

ENVIRONMENTAL SOCIOLOGY NEWS

Newsletter of the American Sociological Association's
Section on Environmental Sociology

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Jean Boucher jl964@gmail.com
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FEATURE ARTICLE

Before the U.S. Approves New Uranium Mining, Consider its Toxic Legacy

Stephanie Malin
Colorado State University

**This articles was original published online by [The Conversation](#)

THE CONVERSATION

Uranium – the raw material for nuclear power and nuclear weapons – is having a moment in the spotlight.

Companies such as [Energy Fuels, Inc.](#) have played [well-publicized roles](#) in lobbying the Trump administration to reduce federal protection for [public lands](#) with uranium deposits. The Defense Department's Nuclear Posture Review calls for [new weapons production](#) to expand the U.S. nuclear arsenal, which could spur new domestic uranium mining. And the Interior Department

Continued on page 2

INSIDE THIS ISSUE

1. FEATURE ARTICLE

Before the US Approves New Uranium Mining,
Consider its Toxic Legacy, Pg. 1

2. CALLS/ANNOUNCEMENTS

Mini-Conference on Environmental Inequality, Pg. 4
2018 ES ASA Mentorship program, Pg. 4
Special Issue: Capitalism Nature Socialism , Pg. 5
Special Issue: Environmental Sociology, Pg. 5

3. PUBLICATIONS

Books, Pg. 5
Journal Articles & Book Chapters, Pg. 8

4. MEMBER NEWS, PG. 10

5. TRANSITIONS, PG. 10

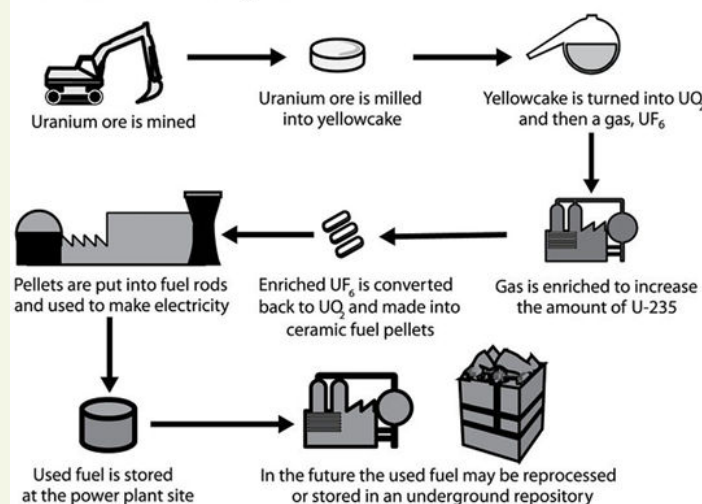
Legacy of Uranium (Cont'd)

ment's Nuclear Posture Review calls for [new weapons production](#) to expand the U.S. nuclear arsenal, which could spur new domestic uranium mining. And the Interior Department is advocating more domestic uranium production, along with other materials identified as "[critical minerals](#)."

What would expanded uranium mining in the U.S. mean at the local level? I have studied the legacies of past uranium mining and milling in Western states for over a decade. My [book](#) examines dilemmas faced by uranium communities caught between harmful legacies of previous mining booms and the potential promise of new economic development.

These people and places are invisible to most Americans, but they helped make the United States an economic and military superpower. In my view, we owe it to them to learn from past mistakes and make more informed and sustainable decisions about possibly renewing uranium production than our nation made in the past.

Uranium Fuel Cycle



[National Energy Education Development Project](#), [CC BY-ND](#)

Mining regulations have failed to protect public health

Today most of the uranium that powers U.S. nuclear reactors is imported. But many communities still suffer impacts of uranium mining and milling that occurred for decades to fuel the U.S.-Soviet nuclear arms race.

These include environmental contamination, toxic spills, abandoned mines, under-addressed cancer and disease clusters and illnesses that citizens link to uranium exposure despite federal denials.



