ANTHRO 3502: CULTURAL ECOLOGY  
Fall 2013  
Instructor: Dr. Eric B. Ross  
Tues., Thurs. 2:20-3:35pm

COURSE OVERVIEW:
Cultural Ecology is the study of how human populations, through their culturally-patterned behaviors and associated beliefs, adjust strategically to their environments and of how such adjustments are expressed and maintained through linkages and feedbacks that make human groups an active part of those environments. This course takes as its point of departure the view that such a perspective, especially when applied in an historical and comparative framework, offers unique opportunities to understand the significance of temporal and spatial variation in human cultural patterns and, in doing so, offers a powerful corrective to simplistic generalizations about why people live, produce and reproduce in certain ways and to the common and comfortable assumption that what is different and not immediately intelligible is, therefore, irrational.

COURSE OBJECTIVES:
Students will appreciation the guiding principles of cultural ecological analysis through an understanding of some major examples of its cumulative body of work. In the process, they will become familiar with the challenges and contributions that cultural ecology has made to general anthropological theory and, in particular, to our comparative understanding of the forces that shape and influence cultural patterns and variations. Further, students should finish the course with a broad sense of how to independently and critically interpret and demystify cultural phenomena, in their own as well as in more remote or unfamiliar environments, and be able to apply such knowledge productively to on-going debates in the contemporary world.

ASSESSMENT:
There will be a take-home mid-term exam, counting 40% of the final grade, and a term-paper worth 60%. The paper, of approximately 2,500 words, will be on a course-related topic devised by the student in consultation with the Lecturer. It will be due on December 10.

READINGS:
The following books are required reading and should be available for purchase at the GW Bookstore.


Weekly Reading, unless available on the Internet, will be available on Blackboard.
PART 1: THE LOGIC AND AIMS OF CULTURAL ECOLOGY

Week 1. Introduction to the Course
In this first section, a brief overview of the over-arching aims of the course is presented; the emergence of cultural ecology as a theoretical perspective is considered within an historical framework; and its relevance considered in terms of a more general anthropological perspective on cultural analysis.

1 (8.27) Introduction to the Course, the Subject and the Lecturer
2 (8.29) The Emergence of the Cultural Mode of Adaptation

Reading:
Netting, Robert, Ecological Perspectives in Cultural Ecology.


Week 2. The Ecology of Non-Accumulating Societies
Some of the first and most interesting developments in cultural ecology began with insights into the subsistence behavior of hunting-gathering populations; here some core concepts will be discussed and considered.

3. (9.3) The Logic and Lessons of Hunter-Gatherer Society
4. (9.5) The Reproductive Ecology of Pre-Industrial Peoples

Reading:


Netting, Robert, Hunter Gatherers in Cultural Ecology.


**Week 3. The Development of Agriculture and Its Health and Environmental Consequences**

In contrast to earlier, simplistic assumptions about the nature of the transition to agriculture, anthropological studies increasingly suggest that its emergence was neither simple nor straightforward; but, rather, that it was a contradictory process that created problems as much as it resolved them.

5 (9.10) The Transition to Agriculture
6. (9.12) Contemporary Agricultural Transformations


Harris, Marvin Cannibals & Kings, Ch. 3 (“The Origins of Agriculture”)
Week 4.  The Ecology of “Human Nature”: Warfare as Adaptation
Among the problems that arose with agriculture was a tension between resource productivity and human reproductive potential, creating continual stresses that gave rise to or severely intensified a variety of behavior patterns, including infanticide and warfare. In this section, we explore some of the adaptive features of these seemingly maladaptive practices.

7 (9.17) Population Regulation in Pre-industrial Societies
8 (9.19) Warfare and Animal Resources in Paleo-Technic Economies

Reading:


Harris, Marvin, *Cannibals and Kings*, Ch. 4, (“The Origin of War”)


Week 5. Energetics and the Adaptive “Logic” of Material life
This session offers, as a kind of sidebar, an opportunity to consider how ecological analysis can reveal levels of processual significance in cultural patterns that would otherwise be ignored or misconstrued.


Reading:

Week 6. The Cultural Ecology of Food Preferences in Pre-industrial Societies
Perhaps in no other aspect of cultural life more than in food customs (in particular, preferences and avoidances) are we able to demystify the relationship of human behavior to
resource questions. While this can be done partly by case-by-case analysis, the benefit of an ecological approach is that it enables us also to overcome the constraints of a purely cultural analysis and to generate cross-cultural and comparative generalizations, that is to say to explicate the nature of divergence and convergence at the heart of any evolutionary process.

