



rijksuniversiteit
groningen

faculteit der letteren

Course Guide

The History of (Un)Sustainability

Research Seminar MA Un/sustainable Societies: Past,
Present, and Future



(Semester 1, 2024-2025)

Various lecturers, coordinated by Dr Iva Peša & Dr
Anjana Singh

Degree programme: MA History, Un/sustainable Societies: Past, Present, and Future

Study phase: MA, Semester 1, Block I & II

Course unit code: LGX216M10

Lecturers: Prof Dr H.A.J. Bras, Dr F. Buscemi, Dr B. Danon, Dr D.W. Franken, Dr N.A. Kraft van Ermel, Dr J. Pelgrom, Dr I. Peša, Dr A. Singh, Dr S. Sishuwa, Dr A. van Steensel, Dr M. Williams

course coordinator: Dr Iva Peša

e-mail address: i.pesa@rug.nl

room number: H1312.0519

office hours: by arrangement

course coordinator: Dr Anjana Singh

e-mail address: anjana.singh@rug.nl

room number: H1312.0507

office hours: by arrangement

Stellenbosch course coordinator: Dr Jabulani Shaba

e-mail address: j.shaba@rug.nl

Time and place of lecture: Block I: Wednesdays 09.00-11.00, Marie Lokezaal, Harmonie building
Block II: Wednesdays 09.00-11.00, T13 Turftorenstraat

1. Type of course unit, number of ECTS credit points and admission requirements

a. Type: Research Seminar, Major course unit

b. ECTS: 10

c. Admission requirements: Admission to the MA in History

2. Content of the course unit

This is a tailor-made seminar for the students of the track 'Un/sustainable Societies: Past, Present, and Future.' It introduces you to the main topics, debates, and approaches necessary to understand un/sustainability from a historical perspective. In a series of lectures and corresponding seminar sessions, you will learn about the five core themes of this MA specialisation:

1. Wealth and inequality;
2. Migration and development;
3. Politics, democracy, and populism;
4. Environmental change;
5. Conflict, human security, and geopolitics.

This course provides conceptual tools that will be of use to the rest of your MA courses. You will be encouraged to write assignments that are in line with your research interests and future job ambitions. This course applies academic perspectives to real-world issues through assignments that tackle societal challenges.

3. Position of the course unit in the degree programme

See above. Students follow this course in the first semester of their MA programme. This course provides a good preparation for the courses in the second semester and the MA thesis.

4. Learning outcomes of the course unit

Upon successful completion of the course unit, students are able to:

- Understand and engage with the main academic topics, debates, and approaches to (un)sustainability from historical and contemporary perspectives;
- Connect theory from secondary literature to current societal challenges, by applying historical knowledge to practice and policy (government, NGOs, media, etc.);
- Reflect on and contribute to problems of (un)sustainability through assignments addressing current issues;
- Apply practical skills needed to address issues of (un)sustainability.

Learning goals

1. specialist knowledge and understanding of one or more eras, themes and/or regions as well as their associated historiographical aspects, recent developments and trends.
2. advanced knowledge and understanding of theories, methods and techniques (including interdisciplinary ones) of the historical sciences.
3. knowledge and understanding of the complexity and diversity of the past, its historiography, and critical historiographical reflection.
4. knowledge and understanding of how historical research is conducted and which research strategies can be successfully deployed.
6. the ability to independently and academically draw up a convincingly contextualised research question, select the relevant theories and methods, and to gather and critically analyse various, possibly complex textual, visual, audiovisual, material and/or quantitative sources and literature.
7. the ability to apply the acquired knowledge of history and historiography and their theories, methods, and techniques to the assessment of research within the discipline or in society.
11. the ability to evaluate complex academic historical knowledge and research results and to discuss these critically and effectively with historians and other academics, while reflecting on their own standpoints and those of others.
12. the ability to provide convincing interpretations of historical issues based on incomplete databases and valid arguments.
13. the ability to set up and implement a historical research project of a predefined scope based on a complex yet transparent question and to process its results into a well-founded conclusion, bearing in mind the possible academic, social, or ethical aspects of the question.
14. the ability to communicate in a clear, accurate, attractive, and linguistically correct way in written form the results of their own research and that of others. They are able to present their knowledge, motives, and considerations to their academic peers and to the general public following the conventions of the historical sciences via critical and synthesising research papers and a ditto final assignment. The latter can take the form of a) a thesis, b) a learning history, c) a scenario for a documentary, or d) an exhibition or exhibition plan.
15. the ability to actively participate in oral discussions on the results of their own research and that of others, with both colleagues and the general public, and to defend these while showing respect for other people's opinions.

