

## **TOPICS IN ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY: THE AMERICAN CITY**

NJIT-Rutgers, Newark: Fall 2014

Graduate Course: History 657

Time: Thursdays, 5:30-8:10

Location: Conklin Room 338 (Graduate Student Lounge)

**Instructor:** Prof. Neil Maher  
Federated Department of History NJIT-Rutgers University, Newark

**Office Hours:**  
Tuesdays & Thursdays, 1:00-3:00, Cullimore 325 (NJIT campus)  
And by appointment

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### **COURSE DESCRIPTION:**

Americans often think of cities as being devoid of nature. Yet in recent years, scholars in the growing field of urban environmental history have challenged this view, arguing instead that cities and the natural environment have deep connections and shared histories. With urbanization a central theme of the American story, and more than eighty percent of present-day Americans living in urban areas, we cannot fully understand America's past without understanding how nature and cities have shaped one another, and in doing so influenced the people living both within and beyond city limits. Over the course of the semester, students will explore such topics as the role nature played in geographically situating cities across the American landscape; early cultural reactions to industrialization and urbanization; the important economic relationship between cities and their hinterlands; the development of public parks for recreation and the migration of wealthier, and usually white, citizens to the suburbs; political activism over pollution, public health, and urban sprawl; and the rise of the urban environmental justice movement.

### **REQUIREMENTS:**

**Attendance and Class Participation:** Class participation should involve active listening and engagement — more than simply showing up, and more than sheer volume of oral output. As graduate students, you should not miss class unless an emergency arises.

**Readings:** Because urban environmental history is a relatively young field, the readings for this course represent a new genre of historical scholarship, and will entail on average one book and one scholarly article per week. While I do not expect you to read every

word, you should understand and be comfortable discussing the factual content of the work as well as the author's argument and his or her use of sources. You should also be able to think critically about the theoretical and interpretative issues raised by the readings. Please purchase the books for the class; all but two are in cheaper paperback editions. These books are now available at NJ Books, which is located at the corner of University and Bleeker streets (the books are not for sale at the Rutgers University bookstore). You can also purchase them online. Copies of the assigned articles are available online via Dropbox. If NJ Books runs out of copies of assigned books, they have told me they will overnight the book to you free of charge (please let me know if they won't do this for you).

**Papers:**

During the semester, you will be asked to write two short essays, and a longer final paper. The goal of the shorter essays is to help jump-start you on your final paper. We will discuss all three paper assignments in more detail as the due dates for them approach.

***Short Essay #1: Methodological Analysis:***

Your first paper of the semester will be a methodology analysis of the readings from the first six weeks of the course (up to and including week 6). For this paper you will compare and contrast the methodologies of these historians – you will focus your analysis on how each historian “does” their history. This will entail an examination of each historian's source materials, both primary and secondary. The paper will be limited to 4 pages in length.

***Short Essay #2: Theme Analysis:***

Your second paper of the semester will be an analysis of a specific theme that is explored by the authors of the readings from week 7 through week 10. For this paper you will choose one theme that is explored in all of these books, and compare and contrast how each author engages this particular theme. As with your first essay, this second paper will also be limited to 4 pages in length.

***Final Historiographical Paper:***

You will also be asked to write a final paper of approximately 15-17 pages in length (please pace your writing to fall within these limits). Students may choose between two types of assignments based on your earlier papers. On the one hand, you may write an historiographical essay that compares and contrasts the various methodologies undertaken by global environmental historians today. Alternatively, you may choose a major theme from the semester's readings and examine how various global environmental historians have approached that theme. For both types of papers, you should analyze as many of the assigned books and articles as possible.

***Final Paper Outline:*** To help organize and conceptualize your final paper, you will also be asked to submit a detailed outline of your project. The outline should include a brief paragraph explaining your argument. The outline is due in class on November 20 (week 12).