The Orphan uranium mine on the South Rim of the Grand Canyon operated from 1956-1969 and is now a radioactive waste site. [Alan Levine](#), [CC BY](#)

As World War II phased into the Cold War, U.S. officials rapidly increased uranium production from the 1940s to the 1960s. Regulations were minimal to nonexistent and largely unenforced, even though the U.S. Public Health Service knew that exposure to uranium had caused potentially fatal health effects in Europe, and was monitoring uranium miners and millers for health problems.

Today the industry is subject to regulations that address worker health and safety, environmental protection, treatment of contaminated sites and other considerations. But these regulations lack uniformity, and enforcement responsibilities are spread across multiple agencies.

This creates significant regulatory gaps, which are worsened by a federalist approach to regulation. In the 1970s the newly created Nuclear Regulatory Commission initiated an Agreement States program, under which states take over regulating many aspects of uranium and nuclear production and waste storage. To qualify, state programs must be "adequate to protect public health and safety and compatible with the NRC's regulatory program."

Today [37 states](#) have joined this program and two more are applying. Many Agreement States struggle to enforce regulations because of [underfunded budgets](#), [lack](#)

Continued on page 3

Legacy of Uranium (Cont'd)

[of staff and anti-regulatory cultures](#). These problems can lead to piecemeal enforcement and reliance on corporate self-regulation.

For example, budget cuts in Colorado have forced the state to rely frequently on energy companies to monitor their own compliance with regulations. In Utah, the White Mesa Mill – our nation's only currently operating uranium mill – has a record of persistent problems related to permitting, water contamination and environmental health, as well as tribal sacred lands and artifacts.

Neglected nuclear legacies

Uranium still affects the environment and human health in the West, but its impacts remain woefully under-addressed. Some of the poorest, most isolated and ethnically marginalized communities in the nation are bearing the brunt of these legacies.

There are approximately 4,000 abandoned uranium mines in Western states. At least 500 are located on land controlled by the Navajo Nation. Diné (Navajo) people have suffered some of the worst consequences of U.S. uranium production, including cancer clusters and water contamination. Click [here](#) for a video about uranium-contaminated structures in the Navajo Nation.

A 2015 study found that about 85 percent of Diné homes are still contaminated with uranium, and that tribe members living near uranium mines have more uranium in their bones than 95 percent of the U.S. population. Unsurprisingly, President Donald Trump's decision to reduce the Bears Ears National Monument has reinvigorated discussion over ongoing impacts of uranium contamination across tribal and public land.

Despite legislation such as the Radiation Exposure Compensation Act of 1990, people who lived near uranium production or contamination sites often became forgotten casualties of the Cold War. For instance, Monticello, Utah, hosted a federally owned uranium mill from 1942 to 1960. Portions of the town were even built from tailings left over from uranium milling, which we now know were radioactive. This created two Superfund sites that were not fully remediated until the late 1990s.

Monticello residents have dealt with cancer clusters, increased rates of birth defects and other health abnor-

malities for decades. Although the community has sought federal recognition and compensation since 1993, its requests have been largely ignored.

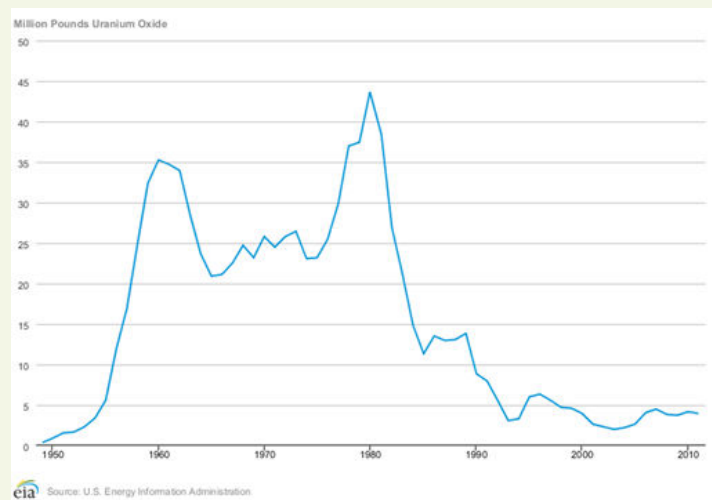
Today tensions over water access and its use for uranium mining are creating conflict between regional tribes and corporate water users around the North Rim of the Grand Canyon. Native residents, such as the Havasupai, have had to defend their water rights and fear losing access to this vital resource.