5. Modes of instruction and learning activities

This course will be offered in-person for Groningen students and online for Stellenbosch students. For Stellenbosch students, we will offer an online streaming of the classes through Brightspace/Blackboard Collaborate. 80% attendance is mandatory. If you cannot attend a class, please always inform the coordinator (i.pesa@rug.nl) in advance.

Each theme is introduced by an interactive lecture and followed by a discussion seminar in the next week. Students should submit their written comments *before* the discussion seminar. The course materials for each session are listed in this syllabus and will be made available on Brightspace.

During the lecture concepts and theoretical approaches related to sustainability will be introduced, based on state-of-the-art literature. Students reflect on the literature in written comments (+/- 500 words), in which they answer pre-formulated questions. The mandatory literature and the written comments will be the basis for in-class discussion.

Throughout the course, students work on a societal challenge in mixed Groningen-Stellenbosch teams (hybrid). This group assignment will take the form of a portfolio: preceding each seminar session students will submit a reflection document, explaining how their societal challenge relates to the theory presented in the readings and the lecture. In week 14, students will submit a final assignment of their choice (1,000 words or alternative format), presenting their societal challenge in a creative format (blog, podcast, policy advice, newspaper article, etc.). The aim of this assignment is to translate academic insights on sustainability to a practical setting.

Students choose one of the core themes of this course to write a final paper of 4,000 words. This paper is based on secondary literature (at least ten articles and/or books of at least 1200 pages in total) relating to themes of un/sustainability. The paper revolves around a clearly defined and analytical statement (formulated in the form of a hypothesis) that students support or refute based on the secondary literature. The selected secondary literature should be a mix of theoretical literature on un/sustainability and subject or geographically specific literature. The paper should reflect the main debates (with conflicting views) on issues of sustainability as these relate to the chosen topic.

6. Assessment

a. Mode of assessment

1. Written comments on the readings (500 words) to be submitted before each seminar session (by 1 pm on Tuesdays before the seminar). The average grade must be sufficient.
2. Active participation, must be sufficient on average.

No resit opportunities for written comments and participation.

3. Group assignment on a societal challenge, translating academic discussions on sustainability to a real-life setting (portfolio format, bi-weekly 500 word contributions and final 1,000 word assignment).

4. Final paper (4,000 words excluding footnotes and bibliography) which discusses major debates on sustainability and applies these to a specific case.

Requirements 3 and 4 can be revised once.

b. Assessment deadlines

Deadlines:

- Weeks 3, 5, 7, 11, 13: written comments (1 pm on Tuesdays before the seminar, on Brightspace).
- Weeks 3, 5, 7, 11, 13: societal challenge reflections (3 pm on Tuesdays before the seminar, on Brightspace).
- Week 6: submit a proposal for your final paper, containing the topic and statement, main debates, and a preliminary bibliography (11 October 2024, 3 pm).
- Week 14: submission of societal challenge portfolio and final assignment (4 December 2024, 5 pm).
- Week 14: peer review of drafts of the final papers of two of your fellow students (submit by 2 December 2024, 10 am).
- Final paper deadline Thursday 19 December 2024, 5 pm.
- Deadline resit of insufficient papers: Wednesday 26 March 2025, 2 pm.

c. Examples of tests

N.a.

d. Conditions for taking exams

This course requires active participation. This will be evaluated by the timely submission of assignments and attendance of the meetings (80% presence is the minimum required). In the case of absence, students are requested to email the coordinator in advance (i.pesa@rug.nl). Inadequate attendance and/or participation can lead to expulsion from the course.

