



Ecological Economics (ECON/IDS/POLS-2420)

Fall 2026–27 · Tuesdays and Thursdays, 2:30–3:45 PM · Room [TBD]

Materials and announcements will be posted at agoraacademy.io

Course Syllabus

Instructor: James Magnus-Johnston, PhD ABD, McGill University; MPhil, Cambridge University

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Office hours: MW 2:30–4:30 PM; TTh 4:00–6:00 PM in D290 (DeFehr Hall, second floor)

Summary: Ecological economics is not merely the study of economics, but a broad, non-technical, and transdisciplinary study of the relationship between humans and the biosphere. Using a long view of history, this course incorporates ideas from across the social and natural sciences to enrich and challenge traditional economic concepts. Topics include the co-evolution of political, economic, and energy systems, the origins of money and inequality, the present scale of ecological decline (including, but not limited to, climate change), proposed solutions, and barriers to their implementation.

Objectives: This course aims to both enrich and challenge traditional economic concepts by incorporating relevant concepts from a variety of other disciplines. The emphasis is on lines of inquiry relevant to contemporary economic challenges, including sustainability and inequality.

Deadline for withdrawal without academic penalty: November 17, 2026.

Reading List

REQUIRED TEXTS (ONLINE)

Daly, H. E., and J. C. Farley. *Ecological Economics: Principles and Applications*. Washington: Island Press, 2010.

Eisenstein, Charles. *Sacred Economics: Money, Gift, and Society in the Age of Transition*. Berkeley: Evolver Editions, 2011. (available free online)

REQUIRED ARTICLES

These are posted on the course webpage and are assigned alongside the chapters listed in the schedule.

Fanning, Andrew L., Daniel W. O'Neill, Jason Hickel, and Nicolas Roux. "The Social Shortfall and Ecological Overshoot of Nations." *Nature Sustainability* 5 (2022): 26–36.

Haberl, Helmut, et al. "A Systematic Review of the Evidence on Decoupling of GDP, Resource Use and GHG Emissions, Part II: Synthesizing the Insights." *Environmental Research Letters* 15, no. 6 (2020).

Hickel, Jason, and Giorgos Kallis. "Is Green Growth Possible?" *New Political Economy* 25, no. 4 (2020): 469–486.

Richardson, Katherine, et al. "Earth Beyond Six of Nine Planetary Boundaries." *Science Advances* 9, no. 37 (2023).

Wiedmann, Thomas, et al. "Scientists' Warning on Affluence." *Nature Communications* 11 (2020): 3107.

SUPPLEMENTARY TEXTS

The following will be referenced in lectures. A number of articles have also been posted on the course webpage.

Raworth, Kate. *Doughnut Economics: Seven Ways to Think Like a 21st Century Economist*. White River Junction, Vermont: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2017.

Kahneman, Daniel. *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011.

North, Douglass C. *Institutions, Institutional Change, and Economic Performance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.

How the Readings Work

Two kinds of reading are assigned in this course, and they are handled differently.

Chapters are read at home. The Daly and Farley chapters are the backbone of the course and are too long to read in class. Come having read them. Short quizzes on keyword definitions are written at the beginning of class, on paper, with devices away.

Articles and excerpts get class time. The journal articles, the Eisenstein chapter, and the Kahneman excerpt are harder going than the textbook, so a short period of class time is made available for them — roughly ten timed minutes of silent reading on paper, devices away, annotating as you go. These are the shaded rows in the schedule. Ten minutes is deliberately not enough to finish. Students who have read beforehand will find the discussion easy; students meeting the piece cold will get through the opening argument and no further. Both can take part, but the advantage is real, and it is the point.

Assignments and Grades

Class participation	10%
Chapter presentations	15%
Reading quizzes	20%
Throughput audit	10%
Policy proposal	20%
Final presentations	15%
Final test	10%

Letter	Percentage	GPA	Descriptor
A+	90-100	4.5	Exceptional
A	85-89	4.25	Excellent
A-	80-84	4	Great
B+	77-79	3.5	Very Good
B	73-76	3.25	Good
B-	70-72	3	Satisfactory
C+	67-69	2.5	Competent
C	63-66	2	Acceptable
C-	60-62	2	Adequate

D	50-59	1	Marginal
F	0-49	0	Failure

An “excellent” assignment (A) would display:

1. Original thinking and a superior grasp of the subject matter
2. A highly developed capacity for critical evaluation, synthesis, and creativity
3. Appropriate descriptions and quotations
4. Organizing and subordinating information well; writing and/or speaking clearly
5. The use of research sources using any recognized style format. For reference, see: Hacker, Diana. *A Pocket Style Manual*. Eighth edition. Boston and New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2018.