Uranium production is a boom-and-bust industry

Like any economic activity based on commodities, uranium production is volatile and unstable. The industry has a history of boom-bust cycles. Communities that depend on it can be whipsawed by rapid growth followed by destabilizing population losses.

The first U.S. uranium boom occurred during the early Cold War and ended in the 1960s due to oversupply, triggering a bust. A second boom began later in the decade when the federal government authorized private commercial investment in nuclear power. But the Three Mile Island (1979) and Chernobyl (1985) disasters ended this second boom.

Uranium prices soared once again from 2007 to 2010. But the 2011 tsunami and meltdown at Japan's Fukushima Dai-ichi nuclear plant sent prices plummeting once again as nations looked for alternatives to nuclear power.



Continued on page 4

Legacy of Uranium (Cont'd)

Companies like Energy Fuels maintain – especially in public meetings with uranium communities – that new production will lead to sustained economic growth. This message is powerful stuff. It boosts support, sometimes in the very communities that have suffered most from past practices.

But I have interviewed Westerners who worry that as production methods become more technologically advanced and mechanized, energy companies may increasingly rely on bringing in out-of-town workers with technical and engineering degrees rather than hiring locals – as has happened in the coal industry. And the core tensions of boom-bust economic volatility and instability persist.

Uranium production advocates contend that new “environmentally friendly” mills and current federal regulations will adequately protect public health and the environment. Yet they offer little evidence to counter White Mesa Mill’s poor record.

In my view, there is little evidence that new uranium production would be more reliably regulated or economically stable today than in the past. Instead, I expect that the industry will continue to privatize profits as the public absorbs and subsidizes its risks.

Stephanie Malin is an Assistant Professor of Sociology, Colorado State University, Fort Collins

CALLS AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

Mini-Conference on Environmental Inequality

The Association for Humanist Sociology invites paper submissions for its 2018 Annual Meeting, which will be held in Detroit, MI, on Thursday, November 8, 2018. Topics include but are not limited to: water rights, local environmental justice issues, environmental racism, environmental activism, resource extraction, sustainability, food, climate change, indigenous rights, and environmental citizenship. Submissions are being received online at bit.ly/AHSDetroit. Select conference papers will be featured in a special issue of *Humanity & Society*. For more information contact Daina Cheyenne Harvey (adharvey@holycross.edu).

2018 ES ASA Mentorship program

As in past years, the 2018 ASA mentorship program will pair mentors with mentees with the expectation that the pair has coffee, lunch, or some sort of informal meeting during this year's ASA conference in order to discuss life as a professional environmental sociologist. Pairs will be made based upon shared interests. Discussions can range from how to negotiate the job market, publications, research, navigating conferences, or just plain old “ideas”. The point is to solidify our section's inclusive and welcoming foundation through establishing a program that can facilitate new relationships across the sub-discipline.

The program was again a great success last year in Montreal. This year, however, we are reverting back to the format used two years ago in Seattle in that all faculty members (tenured or not) will be mentors and graduate students will be mentees. The reason is that the three categories used last year created too much imbalance between those who wished to be mentees and those who wished to be mentors, and the simpler two category system seemed to run a little bit better. As always, however, if there are folks outside academia who are attending and want to take part I would be happy to deal with them on an individual basis and cater the program to their needs.

In addition, this year we will be having mentorship dinner either the night before or after our section reception (note this dinner is in addition to each pair's one on one meeting). More information about that to come.

