Energy History

Instructor: Liat Spiro

Course description:
This course will treat the history of energy regimes—animal, water, coal, nuclear, hydroelectric, oil, and renewables—since approximately 1750. Analyzing energy regimes, their proponents, and their discontents will enable us to understand the historical making of working conditions and labor politics, mechanization and the changing spatial relations of industry, imperialism and nationalism, regional development and the growth of metropolitan areas, and the origins of human-made climate change and “Anthropocene.”

We will explore energy infrastructures as socio-technical systems with political origins and wide cultural consequences. We will consistently keep an eye “upstream” and “downstream” of the energy sector to understand the sources of environmental inequality and the allotment and assessment of risk. The course readings and assignments will promote skills of use to history majors, students majoring in the social sciences and public policy, students of engineering, students of chemistry and physics, and students focusing on the environmental, biological, and health sciences. All comers welcome.

Assignments:
Weekly Response Papers (15%)—Write ~200 words reflecting on the week’s readings, plus one or two questions inspired by them.

Primary Source Analysis (15%)—I will circulate a few sets of primary sources, composed of images, data, and texts, two weeks prior to the due date. “Close read” the enclosed documents (which may be maps, surveys, projections, photographs, advertisements, excerpts of reports, etc.) in 4-6 pages, 12-pt Times New Roman, double-spaced.

Midterm Exam (20%)—Answer four (of six) identification questions and respond to two (of three) essay prompts, using the readings completed so far

Energy Project Op-Ed (25%)—Choose a specific energy project currently under consideration and in the works, and make an argument about whether or how it should be pursued. Draw on at least THREE course readings and THREE sources (primary or secondary) gathered in your own research. 6-8 pages, 12-pt Times New Roman, double-spaced.

Mapping Project (25%)—Construct a map or other visualization based on contemporary or historical data about an energy phenomenon (electricity distribution, fuel waste, price variations, etc.), and write 6-8 pages explaining how it adds to or modifies understandings (be they in the press or historiographical) of your chosen energy
phenomenon. We will hold workshops on how to collect and clean relevant data as well as how to use mapping tools such as ArcGIS.

**Week 1—Panorama**

Optional:  

**Week 2—Energy in the Great Divergence**

**Week 3—Steam**

Optional:  

**Week 4—Persistence of Biopower**
Clay McShane and Joel A. Tarr, *The Horse in the City: Living Machines in the Nineteenth Century* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007)

Optional:  

**Week 5—Killing for Coal**

Primary sources:  
Optional:

Primary Source Analysis Due

**Week 6—Mineral Colonialisms and Anticolonial Nationalisms**
Grace Yen Shen, *Unearthing the Nation: Modern Geology and Nationalism in Republican China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), selections

Primary source:
“Letter from Baron Richthofen on the Province of Hunan,” 20th to 26th February, 1870, Letter on the Provinces of Chekiang and Nganhwei (Shanghai: North-China Herald Office, 1871)
Bertrand Russell, *The Problem of China* (Century Co., 1922), selections

Optional:

**Week 7—Electrification, Inequality, and Difference**

Primary source:

Optional:
Midterm Exam

Week 8—High Modernism & Nuclear

Optional:

Data Collection Workshops

Week 10—Hydroelectric & Regional Development

Primary source:

Optional:

Week 11—International Oil, Then and Now

Mapping Workshops
Week 12—Fracking

Optional:

Energy Project Op-Ed Due

Week 13—Reflections

Optional:

Week 14—Outlooks

Optional:

Mapping Project Due