

Situated Urban Political Ecology: Extending Urban Political Ecology through Postcolonial and Feminist Perspectives

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GE7075 Lecture at SU - UPE

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Urban political ecology (UPE) is concerned with the processes of “the urbanization of nature”, i.e., the social, cultural, and political relations through which material and biophysical entities become transformed into commodities and the physical and built environment of often unequal cities. It contributes a historicized and politicized understanding of why certain groups have influence and access over “sociomaterial flows” such as water, electricity, and sewage services, while others have less to say and little or no access. UPE scholars have studied how technology and human labour is dialectically part in producing unequal environments. Scholars seek to explain how power operates by examining processes of capital accumulation as socio-natural transformation, as well as contestations over these processes. Cities are seen not as the antithesis of nature but rather as a second nature, representing the dominant form of living in the contemporary age.

In this lecture we extend these neo-Marxist foundations of UPE towards a Situated UPE through looking at the vibrant feminist, postcolonial, and critical race engagements that have shaped UPE in the last decade or so. The main argument for doing this is to widen the range of urban experiences that can inform our understanding of urbanization, challenging the legacies of Northern or Euroamerican bias in critical urban and environmental studies. By theorizing political ecologies from capital’s “constitutive outsides,” as developed by Silvia Federici or from “cheap nature,” as phrased by Jason W Moore, those subject positions, landscapes, and ecosystems that are not seen or heard by the forces that organise capital accumulation, but which still are necessary for the making of profits. It also feeds into discussion on how to account for how geographical and historical context matters deeply in the present; or, as in Ana Laura Stoler’s words, how “active colonial remains” keep haunting the present in material, social, and ancestral ways. What I hope to show more generally is that the field of UPE is harbouring a boisterous and lively debate that is continuously developing, while a focus in UPE is maintained to unpack and critique relations of power through studying the sociomaterial process of urbanization.

Required task

To move towards a Situated UPE we will focus on **knowledge politics** and the question of “who is in the know,” and use this question as a guide to unpack and analyse socioenvironmental situations and conflicts. For this purpose, we will get to know Cape Town in South Africa, a city shaped by the political ecologies of colonization and racist spatial planning. You will be tasked to watch the film “One Table Two Elephants” that brings a textured account about knowledge politics from Cape Town.

Your task is to read two articles (one is short), watch our cinematic ethnographic film “One Table Two Elephants” (von Heland and Ernstson, 2018, 84 minutes), and respond to a few questions in relation to the film. We will use your material to discuss the film in class and further bring understanding of what Situated UPE tries to achieve.

1) Read these two required readings

Lawhon, Mary, Henrik Ernstson, and Jonathan D. Silver. 2014. “Provincializing Urban Political Ecology: Towards a Situated UPE through African Urbanism.” *Antipode* 46(2):497–516.

Ernstson, Henrik. 2020. [Urban Plants and Colonial Durabilities](#). In *The Botanical City*, edited by Matthew Gandy and Sandra Jasper. Berlin: Jovis. (author-copy), pp. 71–81. (*Short article.*)

2) Watch the film

Von Heland, Jacob and Henrik Ernstson. 2018. *One Table Two Elephants*. CPH:DOX Copenhagen: 84 minutes, cinematic ethnography, Color, HD, Dolby 5:1, World Premiere In Competition at CPH:DOX 2018 20th March 2018. <https://vimeo.com/298166514> (For context, see <https://bit.ly/Teaching1T2E>)

3) Respond to the following questions:

1. Why do you think the movie is called “One Table Two Elephants”? What is the one table, and what are the two elephants? What symbolic meaning do these words gain in the film, and how do they relate to one another? What is the title trying to capture?
2. How would you summarize what the film is about? Write a short 2-3 sentence synopsis.
3. What scenes and specific people in the film resonated most with you? List them (with time stamps) and explain why you chose them. Afford yourself to write about what you liked, what intrigued you the most, what annoyed you, or what you had difficulties understanding. Try to list at least 3 scenes.
4. Focusing on ways of knowing and silencing, the film is presented as following “biologists, hip-hoppers, and a revivalist urban shaman to explore how race and nature are intertwined” in and around Cape Town. Pick out 2 of the scenes you selected and reflect on how questions of race, nature, and the politics of knowledge is played out in them. For instance:
 - a. How does Cape Town’s history feature in each of your scenes?
 - b. What types of urban futures are being envisioned in your scenes?
 - c. How do these scenes compare to each other?
5. Do you have any final comments about the film? Please prepare a few questions for the class that can be raised, and we can discuss.

Extended reading

The chapter on “comparative urban environmentalism” (Ernstson and Sörlin 2019) reviews some valuable literature and argues for how the intersection between Southern or postcolonial urbanism with urban environmental studies creates an important arena for situated studies of political ecology. The article by Sapana Doshi is short but it effectively develops a feminist and embodied perspective. The rest are very effective case studies, demonstrating how UPE can be used to unpack politics in and beyond cities, in particular those of the global South.

- Ernstson, Henrik and Sverker Sörlin. 2019. “Toward Comparative Urban Environmentalism: Situating Urban Natures in an Emerging ‘World of Cities.’” Pp. 3–53 in *Grounding Urban Natures: Histories and Futures of Urban Ecologies*, edited by H. Ernstson and S. Sörlin. Cambridge: MIT Press. Open Access at: <https://direct.mit.edu/books/book/4522/Grounding-Urban-NaturesHistories-and-Futures-of>
- Doshi, Sapana. 2017. “Embodied Urban Political Ecology: Five Propositions.” *Area* 49(1):125–28.
- Dawson, Katherine. 2021. “Geologising Urban Political Ecology (UPE): The Urbanisation of Sand in Accra, Ghana.” *Antipode* 53(4):995–1017. doi: [10.1111/anti.12718](https://doi.org/10.1111/anti.12718).
- Silver, Jonathan. 2014. “Incremental Infrastructures: Material Improvisation and Social Collaboration across Post-Colonial Accra.” *Urban Geography* 35(6):788–804. doi: [10.1080/02723638.2014.933605](https://doi.org/10.1080/02723638.2014.933605).
- Ranganathan, Malini. 2015. “Storm Drains as Assemblages: The Political Ecology of Flood Risk in Post-Colonial Bangalore.” *Antipode* 47:1300–1320.

Context for the film and Cape Town

- Ernstson, Henrik. 2014. “Situating Ecologies and Re-Distributing Expertise: The Material Semiotics of People and Plants at Bottom Road, Cape Town.” Pp. 1–20 in *Symposium on the Interdisciplinary PhD Program in Urban Design & Planning at the University of Washington, 6 May*. Seattle, WA: University of Washington.
- Ernstson, Henrik. 2020. [Urban Plants and Colonial Durabilities](#). In *The Botanical City*, edited by Matthew Gandy and Sandra Jasper. Berlin: Jovis. (author-copy).
- Benson, Koni, and Faeza Meyer. 2015. “[Reluctantly Loud: Interventions in the History of Land Occupation](#).” In *African Cities Reader III*, edited by Edgar Pieterse. 64–95. Cape Town: African Centre for Cities & Chimurenga.
- Mabin, Alan, and Dan Smit. 1997. [Reconstructing South Africa’s Cities? The Making of Urban Planning 1900 – 2000](#). *Planning Perspectives* 12 (2): 193–223
- Ahluwalia, Pal, and Abebe Zegeye. 2003. [Between Black and White: Rethinking Coloured Identity](#). *African Identities* 1 (2): 253–80.

And see more here: <http://www.situatedecologies.net/teaching-resources/one-table-two-elephants/teaching-the-film-one-table-two-elephants/>

