Sociology of the Environment and Risk

Course convener: Dr Claire Haggett

Tuesdays, 14.10 – 16.00
Weekly, except week 6
Chrystal MacMillan Building, seminar room 1
The course in brief

Hello and a very warm welcome to Sociology of the Environment and Risk.

This course presents a sociological perspective on environmental knowledge, issues, campaigns and risks. We explore what 'the environment' is, how environmental quality is measured and understood, and how we perceive of environmental risks and problems.

Sociological analyses on the relationship between human societies and their natural environments are discussed via:
* evaluating social constructivist theories about the environment
* discussion of the relationship between local and global environmental issues
* analysis of the role played by science in environmental debates
* discussion of the role of the media, and the media construction of environmental issues and risks
* considering sociological theories of environmental transitions and futures

We examine a number of case studies (energy, food, fashion, technology and pollution) and examples with key themes and questions running throughout: how are issues framed? Who is responsible for mitigating a risk, cleaning up after a disaster or saving the planet, and how is blame apportioned? What is the epistemological basis for knowledge claims about the environment; or, how do we know what we know about environmental problems and risks?

The course involves a significant ‘research component’, so is assessed entirely by essays: there is no examination. Undergraduate and visiting-student assessment is via a 1,500 word mid-term essay (25% of the overall mark) and a 3,500-4,500 word final essay (75% of mark).
Objectives

The learning outcomes are such that at the end of the course you will be familiar with and be able to discuss:

1. The concept of social constructionism and its value in understanding the environment;
2. How responsibility and blame for environmental problems are apportioned;
3. The relationship between individual and societal factors in causing and tackling environmental issues;
4. The factors that shape public perception of risks;
5. How sociological analyses of science and of its public understanding can help us understand the role it plays in environmental matters;
6. How the essentials of life – clothes, food, energy – and their environmental consequences can be considered sociologically;
7. How technologies are used and their impacts experienced;
8. Sociological interpretations of different scenarios for the future.

The course is therefore designed to meet the Programme Outcomes criteria set out in the Sociology Honours handbook in relation to sociological knowledge and understanding, general cognitive skills, discipline specific skills and key generic and transferable skills (for further details, please refer to the see the programme specification section in the honours handbook).

Visiting undergraduates - Please consult your handbook for details of submission and assessment procedures.

Student presentations

Although they are not assessed, an essential element of the learning experience in the course are presentations to the class.

In Week 1, you will sign up for a presentation topic. In a small group (two-three students) you will prepare a short presentation (10 minutes) to the class on your chosen topic. While you may draw on the reading list, it will be particularly useful to discuss your own ideas and examples. One of the aims of these presentations is to generate discussion among your fellow students, so try to make them as interesting and engaging as possible, and encourage questions and debate. You are perfectly at liberty to present on the same topic as one of your essays.

Remember to follow the rules of good presentation: have a clear structure; try to speak from notes rather than read a text; look at your audience; vary pace and intonation; have a clear aim and structure to your presentation; don’t simply summarize the reading but try to say something interesting using it; don’t be afraid to be controversial. It is important that you prepare your presentations as a group so that it links together well and that you keep to time.
Examples of possible topics are:

(a) ‘Nature and society are different from each other’. Discuss.
(b) How would you explain ‘social constructionism’ (with examples) to a non-sociologist?
(c) How is responsibility for causing and tackling environmental problems apportioned?
(d) What can sociological ideas tell us about how we respond to environmental issues and problems?
(e) ‘If something happens, the media will tell us about it’. Discuss.
(f) Examine the media framing of a particular environmental issue.
(g) Discuss perceptions of risk in a particular area (e.g. terrorism, smoking, mobile phones, alcohol, unprotected sex, GM food) and discuss how the literature on risk perception can be applied to the understanding of it.
(h) Is society getting riskier?
(i) Discuss the role of scientific expertise (particularly contested knowledge) in a dispute about risk or the environment
(j) Are ordinary people too stupid to understand environmental science?
(k) What is the relationship between food and the environment, and why might sociologists care?
(l) What is the relationship between fashion and the environment, and why might sociologists care?
(m) Examine a wind farm protest from a sociological perspective.
(n) How does consultation and communication with people shape decision making and support and opposition?
(o) How does our relationship with technology effect the environment?
(p) Discuss examples of subjective interpretations of environmental impact
(q) Are we in a ‘risk society’, as Ulrich Beck asserts?
(r) How can we save the planet?