Please note that if you took part in the mentoring program last year you are absolutely encouraged to do so again this year. If you are interested, email Jordan F. Besek (jfbesek@buffalo.edu) the following basic information using the suggested subject line and I will organize the pairs:

Subject line: “ES ASA Mentor Program 2018”

Email:

Institution:

Interested in being a mentor or a mentee:

Sociological Interests:

The deadline is June 30th. If you have any questions, concerns, or comments, contact Jordan Besek.

Special Issue: Capitalism Nature Socialism

The March 2018 Ecofeminist special issue of *Capitalism Nature Socialism* entitled, "Power, Peace and Protest: Ecofeminist Vision, Action and Alternatives" (Volume 29:1) was launched online on International Women's Day. Articles from the issue are available for free at <https://www.tandfonline.com/toc/rcns20/current> until May 8, 2018.

Special Issue: Environmental Sociology

A special issue of *Environmental Sociology* (Volume 4) focused on developing deeply intersectional environmental justice scholarship is now available online. The issue was guest-edited by Stephanie A. Malin and Stacia S. Ryder, Colorado State University, Fort Collins. The issue is available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/toc/rens20/4/1?nav=tocList>. To read the editorial associated with the issue, co-authored by Stephanie A. Malin and Stacia S. Ryder, click [here](#) or follow this URL: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/23251042.2018.1446711>.

PUBLICATIONS**Books:****Planetary Improvement: Cleantech Entrepreneurship and the Contradictions of Green Capitalism**

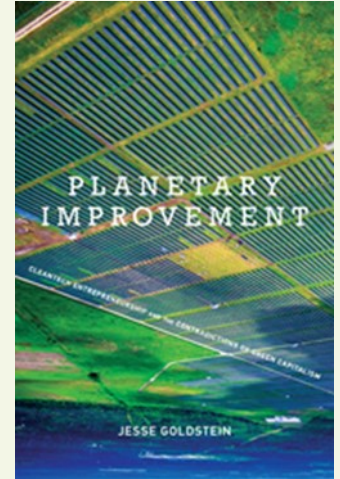
Jesse Goldstein

(MIT Press, 2018) <https://mitpress.mit.edu/books/planetary-improvement>

Entrepreneurs and investors in the green economy have encouraged a vision of addressing climate change with new technologies. In *Planetary Improvement*, Jesse Goldstein examines the cleantech entrepreneurial community in order to understand the limitations of environmental transformation within a capitalist system. Reporting on a series of investment pitches by cleantech entrepreneurs in New York City, Goldstein describes investor-friendly visions of incremental improvements to the industrial status quo that are hardly transformational. He explores a new "green spirit of capitalism," a discourse of planetary improvement, that aims to "save the planet" by looking for "non-disruptive disruptions," tech-

nologies that deliver "solutions" without changing much of what causes the underlying problems in the first place.

Goldstein charts the rise of business environmentalism over the last half of the twentieth century and examines cleantech's unspoken assumptions of continuing cheap and abundant energy. Recounting the sometimes conflicting motivations of cleantech entrepreneurs and investors, he argues that the cleantech innovation ecosystem and its Schumpeterian dynamic of creative destruction are built around attempts to control creativity by demanding that transformational aspirations give way to short-term financial concerns. As a result, capitalist imperatives capture and stifle visions of sociotechnical possibility and transformation. Finally, he calls for a green spirit that goes beyond capitalism, in which sociotechnical experimentation is able to break free from the narrow bonds and relative privilege of cleantech entrepreneurs and the investors that control their fate.