Reading quizzes: Short quizzes based on keyword definitions are given at the beginning of class, on paper, with devices away. They are used not only to demonstrate knowledge and preparation, but also to encourage promptness and attendance. Quizzes cannot be made up; instead, your two lowest quiz scores are dropped automatically, with no explanation required. Use those two on the weeks when life goes sideways.

Class participation in discussions: To foster more active discussions on class readings, your participation will be graded and the instructor will maintain a record of your contributions. You will be graded on the quality and quantity of interaction — that is, not only the volume of interaction, but its quality and consistency. Someone who interacts often but attempts to monopolize the conversation, for instance, may receive a lower grade than someone who contributes regularly and is respectful of the contributions of others. Regular contributions are required. Your participation grades will be posted at the middle and the end of the semester.

Learning statements: At the beginning of each class, students will briefly write and share their understanding of a topic as a means of catalyzing conversation about the academic reading. At the end of class, students will reflect on their initial entry and consider whether their understanding has changed. These are handwritten in a notebook you use for nothing else, dated and in sequence. Notebooks are collected twice, on November 5 and December 3, and returned the following week.

Chapter presentations: For each assigned reading, one group will prepare a synopsis in point form that outlines the main argument of the reading and present it to the class to catalyze discussion. Nothing is written up afterwards. Presentations are peer-reviewed using the web form on the course site; grades and feedback are crowdsourced and recommended to the instructor, who reserves the right to adjust up or down.

Throughput audit: During the second and third weeks of the course you will track your own material and energy throughput for seven days — what enters your life, what leaves it, and in what quantities. Method sheets and a recording template are posted on the course website. You will then write a two-page account of what you found and what the exercise could not capture, which is often the more interesting half. Results are pooled and discussed in class on September 24 alongside national material flow data from the instructor's own research. The audit is marked on the seriousness of the tracking and the honesty of the reflection, not on your numbers.

Policy proposal (1500+ words): Each student is invited to write a 1500+ word analysis of a policy idea presented in one of our main texts. Please provide context for the policy prescription, outline its key features, and be sure to include conflicting or dissenting viewpoints on the subject. To help with the process, you will have an opportunity to discuss your research question with classmates on November 17.

Final presentations: Each student will present their policy findings during the final class of this course, and will then take about two minutes of unscripted questions from the class and the instructor. You will be marked on style (5 marks), clarity (5 marks), substance (10 marks), and class engagement (5 marks); the engagement mark covers how you handle the questions on your own work as well as your contributions to others' presentations.

Final test: There is no scheduled final examination for this course. The final test is a short assessment written in class through Populi during the December 3 session, with results returned immediately.

Policies

Final grades: Grades submitted by instructors become final only after they are vetted by the Dean's Council. That process occurs early in January for fall semester grades and early in May for winter semester grades.

Academic integrity: All material referred to in any assignment MUST be appropriately referenced. Plagiarism is a serious matter. Students should be aware of CMU Academic Policies, particularly those regarding academic misconduct (plagiarism and cheating), which apply to all University courses. These are detailed on CMU's website and in the CMU Calendar. For more information on CMU policies regarding grades, academic misconduct, appeals, and other matters, please see CMU's Academic Calendar.

Accessibility: CMU strives to provide a fair and supportive learning environment for academically qualified students with disabilities. If you are eligible for these services or have questions about becoming eligible, please contact Sandra Loeppky, Coordinator of Accessibility Programs, at sloepky@cmu.ca or 204.487.3300 x.340. In recognition of individuals with asthma, allergies and severe environmental/chemical sensitivities, CMU is striving to become a scent-free campus. Students, staff and guests are asked to refrain from wearing fragrances and scented personal care products at CMU.

Academic support services: Student studying, tutoring, and the Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) program are offered to CMU students free of charge in the Marpeck Mezzanine.