Office hours

Please tell me as soon as possible if you have any questions or are having any problems with the course, if you would find it helpful to have an individual chat about your presentation or essay topics, or if there are any other aspects of the course you would like to discuss with me. I am always happy to discuss ideas, questions or problems with any students.

My office hours are Fridays 2.30-4.30. My office is 5.07, Chrystal Macmillan Building. If those times don’t suit, I am happy to make appointments to see you at other times too or answer questions by email - claire.haggett@ed.ac.uk Please note that I work part time hours (afternoons only).
**Reading List**

‘**Key**’ readings are designed to tie in closely with lectures, so please read them before each session of the class.

‘**Additional**’ readings are for those doing an essay on a particular topic. Don’t feel you need to read all of these for your essay, but equally don’t restrict yourselves to them: for an honours level course such as this, you can do your own literature searches. The further readings below are intended to start you in this process by acting as a guide to the kind of literature available: they’re not a definitive essay reading list.

I’ve asked for copies of the ‘further reading’ books that I expect to be in heavy demand to be transferred to the Reserve section of the Main Library: these books are indicated with an asterisk. Given the length of this reading list, it would not be reasonable to do this with all the further readings, so you will find that some books are out on loan. In those cases, staff at the Library’s service desk can recall them for you. However, this process normally takes at least a week, so plan your essay work in advance, recalling those books you will need which are out.

Recent journal articles will normally be available electronically via the electronic journal holdings of Edinburgh University Library ([http://www.lib.ed.ac.uk/](http://www.lib.ed.ac.uk/)): you’ll need to be logged in via EASE/MyEd to get access to them.

**Useful overall readings: e.g. alternative overall ‘takes’ on the environment and society**

There is no course textbook, but there are several textbooks and monographs that offer overviews of sociological approaches to the environment:

There are also a number of collections of readings that are also useful:


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**Week 1: Tuesday 14th January**

**Introduction - The social construction of the environment**

This session is firstly an introduction and overview of the course. We think about the key themes that run through the course – blame, risk, responsibility, knowledge, epistemology, the role of the media and science – which are the focus of the first half of the course. In the second half of the course, we will think about particular case studies – food, clothes, energy, pollution and environmental quality – and explore how these themes are enacted through them.

Secondly, in this session, we explore ideas about the social construction of the environment. We think about what it means to say that the ‘environment’ and elements in it are socially constructed, how humans have shaped the natural environment, and how there are different versions of what the environment is and how it should be used. We then think about how we come to our own conclusions about environmental issues, problems, and actions. The value of social constructionism is considered, and how useful it is when we might be faced with series and imminent environmental risks.

**Key readings:**


**Additional readings:**


Martell, L. (1994) Rethinking relations between society and nature, chapter 6 in *Ecology and Society*: 164-183. *(Short Loan)*


Week 2: Tuesday 21st January
Behaviour, blame, and responsibility

In this session, we think about who and what causes environmental problems. Different approaches to addressing environmental issues and encouraging pro-environmental behaviours, and different strategies and tools for persuading and punishing people are considered and evaluated, and their underlying rationales considered. Some of these, including government sponsored initiatives, focus on individuals and their role in causing and preventing environmental problems. Others consider more broadly the social context in which people make their decisions, and the values, norms, and structures by which they are constrained. Both are evaluated here.

Key readings:

Additional readings:
http://www.instituforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/MINDSPACE.pdf
http://www.socresonline.org.uk/10/2/hand.html


**Week 3: Tuesday 28th January**

**Knowledge, naming and framing: the epistemology of environmental issues**

The last session considered influences on behaviour; here we focus in more depth on the sources of our knowledge about the environment, how that knowledge is created and shaped, and how (and why) it may or may not have an impact. We discuss the role of the media in both telling us what we should know, and what we should care about. We consider how environmental issues are framed, shaped, and at times, ignored, by the media, and upon what criteria that selection is made. We think in particular about naming and framing; how the name given to an issue constructs the very nature of that issue, and who might be responsible for it.

