PHIL 2500 Introduction to Contemporary Environmental Issues

Honors Section 001 | UNT, Spring 2020

Professor Adam Briggle

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Class Location: WH 116
Class Time: M/W/F 12:00-12:50
Office Hours: By appointment

Course Description
Human beings have become a dominant force on planet Earth. Indeed, some scientists think that we have created a new geological epoch, the Anthropocene or the Age of Humans. Given how rapidly human impacts are accumulating, others propose calling our time the Great Acceleration. Some indicators:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Global CO₂ emissions</th>
<th>Historical period</th>
<th>Total years</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First 25%</td>
<td>1751-1968</td>
<td>217</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second 25%</td>
<td>1968-1988</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third 25%</td>
<td>1988-2005</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fourth 25%</td>
<td>2008-2017</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Our World in Data, 2017

- Over 70% of the Earth’s land surface is shaped by human activities
- Globally, the material equivalent of a new New York City is built every month
- By 2050, it is likely that plastics in the ocean will outweigh fish.
- Globally, 100 million barrels of oil are consumed every day
- The extra energy trapped in the atmosphere from burning fossil fuels is equivalent to that released by 400,000 nuclear bombs exploding every day

The size of the world population over the last 12,000 years

Source: Our World in Data, 2017

This is visualized from ttps://ourworldindata.org, which was first developed for The New York Times.
The decisions we make about environmental issues in the next several years will be crucial for shaping our collective future. This course helps students understand and evaluate the world we are making. We’ll ask questions like:

- What is driving all of this accelerating growth and can it be sustained?
- Is capitalism the problem… or the solution?
- What are the roles of science, technology, media, markets, activists, and governments in environmental issues?
- Where can we find trustworthy information and credible, insightful analyses?
- Who has what responsibilities and what decisions should they make?

This course gives students tools to understand and critically evaluate the unprecedented world that we are building. We will build our toolbox by consulting an interdisciplinary set of ideas and thinkers. We will practice using our tools through a semester-long case study of climate change.

**Learning Objectives**

1) To understand and critically evaluate a diverse set of perspectives on contemporary environmental issues.
2) To develop a well-informed perspective on contemporary environmental issues, especially climate change.
3) To be able to communicate one’s perspective clearly through the use of empirical evidence and well-reasoned arguments.

**Mission**

This course is offered in service of the noble goal of higher education to develop the intellectual and moral virtues. As stated by the UNT College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences: “Our mission is to kindle the thirst for truth, justice, and beauty; to foster cultural literacy and scientific investigation; and to cultivate thinking, speaking, and writing abilities characterized by clear expression and logically coherent, evidence-based arguments. We see these as the values, forms of knowledge, and skills most needed by citizens of a democracy and by productive members of the global workforce.”

**Course Norms**

Though we will pursue knowledge, it is more important to be good than smart. We will seek liberation – from prejudice, fear, laziness, arrogance, stupidity, and other weaknesses. Our task is to follow thinking where it leads us with respect, integrity, civility, and profundity. Classroom behaviors shall be regulated by these norms. My job is not to tell anyone what to think or believe. My job is to help students think with greater clarity, care, and depth. This will involve making arguments from many perspectives (some that may be unpopular), posing difficult ideas, and challenging cherished beliefs.

**The Idea and Practice of a Safe Space**

The college classroom is a gymnasium for self-improvement. A safe space encourages dangerous thinking. Like a good gym, we need to push ourselves. We need to critically examine our own beliefs and broaden our horizons. This may be painful. That is good as long as it is productive pain like that involved in developing stronger muscles. Like a good gym, we need to avoid destructive pain. To do so, we must be mindful of certain limits. Like any good workout, proper form is crucial. We need to learn the difference between good and bad pain. And when someone causes a bad kind of pain, we need to call it out and practice the arts of apology and forgiveness.
Evaluation of Learning Objectives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assignment/Activity</th>
<th>Percentage of Grade</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attendance</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exams</td>
<td>30% (15% each)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paper presentation</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final paper</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL:</td>
<td>100%</td>
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Description of Assignments

1. Attendance: Students need to be both physically and mentally present. Show up ready to think critically. Adam could, at any time, put you on the spot to offer a summary and/or reaction to the assignment. Having notes on hand is a very good idea. You get three freebie missed classes (life happens) – after that your grade will be impacted for unexcused absences.

2. Exams: There will be two exams in class this semester, one on March 6 and one on April 20. These will cover material from the assignments as well as class discussions and lectures. The format will be a mixture of multiple choice and short answers.

3. Paper presentations: Students will write a research paper for this course (see below). The last four class days are devoted to student oral presentations of their papers. Presentations will be max ten minutes. They must use power point – no more than 5 slides total. Strive to concisely communicate your main ideas and why they matter.

4. Final papers: Students will write a research paper due on May 6 as a word document attachment to adam briggle unt dot edu. Papers should address some aspect of climate change. They should define a problem, explain why it is important, and critically evaluate ways to address it. Students must use Times New Roman 12 point font, single-spacing, 1-inch margins. They can choose whatever bibliographic style they like, as long as they use it consistently. Students must include at least ten references from peer-reviewed literature or reputable, edited popular media. Papers must have a title, four or five keywords, and an abstract of ca. 150 words. Papers must be between 3,000 and 4,000 words in length, including bibliography.

