

AMES 3xxx

Petrofictions: Oil Wars, Wealth, and Waste in the Middle East

Course Description:

Oil is everywhere, shaping every aspect of our lives: our technology, relationships, politics, wars. Fossil fuel energy connects distant regions through uneven production, extraction, and exploitation of resources and populations. How does contemporary Middle Eastern culture tell the story of petromodernity – of our petroleum energy dependence? What can petrofictions – literary and cinematic works concerned with oil – tell us about the “slow violence” of environmental change, oil imperialism and its erosion of democracy, or new forms of environmental activism? Throughout the course we will examine how novels, films, and visual art by American, Iraqi, Iranian, or Indian writers and artists help us realize the networked reality of an oil-addicted world, as well as think about new, speculative forms of energy futures in a “post oil” epoch.

Liberal education requirements:

Gaining critical literacy in diverse histories and cultural traditions is one of the foundational principles of liberal education: it denaturalizes one’s given context and offers a basis for thinking comparatively of the variety of meaning-making systems that humans have elaborated in different places and times. In this multi-disciplinary course, students will learn of the history of oil extraction, of the way oil has shaped both American and Middle Eastern lives, landscapes, and possibilities, and finally, of the manner in which cultural analysis allows us both to understand and to challenge the taken-for-granted aspects of our material and political present.

To this end the course will meet the following SLO:

1. Locate and critically evaluate information:

Oil is everywhere, yet we rarely consciously see it. Over the course of the semester, the students will learn to “read for oil” in a variety of political, economic, and cultural contexts. Reading primary sources such as corporate histories, novels, or popular films, as well as critical secondary sources, the students will be able to identify the foundational myths and material limitations that continue to allow for our reliance on oil economies despite knowledge of their destructive climate effects.

SLO Assessment:

Throughout the semester, the students will turn in a number of projects that will demonstrate their ability to directly approach and analyze materials: two comparative papers about our readings, and a final project engaging with a new archive related to the petroleum industry in the Middle East. In this final project they will demonstrate the ability to apply the tools they have learned throughout the semester to new literary, visual, or archival materials.

This 3-credit course will be offered every other year. There are no prerequisites and all the materials are available in English.

Meeting Humanities Studies Core Criteria:

In this course the students engage with diverse products of petroculture: novels (Munif, Kanafani), stories (Calvino, Unnikrishnan, Mahmud), films (Russel, Rashid), documentaries (Gulistan, Herzog), personal testimonies (al-Radi), visual arts and photography archives, and cultural criticism (al-Maria, Baudrillard, Ghosh). The course is divided into several sections, examining how these cultural products emerge from and reflect on their social and historical context: The first section considers the imperative to study the cultural role of oil in a global framework, given our knowledge of the oil economy's devastating environmental impact. The second considers the impact and cultural manifestations of the emergence of oil-wealth and mass labor migration in the gulf. The third section considers the history of oil-related American wars in the Middle East, as well as the emergence of new media technologies depicting it. The final section, Waste, considers the environmental impact of both oil extraction and continuous militarization in the Middle East. Engaging with a diversity of perspective and voices – from Indian labor migrants, through American speculators, to Saudi theorists – the students develop tools to read critically and contextualize cultural products.

Meeting Environment Theme Criteria:

1) Thinking ethically about important challenges facing our society and world;

This course addresses some of the most urgent environmental issues of our time: fossil fuel extraction, its destruction of natural habitats and communities, its relation to global warming, and the lasting environmental effects of militarization. The course examines the history of the oil industry in the Middle East, as well as the economic and cultural structures in which fossil fuels are entangled. Learning of the origins and cultural significance of oil, we also discuss the kind of cultural and political work that needs to be done in order to shift away from environmentally and socially destructive extractive economies.

2) Reflecting on the shared sense of responsibility required to build and maintain community;

Throughout the course, we examine the unequal and codependent relationship between the US and the Middle East, largely shaped by oil-politics. The students will learn how American public policy bears direct impact on Middle Eastern environments and societies. Reading Middle Eastern writers who consider the impact of the oil extraction on local environments, we follow their diagnosis of how the oil economy shaped uneven and violent development in the Middle East, and trace their visions for more democratic and just social formations. Finally, we consider the ways in which the pervasiveness of the oil economy into all facets of life necessitates cultivating a sense of global responsibility and demands for accountability.

3) Connecting knowledge and practice;

In this course, the students learn how to critically assess information put out by fossil fuel companies by reading it alongside texts by environmental scientists and social researchers, as well as on-the-ground writers and artists. They learn to identify the main economic and political myths that sustain our fossil-fuel dependency, despite our knowledge of its environmentally catastrophic effects. Furthermore, they learn to identify the often-unintended social consequences of extractive economies, realizing that any shift away from fossil-fuel extraction would have to be based in principles of social justice. All of the above give students the tools to participate in current debates on energy policy, recognizing their material, social, and environmental impact.

4) Fostering a stronger sense of our roles as historical agents.

Throughout the course, we identify the labor leaders, the environmental activists, the committed artists and documentarists, and the social scientists, who have worked to curtail oil companies' desire for profit: to make the destructive effects of fossil extraction more visible, and the distribution of oil-wealth more just. These figures illuminate that our current oil-saturated reality is not necessary or inevitable, but rather the product of social and political struggles, and they inspire the students to realize how they can make a difference in shaping a better environmental future, both locally and globally.