**Key readings:**


**Additional readings:**


Jones, S. (2011) A review of the impartiality and accuracy of the BBC’s coverage of Science: 14-102. (available online 4/1/13)


Week 4: Tuesday 4th February
Scientific expertise, public understanding of science, and the environment

In this session, we consider the role of science in debates over environmental controversies, how scientific practice influences the outcomes that are generated, and the way in which results are disseminated. Scientific procedures are influenced by social decisions, and we consider the impact that this has on knowledge about the environment. We explore cases were scientific models clash with lay understanding, and the role of public perceptions and understandings of science in debates about environmental problems and action.

Key readings:


Additional readings:
credibility in climate change, Proceedings of the National Academy of
Science of the United States of America. (available online 4/1/13)
http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2901439/

in Policy Making, London: Frances Pinter. (Short and Standard Loan)

London: Sage. (Short Loan)

Expertise and Excellence, Social Studies of Science, 32: 235-296. (E-Journal)


Development, London: Routledge. (Short and Standard Loan)

Reconstruction of Science and Technology, Cambridge: Cambridge
University Press. (HUB Short Loan) (Standard Loan)

Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage. (HUB Short Loan) (Short and Standard Loan)

for Demarcations, Science, Technology, & Human Values, 30: 137-169. (E-
Journal)

255(5045): 690-695. (E-Journal)

CA: Sage. (Short and Standard Loan)

100. (E-Journal)


Change Science and Policy: Boundary-Ordering Devices and Authority,

Devices in Science for Policy, Social Studies of Science, 28: 291-323. (E-
Journal)

In: Gabe, J., Kelleher, D. and Williams, G. (eds.), Challenging Medicine,
London: Routledge. (Short and Standard Loan)

M. and Benton, T. (eds.), Social Theory and the Global Environment,
London: Routledge. (Hub reserve)


**Week 5: Tuesday 11th February**

**Perceptions of risk**

We think in this session about the social construction of risks, the sources of our information and knowledge about risks, and the relationships between the ‘reality’ of risks and our perceptions (and how we understand what that reality is). Building on weeks 3 and 4, we explore the role of scientific expertise in determining risk and the role of the media and other intermediaries in communicating that risk (and suggesting who is to blame for a risk, and how we should change our behaviours).

**Key readings:**

**Additional readings**


**Week 6: Tuesday 18th February**

Innovative Learning Week (no class)

**Week 7: Tuesday 25th February**

Food: choice, consumption and culture

In this lecture, we explore some of the issues developed thus far in the course in terms of different case studies. Food is one of most basic requirements for human survival, yet its consumption in modern materialist societies has complex social, political and environmental influences and consequences. We think about what we eat in terms of choice, quantity, and availability. We also consider what happens to food packaging and waste, and who is responsible for addressing and tackling these important issues. The role of popular culture and how it impacts upon consumption choices and demand is also addressed, and we consider the range of social, economic and environmental barriers to change.
Key readings:

Additional Readings


Week 8: Tuesday 4th March
What (not) to wear: fashions, fads, and fairness

In this lecture, we continue to explore some of the key issues on the course. Clothes are another essential, and their use, choice, and consumption has a very significant environmental impact; as yet not given a great deal of attention by sociologists. We think about what we wear in terms of how we chose, how we are influenced by fashions and trends, and use a semiotic lens to understand these choices and the messages and meanings that they convey. We examine the impact of cheap 'throwaway' clothes and their environmental and social costs and benefits. The role of popular culture and how it impacts upon clothing consumption choices and demand is also addressed, and we consider the range of social, economic and environmental barriers to change.

