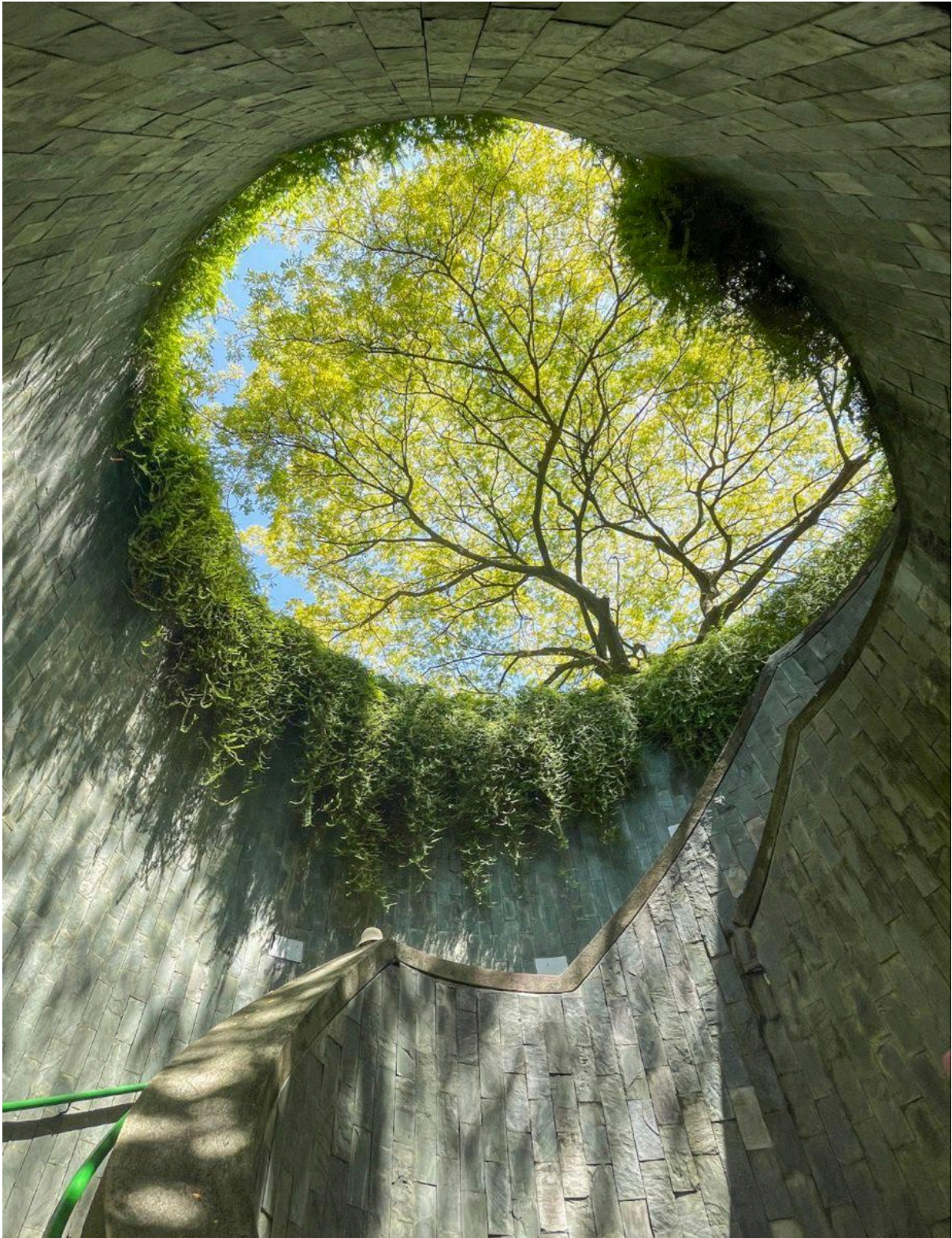


**Modernity and the Ecological Crisis:
Why We Can't Help but Destroy the World**



Ahmad Mahana

CILAS-Spring Semester 2025-2026

Throughout the span of human history, no period has ever alienated humankind from the natural world as much as the modern era. In it, the advent of scientific discovery, the Industrial Revolution, and technological advancement have achieved a dual effect—one that simultaneously furthered the cause of human progress while accelerating the rate of planetary destruction. While these material conditions have certainly deepened the rift between humanity and nature, the origin of this division precedes our desire to consume the planet of its resources and returns to a fundamental belief that modern humans are morally, physically, and spiritually detached from their natural environment.

