University of Oxford
St Edmund Hall

We are looking forward to welcoming you to Oxford in October.

In the past we have found it very useful if students do some preliminary work before arriving in Oxford. One of the first-year courses is 'Geographical Controversies'. In this course, you are required to study at least one key book (chosen from the list at the end of this letter) that have influenced geographical thought. We encourage you to have read at least two of the books from the list. In the examination at the end of the first year, you will need to answer a question on one of the books and demonstrate that you have understood the book's argument, forms of reasoning and use of evidence and are able to situate it in its historical, geographical and social context.

We think you will find it useful to have read in detail one of the books before you come up to Oxford. It would also be good if you could browse the other books to gain an idea of their content. You can choose any of the books from the list; they are all interesting and relevant. We have included a brief description of each book with this letter. Do think carefully before making your choice: don't simply choose the one that you find first or the shortest one! To find out what the books are about you could look on the websites for Blackwells (http://bookshop.blackwell.co.uk) or Amazon (http://www.amazon.co.uk). Both of these have short reviews of each of the books. Another option is to look on Google books (http://books.google.com) which may have some extracts from the book to give you an idea of its content. The books cover topics in the social, environmental and natural sciences and you should make sure that the ones you choose interest you. You will have to write about one of these books in the exam at the end of the first year, so you should make detailed notes.

All of these books are available from most large libraries and bookshops. Alternatively, they can be bought on-line at Blackwells (http://bookshop.blackwell.co.uk) or Amazon (http://www.amazon.co.uk). Through Amazon you can also obtain special "used and new" discounts.

We would also like you to write a 1500-word essay review of one of the books, summarising its main arguments. We would like you to send this to us by the 1st October, so we can read it before term starts. The essay should be sent by email to: David.morenomateos@ouce.ox.ac.uk

NOTE: the 1500-word limit is a real limit: we won't read more than 1500 words. Please see the set list of books on page 2.

David Moreno Mateos
Lorraine Wild

St Edmund Hall Geography Tutors

GEOGRAPHICAL CONTROVERSIES
LIST OF SET BOOKS 2026-27

Carson, R. A. (1962/2000) ***Silent Spring***
Widely available as a Penguin Modern Classic edition and for Kindle

Hickel, J. (2021) ***Less is More:*** *How De-growth Will Save the World.*
Widely available in paperback and Kindle

Kimmerer, R. W. (2020) ***Braiding Sweetgrass****: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants.*
Widely available in paperback and Kindle

Malm, A., 2018. *The Progress of This Storm: Nature and Society in a Warming World*.
Verso Books.

Monbiot, G. (2022) ***Regenesis:*** *Feeding the World Without Devouring the Planet*.
Widely available in paperback and Kindle

Ostrom, E. (1990) ***Governing the Commons:*** *The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action*
Cambridge: University Press

Stainforth, D. (2023) ***Predicting Our Climate Future:*** *What we know, What We Don't Know And What We Can't Know*
Oxford University Press

Trouet, V (2020) **Tree Story:** *The History of the World Written in Rings*
Johns Hopkins University Press: Baltimore

Wang, X. (2020) ***Blockchain Chicken Farm:*** *and Other Stories of Tech in China's Countryside.*
Widely available in paperback and Kindle

SET BOOKS SUMMARIES

Silent Spring

Rachel Carson
1962, Houghton Mifflin; 2000 Penguin Modern Classics

Rachel Carson's ground-breaking book, Silent Spring, remains a landmark work in environmental literature. Published in 1962, it sounded the alarm on the widespread use of pesticides and its devastating impact on ecosystems. Carson's eloquent prose and meticulous research highlighted the far-reaching consequences of indiscriminate chemical spraying, raising awareness about the fragile balance of nature and the urgent need for environmental stewardship. Despite its immense influence, Silent Spring ignited significant controversy, challenging entrenched interests and initiating a broader public debate on the costs and benefits of industrialization and chemical-intensive agriculture.

Silent Spring begins by presenting a vivid portrait of a world silenced by pesticides, where birds no longer sing and once-thriving ecosystems lay barren. Carson's engaging storytelling captivates readers from the outset, demonstrating the intricate connections between living organisms and their environment. Drawing on a wide range of scientific studies, she meticulously documents the devastating impacts of pesticides on wildlife, particularly birds, and the long-term consequences for human health. Carson's eloquent plea for a re-evaluation of the indiscriminate use of chemicals in agriculture and public health interventions sent shockwaves through the scientific community and challenged the powerful chemical industry.

Controversy erupted in response to Silent Spring's publication, with critics questioning Carson's credentials and accusing her of emotionalism and exaggeration. The book's indictment of the chemical industry, its regulators, and the government's role in protecting public health collided with vested interests and established narratives. However, Carson's meticulous research and evidence-based arguments stood firm against the onslaught of criticism. While some of her specific claims have been refined over time, Silent Spring's central message—that humanity's actions have profound and often unintended consequences on the environment—continues to resonate, spurring ongoing research and advocacy in the field of environmental science.