7. Assessment

a. Assessment criteria

- Written comments: 500 words. Based on each theme's readings, the lecturers have formulated questions. Please reflect on the readings, provide a brief answer to one of the questions, and upload the written comment to Brightspace by 1 pm on the Tuesday before the seminar session.
- Societal challenge reflections: 500 words. Apply the theme's readings and the theory presented during the lectures to your societal challenge. As a group, submit a 500 word reflection in which you explain how your societal challenge relates to the specific debates on un/sustainability presented for that theme. Upload these reflections to Brightspace by 3 pm on the Tuesday before the seminar session.
- Research proposal for final paper: 500 words + bibliography. The research proposal comprises a preliminary title and subtitle; an introduction to the topic; a problem field; a research statement (hypothesis); an operationalisation of the research statement; an indication of the structure of the argumentation and a chapter outline; a specification of the literature per chapter; a bibliography (11 October 2024, 3 pm). The course coordinators and fellow students will provide feedback on your research proposal.
- Portfolio assignment societal challenge: bi-weekly 500 word reflections and 1,000 word final assignment, or alternative format (to be submitted on 4 December 2024, 5 pm). Your final assignment should apply academic debates on sustainability to your societal challenge in a practical manner, geared towards your envisaged future work field. Creativity in approaches and presentation styles is encouraged (e.g. producing a short clip for secondary school students explaining your societal challenge, or writing a policy advice for the Dutch/South African government). The course coordinators will judge your assignment based on originality, how well you apply debates about sustainability to your assignment, and suitability for practical application.
- Peer review drafts of final paper. The written peer review comments on the three strong points and the three points to be improved of the final paper. You will formulate peer reviews for two fellow students (2 December 2024, 10 am).
- Final paper: 4,000 words (+/-10%, excluding notes and bibliography) based on 1200 pages of literature (at least ten books and/or articles). The precise assessment criteria are listed in a grading form, found on Brightspace. The paper comprises:
 - An introduction, with an introduction of the topic, overall scientific approach including the scientific and social aim of the research, a research statement formulated in the form of a hypothesis (that structures the argumentation), as well as a justification of the methodology (operationalisation of the research statement);
 - An elaborate, systematically organised argumentation, subdivided in sections;
 - A conclusion (providing a brief summary, reflection on the research statement, a broader contextualisation of your paper and suggestions for future research);
 - Scientific annotation and complete design (cover page, table of contents, bibliography).Final papers should be submitted on Brightspace by 19 December 2024, 5 pm.
- In case of an insufficient grade a revised paper may be submitted by Wednesday 26 March 2025, 2 pm, on Brightspace.

b. Calculating preliminary and final marks

All items 1-5 as listed under 6a (Mode of assessment) must be sufficient (5,5 or higher).

1. Written comments: 20%
2. Active participation and peer review: pass/fail
3. Societal challenge portfolio: 40%
4. Literature review: 40%

8. Cheating and plagiarism

Cheating and plagiarism are subject to the provisions set down in Article 8.17 of Part A of the MA OER

9. Calculation of the student workload

10 ECTS = 280 hrs

- Contact hours + preparation $14 \times 2 \times 4 \text{ hrs} = 110 \text{ hrs}$
- Written comments $4 \times 4 \text{ hrs} = 16 \text{ hrs}$
- Societal challenge 70 hrs
- Peer review $2 \times 2 \text{ hrs} = 4 \text{ hrs}$
- Essay 80 hrs

10. Literature

See point 11

11. Weekly timetable

Session 1: 4 September 2024 (Lecture)

Perspectives on (Un)Sustainability: How Can Historians Contribute to Academic Debates and Policymaking? (Anjana Singh and Iva Peša)

In this introductory lecture to the course, we will discuss the concept of (un)sustainability as a tool for historical research. More specifically, we will analyse which facets of societal change it helps us understand and to what extent it facilitates the interpretation of long-term historical transformations. Finally, we will reflect on the contributions historians can and should make to contemporary debates on (un)sustainability.

