

Energy and Culture

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David Hughes, SAS - Anthropology

MW 02:15-03:35P

Ruth Adams Building Room 109B

Douglass Campus

Will Count Towards SAS - Anthropology Major

Will Count Towards SAS - Anthropology Minor

In physical terms, energy circulates everywhere. In economic and political terms, energy repeatedly runs scarce. This course will adjudicate that thorny contradiction between nature and culture – between the abundance of the sun and the scarcity of fuel. The disjuncture persists because of the way in which certain societies – including our own – construct energy as a cultural meaning. At other times and places, people have often associated energy (or cognate terms) with spirits of the natural or supernatural worlds. Students will read of cosmologies – scientific, indigenous, and Christian – that interpret energy in this holistic sense. Students will also trace the narrowing of “energy” into both labor and fuel. Readings ran the gamut from slavery to coal to oil to uranium – fuels with increasing energy density and consequent risk. The final section of the course will consider the consequences of exploiting concentrated forms of energy: a concentration of power known as the “resource curse” as well as immeasurable, multiplex harm (climate change as well as nuclear radiation). We end with a question: what forms of activism are likely to promote an energy transition away from catastrophe and towards sustainability? Robust readings will draw from anthropology, geography, history, natural history, and political criticism.

DAVID M. HUGHES works on environmental, cultural, and moral questions of the most intractable sort. He has written two books on Southern Africa – *From Enslavement to Environmentalism* (2006) and *Whiteness in Zimbabwe* (2010). Both of these works tract the ways in which white, European colonization has shaped ideas and practices of conservation within and beyond Africa. Currently, he is beginning quite a new project in environmental anthropology: an ethnography of the oil and gas industry in Trinidad and Tobago. In this petro-state, Hughes is investigates the silences and complicity that surround high emissions of carbon dioxide. Indeed, climate change has yet to become a deeply moral or political issue. For the most part, petroleum remains persistently banal – a historical and cultural silence which Hughes would like to disrupt. Hughes teaches Introduction to Cultural Anthropology, Environmental Anthropology, and Ethnographic Writing.