In this course, students will learn to identify the material, social, and philosophical processes that define Modernity and how they continue to contribute to the worsening condition of the ecological crisis. Using a multidisciplinary approach, this course will call into question the very assumptions that underpin Modernity's conception of nature as an objective domain with no intrinsic meaning or value beyond its exploitation, and demonstrate the inevitable destruction that such a worldview inflicts upon the world. While the course does aim to deconstruct the essence of the modernist project, students will also be given the opportunity to discover and explore the wide array of methods proposed by a variety of scholars to conceptualize and realize the possibility of a different world(s).

Instructor Bio:

Ahmad Mahana is an MA candidate of the Sociology-Anthropology degree program at the American University in Cairo. With a regional focus on Saint Catherine, South Sinai, Ahmad's work deploys ethnographic fieldwork methods to explore the ecological and sociological networks involved in reproducing the region's sacred landscape. By considering both human and nonhuman actors as ethnographic subjects, his work aims to deconstruct modern dualisms of nature-culture by presenting alternative modes of being in and of the world inspired by contemporary Bedouin sociality, Islamic cosmology, and desert ecologies.

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Course Outline

Week 1 – Nature, Society, and the Anthropocene: An Introduction

Assigned Readings:

Chua, Liana, and Hannah Fair. (2019) 2023. “Anthropocene”. In *The Open Encyclopedia of Anthropology*, edited by Felix Stein. Facsimile of the first edition in *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Anthropology*. Online: <http://doi.org/10.29164/19anthro>

Descola, P., & Pálsson, G. (Eds.). (1996). *Nature and Society: Anthropological Perspectives*. London: Routledge (1-21).

Week 2 – Splitting Nature and Culture: Modern Phenomenon or Ancient Ordeal?

Latour, B. (1993). *We Have Never Been Modern*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press (10-48).

Descartes R. (2008[1641]). *Meditations on First Philosophy*

Descartes, R. (2008 [1641]). *Meditations on First Philosophy With Selections from the Objections and Replies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Elmusa, S. S. (2003). The Ax of Gilgamesh: Splitting Nature and Culture. In Sharif S. Elmusa (Eds.), *Culture and the Natural Environment: Ancient and Modern Middle Eastern Texts*. American University in Cairo Press. (20-48).

Week 3 – Political Ecology and Climate Crisis: The Environmental Repercussions of Modernity

Burman, A. (2017). *The political ontology of climate change: moral meteorology, climate justice, and the coloniality of reality in the Bolivian Andes*. *Journal of Political Ecology*. Vol. 24 (922-928)

de la Cadena, M. (2015). *Uncommoning nature: Stories from the Anthro-Not-Seen*. *Anthropology of This Century*, 13. (35-58)

Week 4 – Techno-politics and Associative Sociology: Disrupting the Subject-Object Divide

Mitchell, T. (2002). Can the Mosquito Speak? In T. Mitchell, *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity*. California: University of California Press. (19-53)

Latour, B. (2005). *Reassembling the Social: an Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press (1-17)

Week 5 – More-Than-Human Anthropology: A Study in Multispecies Ethnography

Tsing, A. (2012). *Unruly Edges: Mushrooms as Companion Species*. Environmental Humanities, 141-154.

Haraway, D. J. (2016). *Staying With the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham and London: Duke University Press (1-9) and (30-57).

Week 6 – Anthropology, Ontology, and Radical Alterity: Exploring the Prospects of a Different World(s)

Viveiros de Castro, E. (1998). Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism. *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 4(3), (469-488).

Holbraad, M., & Pedersen, M. A. (2017). *The Ontological Turn: An Anthropological Exposition*. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press (1-29).

Hornborg, A. (1998). *Ecological Embeddedness and Personhood: Have We Always Been Capitalists?*. Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland, (3-5).

Week 7 – Animating the inanimate: Pushing the Epistemological Limits of Modernity

Ingold, T. (2006). *Rethinking the animate, re-animating thought*. Ethnos, (9-20).

Hemdan, J. (1980). *Shakhsīyat Miṣr: Dirāsah fī 'Abqariyyat al-Makān [The Personality of Egypt: A Study in the Genius of Place]*. Cairo: Ālam al-Kutub.

Hornborg, A. (2011). *Animism, Fetichism, and Objectivism as Strategies for Knowing (or not Knowing) the World*. Ethnos, (21-32).

Week 8 – Semiotics and Cybernetics: Is Meaning Embedded in the Universe?

Bateson, G. (1972). *Steps to an Ecology of Mind: Collected Essays in Anthropology, Psychiatry, Evolution, and Epistemology*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press (434-454).

Kohn, E. (2013). *How Forests Think: Towards an Anthropology Beyond the Human*. Berkley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press (27-71).