Key readings:

Additional Readings


War on Want (2008) *Fashion Victims II: How UK Clothing Retailers are Keeping Workers in Poverty*. *(available online 4/1/13)*

http://www.waronwant.org/attachments/Fashion%20Victims%20II.pdf

**Week 9: Tuesday 11th March**

**Energy: context, communication, and consultation**

This lecture outlines a sociology of energy. We think about energy generation and use, and how and why sociologists should be interested in these issues. We then focus on renewable energy, conflicts about the siting and development of a range of renewable technologies, and the most useful way of understanding these debates. Drawing on the themes from earlier in the course, we think about rationality and responsibility: are people who protest against renewables irrational, selfish or morally faulty in some way? Or should we be thinking more broadly about how decisions are made and behaviour enacted? This lecture
addresses these questions by focusing on two key aspects: the social context in which people make their decisions; and the role of consultation, communication, and engagement.

**Key readings:**


**Additional readings:**


Bell, D., Haggett, C., Gray, T. and Swaffield, J. (forthcoming) Revisiting the social gap: public opinions and relations of power in the local politics of wind energy, forthcoming in *Environmental Politics* ([available on Learn](#))


**Week 10: Tuesday 18th March**

**Technology, scripting, and subjectivity**

In this lecture, the last of the case studies, we think about the interactions between people and technologies. We focus on two alternative ways of thinking about this interaction. Firstly, we draw on the literature on ‘scripting’ to explore the way in which the use of an object is anticipated and even forced during its design. Secondly, we explore the role of subjectivity, perception and context in determining how people will respond to a new technology and/or its consequences, and we think in particular here about environmental quality and pollution.

**Key readings:**


**Additional readings:**


Week 11: Tuesdays 25th March

Futures

In this final lecture, we look to the future. We consider different sociological conceptualisations of how society and the environment might develop (as well as the relationship between the two). We firstly consider the ideas of ‘ecological modernisation’ and the treatise that with new smarter, cleaner, more efficient technologies we can solve the environmental problems of the past and develop more sustainable ways of living in the future. We then draw on the ideas of Ulrich Beck and his concept of ‘the risk society’ to explore whether increased development and technology is the answer – or the problem.

Key Readings and Resources
Beck, U. (1992) Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity, Chapter 1. (Short and Standard Loan)


Additional Readings and Resources


**Week 12: Tuesday 1st April**

**Reading week: no lecture**
Essays

Undergraduates and visiting students are assessed via:

(1) A mid-term Short Essay which makes up 25% of your marks for the course.

You must submit your Short Essay through ELMA (see below) no later than noon on Monday 24th February 2014 (Week 7). Penalties apply for late submission.

- Your short essay should be between 1400-1600 words.
- This word count includes any footnotes or endnotes, but excludes the bibliography.
- Essays above 1,600 words will be penalized using the Ordinary level criterion of 1 mark for every 20 words over length: anything between 1,601 and 1,620 words will lose one point, between 1,621 and 1,640 two points, and so on.
- Note that the lower 1,400 figure is a guideline for students which you will not be penalized for going below. However, you should note that shorter essays are unlikely to achieve the required depth and that this will be reflected in your mark.
- Please also state a precise word count.
- Essays submitted on time will be returned to you through ELMA within three weeks.

(2) A Long Essay which makes up 75% of your marks for the course.

Long essays must be submitted through ELMA no later than noon on Monday 28th April 2014. Penalties apply for late submission.

- Your long essay should be between 3,500 and 4,500 words.
- This word count includes any footnotes or endnotes, but excludes the bibliography.
- Essays above 4,500 words will be penalized using the Ordinary level criterion of 1 mark for every 20 words over length: anything between 4,501 and 4,520 words will lose one point, between 4,521 and 4,540 two points, and so on.
- Note that the lower 3,500 figure is a guideline for students which you will not be penalized for going below. However, you should note that shorter essays are unlikely to achieve the required depth and that this will be reflected in your mark.
- Please also state a precise word count.
- Essays submitted on time will be returned to you through ELMA within three weeks.

THE TWO ESSAYS MUST BE ON DIFFERENT TOPICS.
A note on word count: in the past, students have asked what is/isn’t included in the word count. To avoid any confusion, the word count includes everything that is in the main body of your essay – all the text, any sub-headings, any references, any quotes, any footnotes, any endnotes, any tables – anything that is in your actual essay. What is does **not** include is the front page (which will have your essay title, your exam number, and the word count listed on it) and it does **not** include anything that follows your essay, ie the bibliography is not included. I hope that is clear – please do ask if you have any questions. And please don’t go over the word count - marks will be deducted!