**GRADING:**

Attendance and Participation:	50%
Written Assignments:	50%

Consistent effort and improvement will be weighted heavily in grading.

**REQUIRED TEXTS:**

Thomas Bender, *Toward an Urban Vision: Ideas and Institutions in Nineteenth-Century America* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975)

Clay McShane and Joel Tarr, *The Horse and the City: Living Machines in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009)

William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (W.W. Norton & Company, 1992)

David Soll, *Empire of Water: An Environmental and Political History of the New York City Water Supply* (Cornell University Press, 2013) (**NOTE:** only available in hardcover)

Michael Rawson, *Eden on the Charles: The Making of Boston* (Harvard University Press, 2010) (**NOTE:** available in paperback on Amazon beginning September 8)

Charles Rosenberg, *The Cholera Years: The United States in 1832, 1849, and 1866* (University of Chicago Press, 1962).

David Stradling, *Smokestacks and Progressives: Environmentalists, Engineers, and Air Quality in America, 1881-1951* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999)

Jeff Wiltse, *Contested Waters: A Social History of Swimming Pools in America* (University of North Carolina Press, 2007)

Andrew Hurley, *Environmental Inequalities: Class, Race, and Industrial Pollution in Gary, Indiana, 1945-1980* (University of North Carolina Press, 1995)

Adam Rome, *The Bulldozer in the Countryside: Suburban Sprawl and the Rise of American Environmentalism* (Cambridge University Press, 2001)

Kate Brown, *Plutopia: Nuclear Families, Atomic Cities, and the Great Soviet and American Plutonium Disasters* (Oxford University Press, 2013) (**NOTE:** only available in hardcover)

Mike Davis, *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster* (Metropolitan Books, 1998)

David Owen, *Green Metropolis: Why Living Smaller, Living Closer, and Driving Less are the Keys to Sustainability* (Riverhead Books, 2010)

**WEEKLY ASSIGNMENTS:**

**INTRODUCTION**

WEEK 1: **INTRODUCTION TO COURSE** (September 4)

Required Reading:

None

WEEK 2: **DEFINING ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY** (September 11)

Required Reading:

Christine Meisner Rosen and Joel Tarr, "The Importance of an Urban Perspective in Environmental History," *Journal of Urban History* 20 (May 1994), 299-310.

Martin Melosi, "The Place of the City in Environmental History," *Environmental History Review* 17 (Spring 1993), 1-23.

Thomas Bender, *Towards an Urban Vision: Ideas and Institutions in Nineteenth-Century America*

**MAKING URBAN AMERICA**

WEEK 3: **POWERING THE METROPOLIS** (September 18)

Required Reading:

Clay McShane and Joel Tarr, *The Horse in the City: Living Machines in the Nineteenth Century*

Thomas Andrews, "Beasts of the Southern Wild: Slaveholders, Slaves, and other Animals in Charles Ball's *Slavery in the United States*," in *Rendering Nature*, Phoebe Young and Marguerite Shaffer, eds., (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, forthcoming).

WEEK 4: **CITIES AND THEIR HINTERLANDS** (September 25)

Required Reading:

William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West*

Sam Truett, "Neighbor by Nature: Rethinking Region, Nation, and Environmental History in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands," *Environmental History* 2, no. 2 (1997): 160-178.

WEEK 5: **QUENCHING URBAN THIRST** (October 2)

Required Reading:

David Soll, *Empire of Water: An Environmental and Political History of the New York City Water Supply*

Donald Worster, "The Flow of Empire: Comparing Water Control in the United States and China," *Rachel Carson Center Perspectives* 2011, no 5 (2001): 1-22. (available online at <http://www.environmentandsociety.org/node/5586>)

WEEK 6: **BUILDING CITY SPACE** (October 9)  
Required Reading:  
Michael Rawson, *Eden on the Charles: The Making of Boston*  
Chad Montrie, "I Think Less of the Factory than of My Native Dell':  
Labor, Nature, and the Lowell 'Mill Girls,'" *Environmental  
History* 9 (April 2004): 275-295 (available online at  
<http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/eh/9.2/montrie.html>)