Less is More: How De-growth Will Save the World

Jason Hickel
2021, Penguin

In "Less is More: How Degrowth Will Save the World," Jason Hickel presents a provocative and controversial argument challenging the prevailing paradigm of relentless economic growth. Hickel argues that the pursuit of perpetual expansion is driving ecological devastation, exacerbating inequality, and failing to deliver true well-being. Drawing on a wide range of data, the author advocates for a radical shift towards a degrowth model that

prioritizes sufficiency, social justice, and ecological sustainability. While Hickel's book has garnered attention and sparked vigorous debates, its bold proposals have faced criticism for their feasibility and potential consequences.

The book's central contention, that degrowth is the key to a sustainable and just future, has generated considerable controversy. Critics argue that scaling down economic activity could lead to job losses, economic stagnation, and a decline in living standards. Hickel counters these concerns by challenging the assumption that growth is the only path to prosperity, emphasizing that degrowth entails a redistribution of resources and reimagining of societal values. However, some readers may find his proposals insufficiently detailed or dismiss them as idealistic.

Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants

Robin Wall Kimmerer
2020, Penguin

In "Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants," author Robin Wall Kimmerer weaves an intricate narrative that challenges the dominant scientific paradigm while illuminating the profound wisdom of Indigenous cultures. This ground-breaking work has sparked both admiration and controversy, igniting heated debates about the intersection of traditional knowledge and modern science.

Kimmerer, a botanist and member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, embarks on a journey to bridge the gap between two seemingly incompatible worldviews: the Western scientific perspective and the rich ecological wisdom passed down through generations of Indigenous peoples. Drawing from her personal experiences and Indigenous teachings, she advocates for a new ecological ethic that celebrates reciprocity and respect for the natural world. One of the most controversial aspects of the book lies in Kimmerer's insistence on elevating Indigenous knowledge systems to the same level as Western science. She challenges the notion that scientific knowledge is the only valid way of understanding the natural world. Instead, she argues for a more inclusive approach that embraces Indigenous ways of knowing, emphasizing the interconnectedness of all living beings. Whether viewed as a ground-breaking manifesto or a threat to established norms, Kimmerer's blend of memoir, scientific inquiry, and Indigenous storytelling undeniably demands attention and invites readers to reconsider their relationship with the natural world

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

Andreas Malm
2018 Verso Books

Malm is a Professor of Human Ecology at Lund University who has written extensively about “Fossil Capital’, arguing that the central role of fossil fuels in the emerging capitalist economy of 18th and 19th centuries laid the roots of global warming. In this book, Malm

presents a philosophical challenge to fashionable academic theories which he believes fail to explain the crisis effectively and may be hindering attempts to respond to the crisis. In particular, he challenges those theories such as posthumanism and new materialism which blur the distinction between nature and society by treating humans and non-human entities as possessing similar forms of agency. Malm is critical of several key thinkers on the human-environment relationship, particularly Bruno Latour, and argues that perspectives which do not recognize the distinctiveness of human agency make it difficult to identify responsibility for environmental destruction and thus weaken the basis for meaningful political action.

In the context of environmental crises, Malm believes that understanding the distinction between the social and the natural is more essential than ever to provide an analytical framework to identify the sites at which the social and natural combine. He focuses particularly on the burning of fossil fuels which brings together capital, fossil fuels and labour in a way which he considers is at the root of our contemporary ecological crisis. In the face of this crisis, Malm believes that "militant climate realism" is required to mobilise effective political action.

Regenesis

George Monbiot
2022 Allen Lane

George Monbiot is a journalist, environmentalist and political activist. He studied zoology at Oxford, and currently lives in the city. He writes a column in the Guardian, and has published a number of polemical books including Captive State, The Age of Consent, Heat, and Feral.

In Regenesis: Feeding the World Without Devouring the Planet, George Monbiot focuses on what he considers 'the most important of all environmental questions': the question of land use. In a critical examination of global food systems, he focuses on farming which in his view 'is the world's greatest cause of habitat destruction, the greatest cause of the global loss of wildlife, and the greatest cause of the global extinction crisis'. He explores the way in which standardisation has occurred in both diets and farming practices. He discusses the emergence of a Global Standard Diet which has reduced the global diversity of diets and led to an increase in the livestock population. He describes how food is being produced on what he calls the Global Standard Farm, dominated by agribusiness with four companies now controlling 90% of the global grain trade. He explores the effects of these standardised farming practices, focusing a whole chapter, 'What lies beneath', on soil and the effects of farming on the complex ecosystem of soil.

