

Final Exam

Question 1:

In the lecture on inequality, reference was made to the debate as to whether or not the contemporary period could be characterized as a “New Gilded Age.” What were the key characteristics of the first Gilded Age, and how is the contemporary period either fundamentally similar or different? That is, what social, economic or political forces propelling extreme inequality have precedent in the past, and/or are there new forces at work today?

- I would argue that the Gilded Age and the contemporary period are fundamentally different. I think that some of the forces that propelled extreme inequality during the Gilded Age have carried over into today. However, I also believe that there are new forces, like deindustrialization, that have led to this period of massive inequality. Although there are some aspects, like extreme income inequality, that the Gilded Age shares with today, the key features of these two eras are different. In 1920, 22% of the wealth in the United States was owned by the top 0.1% of people (Saez and Zucman, 2014). That number is only slightly lower today, showing that there are similar levels of wealth inequality. However, because the economies of these two eras are antithetical, the resulting in key aspects that define each are very different. The social and political conditions, combined with the economies of these two time periods, have worked to create massive inequality. In the Gilded Age, wealth was amassed through industrialization (O'Donnell, 2019). Robber barons would use cut-throat tactics and private armies to secure their wealth. The period was characterized by corruption, monopolies, and muckraking journalists (O'Donnell, 2019). Workers violently fought for higher wages, so the minimum wage was rising. Today, our economy is based on deindustrialization (O'Donnell, 2019). Workers have acquiesced to the minimum wage, so they are not fighting for higher pay (Huyssen, 2019). Wealth inequality today is being spurred on by the indebtedness of the middle and lower classes, preventing the accumulation of wealth (Saez and Zucman, 2014). There are some similarities in social and political aspects of inequality that have carried over to today such as anti-immigrant movements, voter suppression, and political polarization (O'Donnell, 2019). However, these were caused by different economic, social, and political environments. Today cannot be fundamentally the same as the past because everything that has happened in the past, including the Gilded Age, is influencing us now (Huyssen, 2019).
 - Word Count (with citations): 323
 - Word Count (without citations): 303
- Sources:

Huyssen, David. “We won’t get out of the Second Gilded Age the way we got out of the first.” *Vox*, Vox Media, LLC., 1 Apr. 2019, <https://www.vox.com/first-person/2019/4/1/18286084/gilded-age-income-inequality-robber-baron>. Accessed 5 May 2020.

O'Donnell, Edward T. “Are We Living in the Gilded Age 2.0?” *History*, A&E Television Networks, LLC., 31 Jan. 2019, <https://www.history.com/news/second-gilded-age-income-inequality>. Accessed 5 May 2020.

Question 2:

In the lecture on conservation it was stated that “Conservation is always political.” In what ways is this the case, and how does it manifest itself in different conservation strategies (protected area conservation, community-based conservation, ecoregional conservation, market-based conservation). Provide at least one example of a conservation initiative or strategy to illustrate your argument.

- Conservation is inherently political. Conservation deals with the politics of knowledge, translation, scale, and memory. Who and what is deemed “important” has consequences for conservation. Depending on the conservation strategy, the political nature of conservation manifests itself in different ways. The stakeholders that are present in each method of conservation have needs that will be either acknowledged or discarded by those with power. One example of a conservation strategy is the community-based conservation strategy. This conservation method involves including communities in conservation of their local environments. This is in distinct opposition to the idea of nature as being separate from humanity, which often led to sacrificing people by moving them off of their traditional lands for the sake of preserving the environment (Cronon, 1995). Instead, this method acknowledges the necessity of including indigenous people in decisions about conservation and giving them a platform to voice their needs. It also allows the knowledge of indigenous and local people to be used towards conservation methods, which are more likely to be successful because they are considering *all* parts of the environment, including indigenous people (Cronon, 1995). The better the community-based conservation strategy listens to the needs of indigenous communities, the more successful it can be. Another example is the market-based conservation strategy. In this method, the environment is seen as a resource that can provide services to humanity. This method sees the environment in economic terms, attempting to commensurate the seemingly opposite ideas of supporting the economy and saving the environment. It argues that the value of nature should be included in conservation decisions. Payment for ecosystem services is a controversial extension of this method. Although it can be difficult to determine how, or even if, a service the environment provides can have a price, the idea was meant to include even those who see the economy as more important than the environment in conservation (Conniff, 2012).
 - Word Count (with citations): 315
 - Word Count (without citations): 309

Question 3:

In the lecture on Land Grabs and the Political Ecology of Real Estate we discussed “four moments of dispossession” in order to provide historical context to the contemporary context of land grabbing. Drawing on what you have learned in this course about Political Ecology, how would you assess the claim that contemporary real estate booms are a form of land grab?