ASSIGNMENT: First Methodological Paper Due in Class

## THE ENVIRONMENTAL AND SOCIAL CONSEQUENCES

WEEK 7: **DISEASE** (October 16)  
Required Reading:  
Rosenberg, *The Cholera Years: The United States in 1832, 1849, and  
1866*  
Charles Rosenberg, "Framing Disease: Illness, Society, and History," in  
Charles Rosenberg and Janet Golden, eds., *Framing Disease:  
Studies in Cultural History*, xii-xxvi.

WEEK 8: **POLLUTION** (October 23)  
Required Reading:  
David Stradling, *Smokestacks and Progressives: Environmentalists,  
Engineers, and Air Quality in America, 1881-1951* (1999)  
Adam Rome, "Nature Wars, Cultural Wars: Immigration and  
Environmental Reform in the Progressive Era, *Environmental  
History* 13, no. 3 (July 2008): 432-453.

WEEK 9: **PARKS AND POOLS** (October 30)  
Required Reading:  
Jeff Wiltse, *Contested Waters: A Social History of Swimming Pools in  
America*  
Roy Rosenzweig, "Middle-Class Parks and Working-Class Play: The  
Struggle Over Recreational Space in Worcester, Massachusetts,  
1870-1910," *Radical History Review* 21 (1979), 31-46.

WEEK 10: **ENVIRONMENTAL INJUSTICE** (November 6)  
Required Reading:  
Andrew Hurley, *Environmental Inequalities: Class, Race, and Industrial  
Pollution in Gary, Indiana, 1945-1980*  
Rob Nixon, "Slow Violence, Gender, and the Environmentalism of the  
Poor," *Journal of Commonwealth and Postcolonial Studies* 13,

2008, 14-37 (available online at:  
[http://www.english.wisc.edu/rdnixon/files/slow\\_violence.pdf](http://www.english.wisc.edu/rdnixon/files/slow_violence.pdf))

ASSIGNMENT: Second Thematic Paper Due in Class

## POSTWAR CITIES

WEEK 11: **SPRAWL** (November 13)

Required Reading:

Adam Rome, *The Bulldozer in the Countryside: Suburban Sprawl and the Rise of American Environmentalism*  
Scott Donaldson, "City and Country: Marriage Proposals," *American Quarterly* 20 (Fall 1968), 547-566

WEEK 12: **NUCLEAR CITIES** (November 20)

Required Reading:

Kate Brown, *Plutopia: Nuclear Families, Atomic Cities, and the Great Soviet and American Plutonium Disasters* (Oxford University Press, 2013)  
Gabrielle Hecht and Paul N. Edwards, "The Technopolitics of Cold War: Towards a Transregional Perspective," *Essays in Global and Comparative History* series, American History Association (2008)

WEEK 13: **POSTMODERN URBANISM** (November 25 **NOT** November 27)

Required Reading:

Mike Davis, *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster*  
Jennifer Price, "Thirteen Ways off Seeing Nature In L.A.: A Few New Methods for the Old Practice of Using Los Angeles to Think," Parts I and II, in *The Believer*, April 2006  
([http://www.believmag.com/issues/200604/?read=article\\_price](http://www.believmag.com/issues/200604/?read=article_price))

ASSIGNMENT: Paper Outlines Due in Class

WEEK 14: **GREEN CITIES?** (December 4)

Required Reading:

David Owen, *Green Metropolis: Why Living Smaller, Living Closer, and Driving Less are the Keys to Sustainability* (Riverhead Books, 2010)  
Rebecca Solnit, "Detroit Arcadia: Exploring the post-American Landscape," *Harpers* (July 2007): 65-73 (available online at: <http://harpers.org/archive/2007/07/detroit-arcadia/>)