*See bottom of syllabus for tips on good reading and writing.

Policy Stuff

Students should attend every class and to be well-prepared. Read carefully and come with notes and/or a marked-up readings. I do not offer any makeup or extra credit assignments. Late assignments will only be accepted with written documentation of a UNT-sanctioned reason. Grades are on a traditional scale where A = 90-100%; B = 80-89%; C = 70-79%; D = 60-69%; and F = anything below that. The University of North Texas is on record as being committed to both the spirit and letter of federal equal opportunity legislation.
Readings and Other Assignment Materials

All materials required for this course can be found on the course Canvas site. There is one required book: Latouche, Serge. 2010. *Farewell to Growth*. New York: Polity.

Course Calendar

PART I: Historical Background and Theoretical Perspectives

M. Jan. 13. Introductions, Overview of the Course, Climate Change Survey


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M. Jan. 20. No Class, MLK, Jr. Day


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F. Jan. 31. PAPER WORKSHOP

PART II: Crash Course in Climate Change

*This section of the course will draw from the Climate Change 101 document on Canvas

M. Feb. 3 Climate Change 101 – the climate system and climate science. Watch this PBS video.

W. Feb. 5 Climate Change 101 – the history of climate science politics. Watch this Crash Course video.

F. Feb. 7 Climate Change 101 – the Kaya Identity and other key concepts and vocabulary

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**PART III: Contemporary Climate Change Analysis**


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W. March 4. REVIEW DAY

F. March 6. EXAM #1

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SPRING BREAK, March 9-13

**Part III: Green Growth or Degrowth?**


W. March 18. Latouche, Serge. 2009. Farewell to Growth, Introduction and Chapter 1

F. March 20. Latouche Chapter 2

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M. March 23. PAPER WORKSHOP

W. March 25. Latouche Chapter 3
F. March 27. Latouche Conclusion

Part IV: Science and Technology to the Rescue?


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M. April 6. PAPER WORKSHOP

W. April 8. Minx, Jan et al. 2018. “Seven Key Things to Know about ‘Negative Emissions’”


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M. April 13. PAPER WORKSHOP AND ASSIGN PRESENTATION SLOTS

W. April 15. Istvan, Zoltan. 2019. “Environmentalists are Wrong: Nature isn’t Sacred and we Should Replace it”

F. April 17. REVIEW DAY

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M. April 20. EXAM #2

W. April 22. PAPER PRESENTATIONS

F. April 24. PAPER PRESENTATIONS

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M. April 27. PAPER PRESENTATIONS

W. April 29. PAPER PRESENTATIONS

LAST CLASS DAY FOR UNT IS APRIL 30

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W. May 6. FINAL PAPERS DUE TO ADAM.BRIGGLE@UNT.EDU BY 11:59 PM
Rubrics for Reading and Writing

Reading Levels

Level 1 – skimming without understanding or being able to summarize.

Level 2 – grasping isolated points here and there.

Level 3 – having a systemic understanding that grasps the basic order of the piece so that you can give a good summary.

Level 4 – understanding not just the logic and structure of the argument, but also penetrating beneath it to see the assumptions that guide and frame it.

Level 5 – seeing the piece in larger contexts; integrating it into your life and using it in the world; seeing the world anew as a result of being transformed by the reading.

Writing Elements

1. **Grammar, syntax, diction, spelling**
   1. Well-formulated sentences, paragraphs, and sections
   2. Thoughtful, appropriate, and precise word choice
   3. Words spelled correctly, no basic grammatical errors

2. **Organization/structure:**
   1. Clear statement of purpose/thesis
   2. Informs reader of what essay will accomplish
   3. Logically organized, good transitions, coheres as a whole

3. **Scholarship**
   1. Adequate research of relevant resources (appropriate content included)
   2. Follows stated format guidelines
   3. Appropriate tone and style for intended audience, clean presentation

4. **Reasoning**
   1. Comprehension of material, demonstrated grasp of key concepts
   2. Well-reasoned and supported arguments and interpretations
   3. Analysis stays focused and builds on itself, does not wander or fade
   4. Original and/or fruitful insights developed in clear ways

UNT Policy Statements

**Statement Regarding Academic Integrity:** The content of the UNT Academic Integrity Policy applies to this course, and I refer all cases of cheating and plagiarism to the Office of Academic Integrity. If you do choose to cheat or plagiarize on a paper or exam you will fail the course.
Disability Statement: The University of North Texas makes reasonable academic accommodation for students with disabilities. Students seeking reasonable accommodation must first register with the Office of Disability Access (ODA) to verify their eligibility. If a disability is verified, the ODA will provide you with a reasonable accommodation letter to be delivered to faculty to begin a private discussion regarding your specific needs in a course. You may request reasonable accommodations at any time, however, ODA notices of reasonable accommodation should be provided as early as possible in the semester to avoid any delay in implementation. Note that students must obtain a new letter of reasonable accommodation for every semester and must meet with each faculty member prior to implementation in each class. Students are strongly encouraged to deliver letters of reasonable accommodation during faculty office hours or by appointment. Faculty members have the authority to ask students to discuss such letters during their designated office hours to protect the privacy of the student. For additional information, refer to the Office of Disability Access website at http://www.unt.edu/oda. You may also contact ODA by phone at (940) 565-4323.