Electronic Submission of Essays
Course work will be submitted online using our submission system – ELMA. You will **not** be required to submit a paper copy. Marked course work, grades and feedback will be returned online – you will not receive a paper copy of your marked course work or feedback.

For information, help and advice on submitting coursework and accessing feedback, please see the ELMA wiki at https://www.wiki.ed.ac.uk/display/SPSITWiki/ELMA

Pitfalls to avoid: Plagiarism
Plagiarism is a serious offence attracting severe penalties: see the Sociology Honours Handbook or other student handbook relevant to you for what it is and how to avoid it.

You **must** ensure that you understand what the University regards as plagiarism and why the University takes it seriously. All cases of suspected plagiarism, or other forms of academic misconduct, will be reported to the School Academic Misconduct Officer. You'll find further information in the Sociology Honours handbook, and at the following site:

http://www.sps.ed.ac.uk/undergrad/honours/what_is_plagiarism

The School of Social and Political Science uses the ‘Turnitin’ system to check that essays do not contain plagiarised material. Turnitin compares every assignment against a constantly-updated database, which highlights all plagiarised work.

Academic Misconduct in Submission of Essays: Coursework submitted to the via ELMA will be regarded as the final version for marking. Where there is evidence that the wrong piece of work has been deliberately submitted to subvert hand-in deadlines - e.g. in a deliberately corrupted file - the matter may be treated as a case of misconduct and may be referred to the School Academic Misconduct Officer.

Pitfalls to avoid: Lateness
Please note that both essays must be submitted by the deadline. Should this be after the deadline (**noon** on the relevant day) then Lateness Penalties will apply.
See the Sociology Honours Handbook or other student handbook relevant to you for the lateness penalties, and on what to do should you have a good reason to miss the deadline.

The School of Social & Political Science does not operate a system of ‘extensions’. If you are submitting an essay late you should also complete a Late Penalty Waiver (LPW) form explaining any mitigating circumstances. In the absence of a LPW, or where a LPW is submitted without a genuine case for mitigation late penalties will be applied. Note that if you do have good reason for being late with an essay, and you provide adequate evidence explaining this, you will not be penalised! Please see the Sociology Honours handbook for full details of our procedures.

A note about marks: all marks are provisional until confirmed by the External Examiners at the summer exam boards. The External Examiners for 2013/2014 are Dr Esther Dermott from the University of Bristol, and Dr Michael Halewood from the University of Essex.

**Essay topics**

You are not restricted to the list below. Although you must consult me if you intend to do so, you may construct your own essay title within any of the areas covered by the course.

1) Is social constructionism a useful idea when thinking about the environment?
2) Who or what is to blame for environmental problems?
3) How can we understand human behaviour towards the environment?
4) How do the public understand science? And does it matter?
5) Are environmental risks knowable?
6) Do our perceptions of risks differ from the reality?
7) Why might environmental sociologists be interested in food?
8) Why might environmental sociologists be interested in fashion?
9) How do we engage with technology and what implications does this have for the environment?
10) Is technological scripting a useful way of understanding people’s engagement with and use of energy or technology?
11) Does social context matter in decisions about how and where to site new technologies and developments?
12) Is NIMBY a useful way to conceptualise protest against renewable energy developments? If not, what is?
13) 'Environmental quality is just a matter of opinion'. Discuss.
14) Can we 'develop our way out of disaster'?
15) If we want to 'save the planet', should we be thinking ideally or realistically?
How the mid-term and final essay differ:

The mid-term and final essays must be on different topics. I haven’t set separate questions or reading lists for them, but the obvious difference is that, because the mid-term essay is shorter and you have less time to work on it, it is less ambitious. In both essays, you’ll obviously want to read all the essential reading, but for the mid-term you can draw on the further reading in a more limited way. If discussing, for example, particular environmental risks, it would be appropriate to choose one risk if it is a mid-term essay, and more than one if it is the final essay. You are perfectly at liberty to give your class presentation on the topic of your mid-term or final essay.