekly prompt 4: What is the difference between environmental racism and environmental justice? What is the difference between environmental justice and urban political ecology? Why does the history of racial segregation matter so much to the contemporary urban environment?

Further readings:
CONTEMPORARY GOVERNANCE CHALLENGES

Feb 23 – Urban Informality: Land and Housing in an Age of Inequality

In cities around the world, people live under conditions of precarious and not entirely legal land tenure. Land laws and regulations are flexibly and differentially interpreted, and various groups are involved in everyday negotiations and political practices to claim basic services, such as water, land, and housing. We call this “urban informality”. Arguably, “urban informality” can be posited as the new normal since this condition does not simply refer to slums, but also lower middle class settlements (as my work in Bangalore, India has shown). And furthermore, informality is not necessarily synonymous with poverty—i.e. even the wealthy engage in informality. So what, then, is urban informality? How is it related to heightening global inequality and dispossession? This lecture takes a hard look at these questions, tracing key debates from the early 1970s to the current moment.

Weekly prompt 5: Why is it important to problematize (i.e. not just take for granted) ‘chaos’ narratives of the megacity? How does the theory of urban informality help us better understand the city in all its complexity? Why is land dispossession such an important arena of struggle today?


Further readings:

Mar 2 – The “Sustainable City” against/in Late Capitalism

Over the last three decades, there has been a steady transformation in urban governance that Harvey broadly characterizes as a shift from “managenerialism” (i.e. more emphasis on welfare and state provision) to “entrepreneurialism” (i.e. more emphasis on attracting private capital). Among urban scholars, there is considerable interest in theorizing the move towards “neoliberal” environmental governance and implications for the role of the state vs. that of the market in what is known as “late capitalism” (how does late capitalism differ from industrial capitalism?). Accompanying this shift has been an increasing emphasis on making cities “green” and “sustainable”. Weekly prompt 6: What does the hopeful vocabulary of “sustainable city” entail in practice? How does the “sustainable city”
vision run up against the consumer-, finance- and capital-oriented “entrepreneurial” or “world-class city”?


Mar 9 – Climate Change Risk and the City
Cities are increasingly susceptible to the negative effects of climate change, including storm surges, flooding from even moderate rainfall, heat waves, and health epidemics. In many of these cities, the informal poor, women, minorities, and other vulnerable groups have been shown to bear a disproportionate burden of climate risks. We will read Zeiderman’s ethnographic work on how the politics of risk (climate and otherwise) provide a subtext for urban citizens in Bogota, Colombia, while also discussing some of the more practical dimensions of climate change adaptation governance in cities.
Weekly prompt 7: What is the most interesting insight you learned from Zeiderman’s book? Why might a framework of “risk” be a double-edged sword?


Mar 16 – Spring Break – no class

Mar 23 – Urban Water and Sanitation Politics
Water is perhaps the most studied resource in urban political ecology given the inextricable relationship between the harnessing of water and urbanization. In this lecture, we will look at formative works that theorize that relationship, including work that is increasingly looking at water poverty and failing technology and infrastructure in the global North, and move on to contemporary debates on urban water privatization. Of particular interest to scholars and policy analysts have been the implications of water privatization and market-based reform on access and sustainability, as well as the forms of political struggle that take root at sites of water policy change. Weekly prompt 8: What does a feminist political ecology lens bring to the study of urban water access? What does a transnational (i.e. across the North and South) lens bring to the study of urban water access?

Truelove, Y. 2011. “(Re-)Conceptualizing water inequality in Delhi, India through a feminist political ecology framework”. *Geoforum* 32: 143-152.

**Further readings**

**Mar 30 – Urban Transit Politics**

People and things in cities are constantly on the move. A surging middle class in Latin America, Asia, and Africa has meant an explosion in the demand for personal vehicles and associated air pollution. Yet, even as some urban dwellers have gained more mobility, a significant proportion of people in both the North and South rely on public transit and para-transit systems, and often lack accessibility to employment and healthy food options (as is the case in many cities in the US). In this lecture, we look at uneven geographies of mobility and accessibility in developing and developed cities and debates around sustainable transit, including the cycling and gentrification debate in DC. **Weekly prompt 9:** The goals of sustainable transit seem to be incompatible with upward economic mobility, since the latter moves people towards owning cars. Debate this proposition.


Also, see these before and after maps of how freeways transformed America’s cities: [http://www.vox.com/2014/12/29/7460557/urban freeway slider maps](http://www.vox.com/2014/12/29/7460557/urban freeway slider maps)


**Apr 6 – In-class film. No readings due**

**Apr 13 – Urban Waste Politics**
The generation of municipal solid waste presents one of the gravest threats to urban health and sustainability everywhere. In the Global South, most recycling work is carried out under dangerous and exploitative conditions by the urban poor. We will read award-winning journalist Katherine Boo’s heart-wrenching account of trashwork in a Mumbai slum. While this is not an “academic” book per se, several
themes about the structural causes of poverty, environmental inequalities, class, and globalization resonate with the themes of this class. **Weekly prompt 10:** Why is waste such a powerful resource through which to examine contemporary urban politics? Yet, why is waste so neglected in academic and policy work?


**Apr 20 – What Kind of Urban Politics?**

Political struggle against unjust environmental conditions implicating racial, economic, and other oppression takes many forms, from outright resistance and protest, to what Asef Bayat has called “quiet encroachment of the ordinary”, to even strategic complicity. We will look at various political practices that seek to challenge, subvert, or parody dominant forms of rule and subjectivities and ask how these analyses enrich the field of urban political ecology. **Weekly prompt 11:** What kind of politics do we need for creating cities that are both sustainable and inclusive?

Pieterse, E. Chapter 1 in *City Futures: Confronting the Crisis of Urban Development.* Zed, London


Further Readings:


**Apr 27 – Wrap-up Discussion – No readings due. Come prepared to discuss your favorite quotes, theories, and concepts from the readings and any last-minute questions about your final papers.**