Jesse Goldstein is Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Conceptualizing Environmental Justice: Plural Frames and Global Claims in Land Between the Rivers, Kentucky

Banerjee, Damayanti

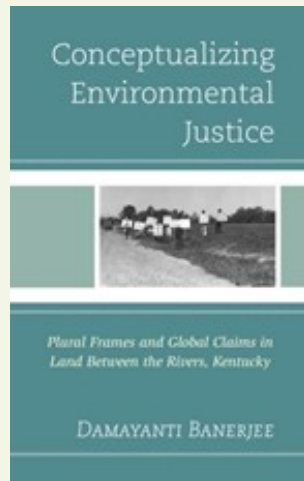
(Lexington Books, 2017) <https://rowman.com/ISBN/9781498507851/Conceptualizing-Environmental-Justice-Plural-Frames-and-Global-Claims-in-Land-Between-the-Rivers-Kentucky>

Conceptualizing Environmental Justice evolved from an ethnographic study of an environmental justice movement in a rural community called Land Between the

Continued on page 6

Conceptualizing Environmental Justice (Cont'd)

Rivers in Kentucky. The environmental movement emerged as a result of collective displacement for the construction of two dams and an environmental refuge over a period of sixty years. This book explores the historical and contemporary efforts to mobilize the community and asks what specific strategies and tools were adopted and how these tools coalesced into four justice themes: cultural injustices, economic deprivation, institutional fairness, and political agency. It explores how each theme shaped and informed the displaced residents' efforts to protect their rights and seek justice. This book argues that expanding the conceptual foci of environmental justice theory and identifying both distributive and non-distributive themes of justice allows us to understand the complexities of environmental movement narratives and examine what shape environmental justice movements will take in the future.



Damayanti Banerjee is research faculty affiliate at Colorado State University.

The Progress of this Storm: Nature and Society in a Warming World

Andreas Malm

(Verso Books, London, 2018)
<https://www.versobooks.com/books/2575-the-progress-of-this-storm>

In a world careening towards climate chaos, nature is dead. It can no longer be separated from society. Everything is a blur of hybrids, where humans possess no exceptional agency to set them apart from dead matter. But is it really so? In



this blistering polemic and theoretical manifesto, Andreas Malm develops a counterargument: in a warming world, nature comes roaring back, and it is more important than ever to distinguish between the natural and the social. Only with a unique agency attributed to humans can resistance become conceivable.

Andreas Malm teaches Human Ecology at Lund University, Sweden. He is the author, with Shora Esmailian, of Iran on the Brink: Rising Workers and Threats of War and of Fossil Capital, which won the Isaac and Tamara Deutscher Memorial Prize.

Agri-environmental Governance as an Assemblage: Multiplicity, Power, and Transformation

Jérémie Forney, Chris Rosin, Hugh Campbell

(Routledge, 2018) <https://www.routledge.com/Agri-environmental-Governance-as-an-Assemblage-Multiplicity-Power-and/Forney-Rosin-Campbell/p/book/9781138070738>

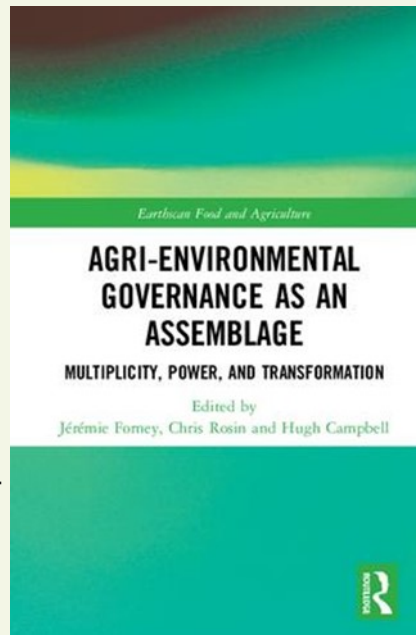
In recent decades, the governance of the environment in agri-food systems has emerged as a crucial challenge. A multiplicity of actors have been enrolled in this process, with the private sector and civil society progressively becoming key components in a global context often described as neoliberalization. Agri-environmental governance (AEG) thus gathers a highly complex assemblage of actors and instruments, with multiple interrelations.

