

To all St Hilda's Geography Freshers:

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. We will ask you to read another of the books in detail during the first year. 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 30th September so we can read it before term starts. The essay should be sent by email to: lorraine.wild@st-hildas.ox.ac.uk.

NOTE: the 1500 word limit is a real limit: we won't read more than 1500 words

Best wishes,

Lorraine & Lisa

Lorraine Wild & Lisa Wedding
College Geography tutors

List of Geographical Controversies Set Books 2024/25

- Trouet, V. (2020) *Tree Story: the History of the World Written in Rings*
- Carson, R. A. (1962/2000) *Silent Spring*
- Hickel, J. (2021) *Less is More: How De-growth Will Save the World.*
- Kimmerer, R. W. (2020) *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants.*
- Stainforth, D. (2023) *Predicting Our Climate Future: What We Know, What We Don't Know, And What We Can't Know*
- Ostrom, E. (1990) *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action*
- Monbiot, G. (2022) *Regenesi: Feeding the World Without Devouring the Planet.*
- Thompson, K. (2014) *Where do Camels Belong? The Story and Science of Invasive Species*
- Wang, X. (2020) *Blockchain Chicken Farm: and Other Stories of Tech in China's Countryside.*

These books have been selected for a number of reasons:

- Each one is either based around a controversy of some kind or is a controversial book in its own right. They are not simply textbooks or reviews.
- They are accessible to the general reader, although some will be easier to read than others and you should take this into account when you make your choice. The notes on each book below will help you make up your mind.
- Although most of these books are not written by people who regard themselves as geographers (you'll read plenty of those in the rest of the course) all of them are relevant to Geography. Some feed into other parts of the Prelims course, some into foundational papers in the Final Honour School course and others relate directly to some of the options. Reading these now will be useful later.
- All the books should be interesting and original – some are landmarks in their field.

Finally, the selection aims to provide variety. There are books from the past and some published recently. Their authors are from a diverse range of backgrounds, so there should be something to suit everyone.

Reflecting on the texts

In the section which follows, for each book there is a page outlining its argument, its relevance to controversies and suggesting who it might interest. There are also a few suggested readings to provide context for the title. We realise you may not be able to get access to many of these readings before you come to Oxford. These are readings you can follow up later; you don't need to have read them for the vacation work. You should be able to place the book in its context – biographical, social, political, intellectual and geographical. You are not expected to read across the entire field from which they come. Although you are free to track down your own sources – and to follow your curiosity, try to concentrate on your response to the text. Do not be too swayed by what others have written or by other reviews. In the examination the most important thing is that you can demonstrate that you have read and understood the book and you will be expected to show first-hand knowledge of its content.

A review is not 'your view' of the book but is a review of the aims of the book and how it presents its argument, what kinds of evidence it presents and

Set Books Summaries

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.

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.

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.

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.

Regenesiis

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 his controversial book, "*Regenesiis*," acclaimed author and environmentalist George Monbiot presents a radical vision for the future of our planet. Monbiot challenges conventional wisdom and offers a provocative argument that suggests we can reverse the ecological damage caused by human activity. Through careful research and engaging narrative, he delves into various examples of successful ecological restoration and proposes innovative solutions that challenge the status quo. However, it is precisely Monbiot's critique of traditional conservation approaches that have stirred heated debates among experts, making "*Regenesiis*" a highly controversial book.

Monbiot's argument centres on the concept of "rewilding," which involves allowing ecosystems to flourish and self-regulate without excessive human intervention. He draws inspiration from diverse landscapes worldwide, showcasing how large-scale restoration projects, such as the reintroduction of wolves in Yellowstone National Park, have led to profound ecological transformations. Monbiot boldly argues for the restoration of missing keystone species, emphasizing their role in rebalancing ecosystems and rejuvenating biodiversity. The controversial nature of "*Regenesiis*" lies not only in Monbiot's alternative approach but also in his critique of mainstream environmental organizations. He argues that these organizations have become too complacent and risk-averse, prioritizing incremental changes over transformative action. Monbiot advocates for a fundamental shift in our relationship with nature, advocating for a more hands-off approach that allows ecosystems to regenerate on their own terms. This bold call for rewilding, coupled with his scathing criticism of established conservation practices, has sparked heated debates among experts and environmentalists alike.