As a response to the destructive effects of contemporary farming, Monbiot explores the potential of alternative farming practices through a series of examples of farmers using regenerative practices including no-till farming, agroecology, and diverse cropping systems that prioritize soil regeneration. Monbiot argues a case for a diet free from animals and devotes a chapter, 'Farmfree', to exploring the potential of new technologies, including precision fermentation, to produce meat identical proteins and fats. Fermentation in vats

would take minimal land and free up farmland for restoration. As the sub-title of the book indicates, Monbiot considers the search for ways to feed the world ‘without devouring the planet’ to be one of society’s most urgent challenges.

Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action

Ostrom, E.
1990 Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Fifteen years ago, in 2009, Elinor Ostrom became the first person to win the Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences for work related to the environment. She is the first woman ever to have received the award. Ostrom's work challenged the prevailing assumption that common-pool resources, such as fisheries, forests, and water systems, are best managed either through privatization or government regulation to prevent overuse and depletion. Instead, Ostrom demonstrated through extensive fieldwork and empirical studies that local communities can effectively self-organize and govern these resources sustainably. She identified key principles that enable successful management of the commons, such as clearly defined boundaries, rules suited to local conditions, collective decision-making, effective monitoring, and graduated sanctions for rule violations. Her research provided valuable insights into how economic and social institutions function and how communities can collaborate to manage shared resources without leading to the "tragedy of the commons." This work has had profound implications for environmental geography, economics, political science, and public policy, highlighting the importance of trust, communication, and cooperation in resource management. Ostrom's contributions have significantly advanced our understanding of economic governance and collective action.

Predicting Our Climate Future: What We Know, What We Don't Know, And What We Can't Know

Stainforth, D.
2023 Oxford University Press: Oxford

Climate change poses basic challenges that make us rethink what we know and how we study it. This is especially important for geographers because climate change impacts society greatly, and the science is still developing. Historical precedents show that scientific understanding often undergoes significant revisions before reaching consensus. This book investigates the complexities of climate science. Which conclusions about climate change are reliable and which should be approached with skepticism? The author, David Stainforth, is a well-known climate modeller. Here he addresses the core issues of climate change, illustrating how traditional research methods are often inadequate for this complex subject. Effective responses to climate change depend on a shared understanding of the foundational scientific knowledge, yet current academic structures often fail to distinguish between robust findings and more questionable claims. He advocates for innovative approaches that span the physical sciences, social sciences, economics, and policy.

Tree Story: the History of the World Written in Rings.

Trouet, V.
2020 Johns Hopkins University Press: Baltimore.

In this first-hand account of life as a researcher in the field of paleoenvironmental reconstruction, Valerie Trouet explores the science of dendrochronology -- the study of tree rings -- to uncover the history of our planet. The book reveals how tree rings provide precise records of climatic conditions over centuries and millennia, offering insights into historical events, environmental changes, and the impact of human activities.

Trouet integrates narratives from her own research with other scientific studies to illustrate how tree rings have been utilized to understand phenomena such as droughts, volcanic eruptions, and the rise and fall of civilizations. The book emphasizes the significance of trees as natural archives and highlights their crucial role in enhancing our understanding of the past and informing our preparedness for the future. Readers of this work will appreciate its focus not just on what can be learned about past environmental but will come to see how such knowledge is often contested and is rarely arrived at without controversy.

Blockchain Chicken Farm: and Other Stories of Tech in China's Countryside

Xiaowei Wang
2020, Farrar, Straus and Giroux

In their thought-provoking and controversial book, "Blockchain Chicken Farm: And Other Stories of Tech in China's Countryside," Xiaowei Wang dives into the intriguing intersection between technology and rural life in China. Wang presents a vivid exploration of the impact of digital advancements on traditional farming practices and uncovers the complex consequences that arise when new technologies collide with age-old traditions. Through a series of captivating stories, the author sheds light on the innovative ways in which blockchain, e-commerce, and artificial intelligence are reshaping the agricultural landscape. However, it is precisely this convergence of technology and rural life that renders the book so curious, as Wang critically examines the potential social, economic, and environmental repercussions that emerge from these developments.

At the heart of the controversy lies Wang's incisive analysis of the consequences of technology on rural communities. By delving into the stories of blockchain-tracked chickens, livestreamed pig farming, and e-commerce platforms connecting farmers directly with urban consumers, the author explores how technological innovations disrupt traditional power dynamics and social structures. Wang investigates the implications of these changes, revealing the economic inequalities that arise and the potential erosion of community and cultural practices. By questioning the sustainability and long-term viability of these new technological approaches, "Blockchain Chicken Farm" challenges the prevailing narrative of progress and calls for a critical examination of the costs and benefits associated with the tech-driven transformation of agriculture.