This book addresses this complexity, challenging traditional modes of research and explanation in social science and agri-food studies. To do so, it draws on multiple theoretical and methodological insights, applied to case studies from Asia, Europe, Africa, and the Americas. It elaborates an emergent approach to AEG practices as assemblages, looking at the coming-together of multiple actors with diverse trajectories and objectives. The book lays the foundations for an encompassing theoretical framework that transcends pre-existing categories, as well as promoting innovative methodologies, which integrate the role of social actors – including scientists – in the construction of new assemblages. The

Continued on page 7

Agri-environmental Governance as an Assemblage (Cont'd)

chapters define, first, the multiplicities and agencies inherent to AEG assemblages. A second set tackles the question of the politics in AEG assemblages, where political hierarchies interweave with economic power and the search for more democratic and participative approaches. Finally, these insights are developed in the form of assemblage practice and methodology. The book challenges social scientists to confront the shortcomings of existing approaches and consider alternative answers to questions about environmental governance of agri-food systems.



Jérémie Forney is Assistant Professor, Anthropology Institute, University of Neuchâtel, Switzerland.

Chris Rosin is Senior Lecturer in the Department of Tourism, Sport and Society, Lincoln University, New Zealand.

Hugh Campbell is Chair in Sociology, Department of Sociology, Gender and Social Work, University of Otago, New Zealand.

Sustainability through the Lens of Environmental Sociology

Md Saidul Islam

(MDPI, 2018) <http://www.mdpi.com/books/pdfview/book/543>

Our planet is undergoing radical environmental and social changes. Sustainability has now been put into question by, for example, our consumption patterns, loss of biodiversity, depletion of resources, and exploitative

power relations. With apparent ecological and social limits to globalization and development, current levels of consumption are unsustainable, inequitable, and inaccessible to the majority of humans. Understanding and attaining sustainability is a crucial matter at a time when our planet is in peril—environmentally, economically, socially, and politically. Since its official inception in the 1970s, environmental sociology has provided a powerful lens to understanding the challenges, possibilities and modes of sustainability.

Most chapters in this book were published as peer-reviewed articles in *Sustainability* in its special issue “Sustainability through the Lens of Environmental Sociology”, providing an environmental sociology approach to understanding and achieving the widely used notion of “sustainability.” This edited collection covers, among other topics, the inherent discursive formations of environmental sociology, conceptual tools and paradoxes, competing theories and practices, and their complex implications on our society at large.

Chapters in this book specifically focus on how sustainable development has been understood through different theoretical lenses in environmental sociology, such as ecological modernization, policy/reformist sustainable development, and critical structural approaches (such as the treadmill of production, ecological Marxism and how sustainable development has been practiced in, or by, various stakeholders, such as states, corporations, and local communities, for various ends, through the use of specific case studies, showing, for example, the discursive shifts, dynamic formations, and diverse contours of sustainable development, metabolic rift theory, etc.).

Md Saidul Islam is Associate Professor of Sociology, School of Social Sciences (SSS) and Asian School of the Environment (ASE), NTU.



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Continued on page 10

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MEMBER NEWS

Dr. Md Saidul Islam, Associate Professor of Sociology, School of Social Sciences (SSS) and Asian School of the Environment (ASE), NTU, received the Outstanding Scientist Award for 2017 for Publication Excellence from the i-Proclaim, Malaysia. i-Proclaim seeks to recognize and reward the outstanding performance, talent and effort of the best research contributors, PhD holders and agencies dealing with research and publication in the Asia and global context. The Award was given on December 31, 2017 at the i-Proclaim's annual meeting held in the Mini Auditorium, International Islamic University, Malaysia (IIUM), Kuala Lumpur.



Join me in extending well-deserved congratulations to Dr. Islam.

Lauren Richter (Ph.D. Candidate at Northeastern University) won the 2018 Association for Environmental Studies and Sciences (AESS) Best Student Paper Award for her article, "Constructing Insignificance: Critical Race Perspectives on Institutional Failure in Environmental Justice Communities." This article was recently published in the journal *Environmental Sociology* 4(1) 2018.

Join me in extending well-deserved congratulations to Ms. Richter.

TRANSITIONS

There are no transitions news to report at this time. Send me any transition news (significant promotion, job change, and transition to eternity) you are aware of for inclusion in the next issue.