- Gammon, A. R. (2018) The Many Meanings of Rewilding: An Introduction and the Case for a Broad Conceptualisation. *Environmental Values*, 27, 331-350.
- Jørgensen, D. (2015) Rethinking rewilding. *Geoforum*, 65, 482-488.
- Tsing, A. (2017) The buck, the bull, and the dream of the stag: Some unexpected weeds of the Anthropocene. *Suomen Antropologi*, 42, 3-21.

Where do camels belong? The story and science of invasive species

Ken Thompson
2014 Profile books: London, new edition 2015

Thompson's book uses as its title a question to which we might consider the answer obvious: surely everyone knows that camels belong in the Middle East? Through a wide range of

examples, Thompson shows that the answer to the question about where any species 'belongs' is neither obvious nor straightforward. Once we recognize this, he argues, we are forced to acknowledge that terms such as 'native' and 'alien', which are widely used in the literature on conservation, must be used with caution. This matters because there is a widespread assumption that 'if it's nice, it must be native' (the title of chapter 5) and that 'aliens' are invariably invasive and harmful to 'native' species. As Thompson demonstrates, such beliefs, often unsubstantiated by scientific evidence, have led to 'attempts to control species suspected, rightly or wrongly of causing economic or environmental harm...[and] the cure has often turned out to be worse than the disease' (p.129). He explores these ideas through considering the origins of the concept of 'nativeness' in the writings of H.C. Watson in the 19th century and the ways in which the label 'alien' becomes tied up with public preferences, as seen in the case of the dingo in Australia. He concludes that 'we should commence any attempt to control alien species with our eyes wide open' (p. 221).

Ken Thompson, an ecologist and former lecturer at the Department of Animal and Plant Sciences at the University of Sheffield, is an author of popular science books. This book is written in an engaging popular science style which deliberately makes limited use of citations, although some notes are given at the end of the book. It is a popular science contribution to wider academic discussions about 'invasion biology', a controversial field of research which dates from Charles Elton's 1958 classic text on *The Ecology of Invasions by Animals and Plants*. Debates about aliens and invasive species have frequently led to passionate discussions, see for example the responses by Lambertini, the ISSG and others to the articles by Davis et al (in *Nature* 2011) and by Vince (in *Science* 2011). Thompson has brought these debates to a wider audience and those who oppose his view that the 'threat' of alien species is exaggerated, have criticised him for making unqualified assertions and lacking scientific evidence for his claims (see Simberloff 2015). A much more specific example of how the native/alien debate plays out in terms of conservation issues and perceptions and labelling of species, can be seen in Gibbs et al.'s consideration of Australia as 'camel country', a reminder that the answer to Anderson's question is not as straightforward as we may have thought.

- Davis, M. (2009) *Invasion Biology*.
- Davis, M. et al. (2011) 'Don't judge species on their origins', *Nature*. 474: 153–154.
- Gibbs, L et al. (2015) 'Camel country: Assemblage, belonging and scale in invasive species geographies', *Geoforum*. 58: 56–67.
- Invasive Species Specialist Group (IUCN): <http://www.issg.org/pdf/rebuttal.pdf>
- Lambertini, et al. (2011) *Invasives: a major conservation threat*, *Science*. vol. 333: 404-405.
- Simberloff, D. (2015) 'Book review: Where do camels belong?' *Biological Invasions*. 17: 1927-1929.
- Vince, G. (2011) 'Embracing invasives', *Science*. 331: 1383-1384.

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.