

GEOGRAPHY AND PLANNING

GPHY 401: Honours Seminar in Human Geography I: Geographies of Waste and Recycling



Format	Lectures, discussions, and debates based on key texts, case studies and videos
Contact Time	3 hour weekly in-class lecture

COURSE DESCRIPTION

Climate change, just energy transition, degrowth, inclusive growth, net zero, green economy, and circular economy are prevalent in most if not all, discussions about our collective low or zero-carbon future. Each of these initiatives invariably focuses on reducing global dependence on hydrocarbons/fossil fuels and aggressively promotes investment and adoption of green and renewable energies and technologies. This transformation affects every sector, including agriculture, manufacturing, transport, energy, mining, telecommunications, finance, service, and retail. Since all these sectors produce waste in some form, managing both – hazardous and nonhazardous – is at the center of the global drive for not only decarbonization but also dematerialization.

The course takes an interdisciplinary approach to understanding waste, its creation, and its centrality to the expansion of global capital accumulation, paying particular attention to the social, political, and economic processes that render certain material objects/commodities, spaces/places, and populations as waste in contemporary economics. Equally important, the course engages with current debates about recycling (e.g., urban mining within informal waste networks) as part of the solution to the global waste problem. Recycling, couched in ideas such as the circular economy and green and sustainable development, is also increasingly explored to ease anxieties around critical minerals scarcity - considering projected demand to support the energy transition. Specifically, the course asks students to think about what waste streams become commodified through recycling, the conditions under which recycling takes place, who is doing the job of recycling, and why. The course draws on scholarly works in political ecology, critical resource geographies, commodity chain analysis, environmental and social justice, the circular economy, black ecologies, and critical race. Please note this is a seminar-based course. Students are expected to take an active role in presentations and discussions.

SELECTED COURSE TOPICS

Waste, Recycling, Commodity Chain, Circular Economy, Green Economy, Urban Mining, Green Capitalism, Informal Waste Economies, Racial Capitalism; Electronic Waste, Nuclear Waste, Used Textiles, Fast Fashion; Toxic Dumping, Labour

LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of the course, students should be able to:

1. Explain key theoretical approaches and concepts in the field of waste studies and the growing subfield of discard studies
2. Discuss the multiple ways that disposability is naturalized in contemporary society as well as the ethical and justice impacts of waste disposal.
3. Articulate the pros and cons, as well as political, economic, and socio-ecological factors influencing the policy shift towards a circular economy
4. Describe the key challenges associated with reliance on market-based solutions to solve global environmental problems
5. Communicate a key concept from the course in plain language format to a non-academic audience to practice transferrable skills beyond the class