Counselling: University students face many challenges and at times may benefit from having a trained professional to talk to. There are qualified counsellors at CMU who volunteer their services free of charge to students on the CMU campus. Students wishing to book an appointment with a counsellor are asked to contact the North Side Receptionist at 204.487.3300 or info@cmu.ca. Confidentiality is maintained at all times. The counselling office is located at C365 (north side) and is free for CMU students.

Continuity plan: Faculty and students should plan to stay home when ill and follow public health requirements for respiratory illness. When students cannot come to class, please seek notes from the designated note-taker. If the instructor cannot be in class, an announcement will be made in Moodle, and we will use the video platform to communicate via videoconference.

AI use — with citation only. Students are permitted to use artificial intelligence tools on take-home assignments in this course if every use of AI-generated material incorporated into the assignment is properly cited. Citation should look like this: "This paper benefited from the use of [tool], created by [company], for [purpose: drafting, clarifying concepts, etc.]." Note that quizzes and reading responses are written in class on paper without devices, and that tests are written in class through Populi. AI assistance is neither possible nor permitted for any of these.

Elder in Residence. CMU's Indigenous Elder in Residence is available to meet with any student who would like to have a conversation. If you would like to meet with him one-on-one, you can reach out to him directly to set up a time. See the Student Hub for details on availability and booking.

Schedule

See agoraacademy.io for live updates. Chapter numbers refer to Daly and Farley unless marked E (Eisenstein) or K (Kahneman). Short periods of class time will be made available for the articles and excerpts — the shaded rows below. Tuesdays are green, Thursdays blue.

Date	Ch.	Track	Topic and reading
THURS Sept 10	1	<i>Textbook</i>	Introduction: what is economics?
TUES Sept 15	2	<i>Text + article</i>	Physical laws and the “fundamental vision” · Richardson et al., “Earth Beyond Six of Nine Planetary Boundaries” — THROUGHPUT AUDIT BEGINS (seven days of tracking)
THURS Sept 17	3	<i>Textbook</i>	Economics as policy?
TUES Sept 22	—	<i>Textbook</i>	Systems theory
THURS Sept 24	4	<i>Textbook</i>	Resource economics — throughput audit results pooled and discussed against national material flow data
TUES Sept 29	E2	<i>Supplementary</i>	The illusion of scarcity (Eisenstein, ch. 2)
THURS Oct 1	8	<i>Textbook</i>	The market
TUES Oct 6	9	<i>Textbook</i>	Supply and demand
THURS Oct 8	10	<i>Textbook</i>	Market failures
TUES Oct 13	11	<i>Textbook</i>	Failures and abiotic resources (ref. ch. 5)
THURS Oct 15	12	<i>Textbook</i>	Failures and biotic resources (ref. ch. 6)
TUES Oct 20	K1	<i>Supplementary</i>	Behavioural economics (Kahneman, part 1)
THURS Oct 22	13	<i>Text + article</i>	GDP vs. welfare · Hickel and Kallis, “Is Green Growth Possible?”
TUES Oct 27	14	<i>Textbook</i>	Money
THURS Oct 29	15	<i>Text + article</i>	Distribution · Wiedmann et al., “Scientists’ Warning on Affluence”
TUES Nov 3	16	<i>Textbook</i>	The real vs. the monetary economy
THURS Nov 5	20	<i>Textbook</i>	Policy design — LEARNING STATEMENT NOTEBOOKS COLLECTED
Nov 9–13	—	—	<i>NO CLASSES — Fall Reading Week (CMU closed Nov 11, Remembrance Day)</i>
TUES Nov 17	—	<i>Assessment</i>	POLICY PROPOSAL WORKSHOP — research questions discussed with classmates
THURS Nov 19	17–18	<i>Textbook</i>	Internationalization vs. globalization
TUES Nov 24	19	<i>Textbook</i>	Financialization (peer reviews)
THURS Nov 26	21	<i>Text + article</i>	Managing scale · Haberl et al., “A Systematic Review of the Evidence on Decoupling”
TUES Dec 1	23	<i>Text + article</i>	Allocation and policy examples — in-class country mapping: social shortfall vs. ecological overshoot · Fanning, O’Neill et al., “The Social Shortfall and Ecological Overshoot of Nations”
THURS Dec 3	24	<i>Assessment</i>	Conclusion · FINAL TEST — LEARNING STATEMENT NOTEBOOKS COLLECTED
TUES Dec 8	—	<i>Assessment</i>	FINAL PRESENTATIONS with unscripted Q&A — last session of the term