Discussion questions:

- What are the (dis)advantages of the concept of sustainability for historical research?
- What can historians contribute to the interdisciplinary research field on sustainability?
- How does sustainability relate to (the history of) global inequalities?

Readings:

Jeremy L. Caradonna, *Sustainability: A History* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014), 1-20 ('Introduction').

Sandra J. Garren and Robert Brinkmann, 'Sustainability Definitions, Historical Contexts, and Frameworks', in: Sandra J. Garren and Robert Brinkmann (eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Sustainability. Case Studies and Practical Solutions* (Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 1-18.

Paul Warde, *The Invention of Sustainability: Nature and Destiny, c. 1500-1870* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2018), 1-16 ('Introduction').

Further readings:

Andrew C. Isenberg, 'Introduction: A New Environmental History', in: Andrew C. Isenberg (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Environmental History* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014), 1-22.

Joseph A. Tainter, 'Understanding Sustainability through History', in: Jeremy L. Caradonna (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of the History of Sustainability* (London, Routledge, 2017), 40-56.

Anjana Singh, 'Globalisation, Environmentally Non-sustainable Growth and the Plight of the Adivasis in India', *Groniek* 213 (2016), 369-383.

Session 2: 11 September 2024 (Lecture)

Wealth and Inequality in a Long-Term Global Perspective (Arie van Steensel and Daniel Franken)

Inequality in its different manifestations has been at the forefront of scholarly research and public debates in recent years. While many scholars have focused on income inequality, others have cast light on other facets of unequal resource distribution that have an impact on human health and development. This seminar will focus on the long-term evolution of wealth inequality – while paying special attention to other (non-monetary) inequities – and discuss the possible relations between inequality and sustainability in societies past and present.

Discussion questions:

- What factors explain the evolution of economic inequality across time and place? How does economic inequality relate to un/sustainability?
- How do economic disparities manifest themselves in other dimensions of inequality?
- How does inequality affect a population's ability to live sustainably in past and present?

Readings:

Guido Alfani, 'Wealth and Income Inequality in the Long Run of History', in: Claude Diebolt and Michael Hauptert (eds.), *Handbook of Cliometrics* (Cham: Springer, 2019), 1173–1201.

Richard G. Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, *The Inner Level: How More Equal Societies Reduce Stress, Restore Sanity and Improve Everyone's Well-Being* (London: Allan Lane, 2018), Chapter 8.

Watch Thomas Piketty, A Brief History of Equality, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gZ5mDyUoeMo>

Further readings:

M. Hajizadeh, A. Nandi, and S.J. Heymann, 'Social Inequality in Infant Mortality: What Explains Variation Across Low and Middle Income Countries?' *Social Science & Medicine* 101 (2013), 36-46.

Branko Milanović, *Global Inequality: A New Approach for the Age of Globalization* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016).

Thomas Piketty, *A Brief History of Equality* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2022).

Marten Scheffer, Bas van Bavel, Ingrid A. van de Leemput, and Egbert H. van Nes, 'Inequality in Nature and Society', *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 114:50 (12 December 2017), 13154–13157.

Walter Scheidel, *The Great Leveler: Violence and the History of Inequality from the Stone Age to the Twenty-First Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).

Session 3: 18 September 2024 (Seminar)

Seminar to discuss the literature of this theme and link it to students' own research interests.

Session 4: 25 September 2023 (Lecture)

Migration, Development, and Sustainability (Hilde Bras and Jeremia Pelgrom)

Migration represents a major transformation of the lives of those involved and has been transformative of societies and economies globally. The two sessions explore the impact of migration on societies and the relation with (un)sustainability. In the first session an overview of theoretical perspectives on migration, development, and sustainability is given. In the second session, the impact of two specific forms of migration are further analysed using these theoretical lenses: settler colonisation in ancient times and contemporary migration of Africans to China. The discussion will focus on 1) the role of colonisation in destabilising indigenous societal structures, but also on the formation of new socio-economic and cultural networks and 2) the paradoxes of migration and sustainability and the economic, social, and environmental impacts of contemporary international migration.