11. (10.1) The Ecological Correlates of Amazonian Food Preferences and Avoidances
12. (10.3) Evolutionary Transitions in New Guinea Subsistence Ecology

Reading:
Harris, Marvin, Cannibals and Kings, Ch. 5 (“Proteins and the Fierce People”)

Week 7. Adaptational Problems of the (Pre-industrial) State
In this section, we begin to address some of the special ecological questions associated with the rise of paleotechnic civilizations and the contradictions of growth based on problematic resource constraints and opportunities. While the problems faced by such societies are not exactly those that confront contemporary industrial states, there are nevertheless compelling reasons to seek to extract broad lessons from such studies.

13. (10.8) The Ecology and Economy of Aztec Cannibalism
14. (10.10) The Enigmatic Decline of the Mayan Empire

Reading
PART 2: ADAPTING TO THE COLONIAL WORLD SYSTEM
The expansion of European capitalism and the emergence of the modern world, system imposed new pressures and constraints to which local populations were compelled to adapt, though not always in obvious or direct ways. Indeed, most of what we usually know of any cultures (except archaeologically or from limited historical documentation) is generally after they have been affected by such changes. Hence, our data—and our theories—tend to be skewed toward a misguided impression of indigenous life.

Week 8: Underdevelopment and Cultural Transformation on the Capitalist Frontier
In this section, we will critically explore a number of cases of the impact of European commercial expansion on cultural patterns often regarded as “traditional.” In so doing, we will begin to explore and expose some of the sources of poverty in the contemporary world.

15. (10.15) Cultural Formations in the Colonialized World
16. (10.17) Adaptations to the Demands of European Trade

Reading:

Netting, Robert, Northwest Coast Fisherman in Cultural Ecology.


Week 9.
17. (10.22) Mid-term Overview & Discussion

Week 10. Cultural Adaptations to the New Colonial Order
This section continues the previous one, looking in more detail at a number of cases from recent Third World experience, in particular the paradigmatic example of Ireland as a model of subsistence marginalization and crisis.

20. (10.31) The Political Ecology of Irish Famines

Reading:


PART 3: CULTURE AND ENVIRONMENT IN COMPLEX SYSTEMS: FROM CULTURAL TO POLITICAL ECOLOGY

Week 11. Sub-Optimal Adaptation: The Contradictions of Poverty

21 (11.5) The Logic of Being Poor in Brazil's Northeast
22 (11.7) Modern Malthusian Politics and its Fallacies: “The Tragedy of the Commons”

Reading:


**Week 12. Culture, Environment and Population in the World System**

23 (11.12) Population, Environment and Politics in Rural Development
24 (11.14) **FILM: The Legacy of Malthus. (Deepa Dhanraj 1994).**

*Reading:*


**Week 13. The Fate of Local Food Production in a Global/Globalized System**

25. (11.19) The Seeming Paradox of Beef Taboo and “Cow Love” in Hindu India

*Reading:*


ETC Group 2002 Genetic Pollution in Mexico's Center of Maize Diversity. Food First
Week 14 Struggles for Land: Ecological Aspects of Food Production in Complex Systems

This section considers some of the complex configurations of modern food production that integrate local resource use with global transfers, in ways that frequently generate conflict between subsistence cultivators, seeking livelihood security, and commercial interests, motivated by profit. Among the cases that will be considered are soy production and the increasing role of a handful of multinational companies that dominate a small number of major world food crops.

27. (12.19) The Multinational Beef System and its Consequences for the Amazon
28. (12.21) The Emergence of the Global Soy Trade and World Food Inequalities

Reading:


Week 15
In this important film, the late British director Adrian Cowell documents the complex process that draws together international capital, Brazilian development priorities, peasant marginalization and the destruction of the Amazon rain forest.

27. (12.26) FILM: Decade of Destruction: Killing for Land (1990)
28. THANKSGIVING

*Reading:*
Amazon's Jungle Warfare – Brazil. Youtube.
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GQe7_g9DZZo&feature=channel


**Week 16 (TBA)**
29. (12.3)
30. (12.5)

**FINAL EXAM**

**PAPER DUE:** December 9