- I would argue that real estate booms are forms of contemporary land grabs. Real estate booms and land grabs share many of the same characteristics. Fundamentally, they both manage to produce inequality by allowing powerful individuals to dispossess local communities. Those with power are able to coerce marginalized peoples into enclosure and dispossession. Real estate agents and investors will take the land that has belonged to community members or communities and turn it into privatized land that they can use for profit. Like land grabs in the past, real estate booms are also prompted by the search for resources (Boras et al, 2014). However, instead of looking for water or timber, real estates as s are searching for land opportunities to use for development. In traditional land grabs, the Global North sought land in the Global South. Likewise, in real estate booms, people come in from the Global North to take advantage of locations in the Global South, like Costa Rica and Bali (Boras et al, 2014). Additionally, land grabs are often defined with incommensurability. Those who are taking the land only see their actions as providing economic gains for local people (Klare, 2012). With real estate booms, many actors are under the impression that development can only be helpful for locals. However, many indigenous people do not understand land in the same way that real estate agents do, and the dispossession of their land causes them more sociocultural harm than economic benefit. One other characteristic of land grabs is the tendency for land to be presented as “empty.” However, there are often long-established indigenous residents who have been living on the land (Klare, 2012). There is also the potential in real estate booms for indigenous people’s land to be sold. For example, in Sarawak, land was sold to Shin Yang that had Penan living on it, causing tensions and violence that have had negative impacts on the Penan people.
 - Word Count (with citations): 320
 - Word Count (without citations): 308

Question 4:

In the lecture on The Transnational Politics of Vulnerability, we showed that the frequency of disasters has increased substantially over the past several decades. It is unclear, however, how to account for this increase. Is it just better reporting, increased population, a signature of human causation (for instance deforestation or anthropogenic climate change), or is it due to changes in vulnerability caused by inequality (structural adjustment, neoliberalism, urbanization)? Which of these factors do you think best explains the increase in disasters? In constructing your argument, draw on one or more of the key concepts you have learned in this course.

- Although better reporting, increased population, and human causation contribute to the higher number of disasters, I would argue that the increased frequency of disasters is mostly due to changes in vulnerability caused by inequality. Changes in vulnerability and inequality encompass the changes that have occurred in social, political, economic, historical, and ecological processes. Although disasters are often called “natural,” they are anything but. Natural events turn into disasters when there are structures present in a society that cause inequality and differential levels of vulnerability (Jackson, 2005). If inequalities are present, some groups will be more vulnerable to disasters than others. They will not be as prepared, they will not have adequate coping capacities, they will not be a priority in the response, and they will not be equally included in recovery efforts (Jackson, 2005). For example, during Hurricane Katrina, African Americans and the poor were much more vulnerable to the disaster than Whites or the rich (Jackson, 2005). This was due to the structures of violence that had persisted in New Orleans for generations. People of color had to live in the areas they were relegated to and could afford: lower-ground locations (Jackson, 2005). Additionally, people of color and the poor in New Orleans had less access to resources like credit cards to help them leave before the storm and had less opportunity for loans and insurance to help them recover afterwards (Smith, 2005). The people that experience increased vulnerability in times of disaster are suffering from the results of structural violence. Societal structures like racism, discrimination, poverty, and cuts in welfare programs all contribute to the differential experience of vulnerability for people during disasters (Smith, 2005). As time has gone on, more and more methods of structural violence have emerged. I believe that the proliferation of these structures of violence in our society has led to the increase in events becoming “disasters.”
 - Word Count (with citations): 313
 - Word Count (without citations): 301