Discussion questions:

- Are settler colonies sustainable societies? Clearly define what sustainability is in your view and provide arguments for your position. Illustrate your answers by providing historical and/or contemporary examples.
- What are the impacts and challenges of migration on the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainability in source and destination areas?
- Are migration and sustainability compatible or contradictory? What arguments – derived from distinct theoretical perspectives – can you give for each position for different sustainability dimensions (economic, social, and environmental)? Illustrate your answers by providing historical and/or contemporary examples other than the already discussed Africa-China case.
- Is settler colonialism an (early) modern phenomenon? In your answer, include an analysis of the foundation history of Cyrene (read Herodotus). Is the foundation of the colony of Cyrene an example of settler colonialism?

Readings:

Maria Franco Gavonell et al., 'The migration-sustainability paradox: transformations in mobile worlds,' *Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability* 49 (2021), 98-109.

Documentary on African migration to China: 'Zwart geld: De toekomst komt uit Afrika' <https://www.vpro.nl/programmas/tegenlicht/kijk/afleveringen/2012-2013/de-toekomst-komt-uit-afrika.html>

Patrick Wolfe, 'Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native', *Journal of Genocide Research* 8:4 (2006), 387-409.

Lorenzo Veracini, *Settler Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview* (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 'Introduction', 1-15.

Herodotus, book IV, chapters 150-165 (use link)

Further readings:

Hein de Haas, 'Paradoxes of Migration and Development,' in: *Handbook of Migration and Development*, edited by Theodore Bastia and Robert Skeldon, 17-31. London: Routledge, 2020. <https://www.migrationinstitute.org/publications/paradoxes-of-migration-and-development>

Jon Barnett and Neil W. Adger, 'Mobile Worlds: Choice at the Intersection of Demographic and Environmental Change,' *Annual Review of Environment and Resources* 43 (2018):245-65.

David Coleman, 'Immigration and Ethnic Change in Low-Fertility Countries: A Third Demographic Transition,' *Population and Development Review* 32, no.3 (Sept. 2006): 401-446.

Session 5: 2 October 2024 (Seminar)

Seminar to discuss the literature of this theme and link it to students' own research interests.

Session 6: 9 October 2024 (Lecture)

Building Power: A Historical Analysis of Regime Change and Political Leadership (Bart Danon and Francesco Buscemi)

What makes politicians powerful? The aim of these two lectures is to bring examples from Roman history and the Age of Revolutions in the 18th century together in order to historicise our understanding of political leadership and the un/sustainability of political power.

Private Property and Public Office: The End of the Roman Republic

The Roman Republic was a political system that remained in operation for almost 500 years. Yet at the end of the first century BCE, it found itself in a crisis. The result was that an oligarchic system (in which a small group of people monopolised all political offices) was replaced by a monarchic – and eventually autocratic – system. The causes of this change are subject to much debate. This lecture explores the role of private property in this crisis of political sustainability and in the 'fall' of the Roman Republic. Who were the politicians of the Roman Republic? What was the main basis of their power? And how did the Roman emperor differ from earlier Republican politicians?

Charismatic Leadership and Celebrity Politics in a Historical Perspective

In times of crisis or disaster people tend to put their trust in political leadership. The Age of Revolutions offers a perfect vantage point to see how modern leaders had to embrace fame in order to present themselves as charismatic personalities. Through collective enthusiasm and affection of love for the leader, the model of leadership established during those years was successful because it created an emotional bond between political leaders and followers. At the same time, what made these leaderships successful constituted a risk for democracy: what if the intensity of the attraction for the leader brings entire countries to undermine democratic institutions? The lecture will present these questions and the core elements of charismatic leadership while focusing on the historical examples of George Washington, Toussaint Louverture, and Napoleon Bonaparte.

Discussion questions:

- What did the power basis of Roman republican politicians consist of and how un/sustainable was this?
- How did the Roman emperor differ from earlier republican politicians? Reflect on these differences and connect them to questions of un/sustainability.
- To what extent is the modern Dutch state an oligarchy? Does this affect the un/sustainability of Dutch politics?
- What is the power of celebrity in times of crisis?
- Should politicians mobilise their celebrity status to push their political agenda forward? Motivate your answer by making reference to a success or failure story you are familiar with.

Readings:

Jeffrey A. Winters, *Oligarchy* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2011), 1–20.

Henrik Mouritsen, *The Roman Elite and the End of the Republic: The Boni, the Nobles and Cicero* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2022), 1–6.

Antoine Lilti, *The Invention of Celebrity* (Cambridge, Polity, 2017), 1–13 ('Introduction – Celebrity and Modernity').

John Street, 'Celebrity Politicians: Popular Culture and Political Representation', *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 6:5 (2004), 435-452.

Session 7: 16 October 2024 (Seminar)

Seminar to discuss the literature of this theme and link it to students' own research interests.

Session 8 & 9: no class

Session 10: 6 November 2024 (Lecture) NEW LOCATION: T13

Environmental Change in the Anthropocene (Megan Williams and Iva Peša)

Current discussions about the Anthropocene, the period during which human activities have impacted the environment sufficiently to constitute a distinct geological epoch, have put environmental change at the center of societal concerns. Climate change and global warming are not new phenomena, though. Adopting an environmental history lens, this session will ask questions about historical environmental change, human agency, and political responses. What can we learn about sustainability by paying attention to climate and non-human actors (animals, microbes, and vegetation)?

Discussion questions:

- Look up an example of how environmental factors have played a role in a historical episode you are particularly interested in. Reflect on questions of un/sustainability.
- Does considering environmental history lead to a redefinition of 'human agency'? How does this interpretation of 'human agency' relate to un/sustainability?
- Is 'sustainability' still possible in the Anthropocene?

Readings:

Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'The Climate of History: Four Theses', *Critical Inquiry* 35:2 (2009), 197-222.

Mike Hulme, 'Climate and its Changes: A Cultural Appraisal', *Geo: Geography and Environment* 2:1 (2015), 1-11.

Fredrik Albritton Jonsson and Carl Wennerlind, *Scarcity: A History from the Origins of Capitalism to the Climate Crisis* (Harvard University Press, 2023), Introduction: Beyond One Concept of Scarcity, 1-20, and CH8: Planetary Scarcity, 203-229.

Recommended reading:

IPCC Report, 'Summary for Policymakers', https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg2/downloads/report/IPCC_AR6_WGII_SummaryForPolicymakers.pdf

Carla Pascoe Leahy et al., 'Sustainable Academia: The Responsibilities of Academic Historians in a Climate-Impacted World', *Environment and History*, https://www.ingentaconnect.com/content/whp/eh/pre-prints/content-whp_eh_3695#

Session 11: 13 November 2024 (Seminar)

Seminar to discuss the literature of this theme and link it to students' own research interests.

Session 12: 20 November 2024 (Lecture)

Conflict, Human Security, and Geopolitics: Drivers of Instability (Re)Assessed (Sishuwa Sishuwa and Nicolaas Kraft van Ermel)

This lecture links questions of sustainability to the field of security and geopolitics. The aim of this introduction is 1) to familiarise students with important concepts, such as conflict, security, drivers of instability, and geopolitics; 2) to address developments in the field (i.e. from state security to human security; from external to internal conflicts; from traditional geopolitics to hybrid warfare); 3) to explore the relationship between drivers of instability and between those drivers and the possible outbreak of conflict; 4) to offer some regional examples (focusing on Russia and the Global South) and cases of those drivers of instability.

Readings:

Oxford Research Group, 'Sustainable Security Index', 2020 Edition.

Shahrbanou Tadjbakhsh, 'In Defense of the Broad View of Human Security', in: Mary Martin and Taylor Owen (eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Human Security* (London, Routledge, 2013), 43-57.

Vladislav Inozemtsev, 'Russia: Can Economic Difficulties Weaken the Political System?', Russia/NIS Center, August 2021.

Session 13: 27 November 2024 (Seminar)

Seminar session in which students will form teams and choose a sustainability-related theme (e.g. food, water, media, religion) which they will connect to 'conflict and security' debates in a 10-minute presentation. The specific literature will depend on the chosen theme.

Session 14: 4 December 2024

Peer review session for the final paper (deadline 19 December 2024).