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POL 372: Politics and Human Survival

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POLITICS AND HUMAN SURVIVAL

Spring 2022 | 3 credits | Lehman College | Prof. J. Mohorčich (joseph.mohorcich@lehman.cuny.edu)

Office hours: Mon. 2 -5 p.m. and by appointment (Zoom, phone, or email)

Those who witness extreme social collapse at first hand seldom describe any deep revelation about the truths of human existence. What they do mention, if asked, is their surprise at how easy it is to die.

– The Dark Mountain Manifesto

The range of possibilities for the future is wide: everyone could die a terrible death or life could be pretty okay. In this class, we'll read contemporary political thought about what could happen in the future. We'll pay special attention to the forces and feedback loops that threaten human life.

Your central task in this class will be to identify a problem in the domain of human survivability, civilizational collapse, or ecological destabilization and to produce a solution set for this problem.

This course is reading intensive and discussion-based. Your main responsibilities, as described below, are to do the reading, to watch the lectures, and to write and respond to discussion questions about the material.

Objectives and requirements

We have three objectives of increasing generality. First: study the texts listed here in order to gain a working knowledge of ecological and political patterns that contribute to human mortality. Second: develop close-reading and critical writing skills in order to examine these problems and to generate solutions for them. Third: improve question-posing and writing skills so as to better participate in the ancient human art of discussing controversial ideas to arrive at a shared understanding. Discussion questions, responses, and semester-long project on saving the world measure progress in these objectives.

Discussion questions	10%	(send in five discussion questions)
Participation	20%	(do the reading, put your phone away, be engaged)
Semester-long project on saving the world	70%	see document on project; comprised of:
In-class updates	10%	
Midterm paper	20%	
Final paper	40%	

For exams one and two, I'll email out a prompt with several identification and essay questions. You'll send back your response within 72 hours. Perhaps understandably, students worry most about exams, but completing the discussion questions and answers is quite important.

Sending in five discussion questions

Before five classes of your choosing, email me a question about the readings. These questions should be interesting and demonstrate that you've thought about the readings. When your question references a place in the reading, include page numbers so others can follow your thought. Questions are due the same day as the reading they're about. Please number your question in the subject line of your email.

You have to send in **five** questions over the course of the class. So, send in a question before five out of our ~24 classes. You can't send in more than one question per class, so make sure you don't run out of days.

Books to buy

None. This course uses [open educational resources](#), which means that the readings are freely available. They will be linked in this syllabus, sent by me, or found online.

Support services information

For learning accommodations, please register with the Office of Student Disability Services in Shuster Hall, room 238, (718) 960-8441. Also, the Academic Center for Excellence (ACE) provides tutoring and workshops in social sciences, writing, and academic skills. For more information, visit lehman.edu/issp or call (718) 960-8175.

Roadmap and readings

Jan 31	The Dark Mountain Manifesto (2009); Williams and Srnicek, the Accelerationist Manifesto (2013); 80k Hours, “ Our list of especially pressing world problems ,” Malcolm Harris, “ The Fascist Bogeyman ” (2016). Read these before you come to class.
Feb 7	Todd, “ The case for reducing existential risks ” (2017); Gupta, “ Dealing in Security : understanding vital services and how they keep you safe”; Kearny, Nuclear War Survival Skills introduction and ch. 1 (1987); Dekenberger, “ We could feed 8 billion people through a nuclear winter ” (2018).
Feb 14	Koehler, “ How to use your career to help reduce existential risk ” (2020); Brown, Plan B , selections.
Feb 28	The Fourteen Grand Challenges ; Smil, <i>Global catastrophes and trends</i> , selections; Nafeez Mosaddeq Ahmed, <i>Failing States, Collapsing Systems: Biophysical Triggers of Political Violence</i> , selections.
Mar 7	John Maynard Keynes, “ Economic Possibilities for Our Grandchildren ” (1930); “Student Debt” in The Debt Resistor’s Operations Manual (2012); Humans need not apply (2014); Banerjee & Duflo, “ The Economic Lives of the Poor ” (2007); Karl Widerquist, <i>Independence, Propertylessness, and Basic Income</i> , selections of about 30-40pp (2013).
Mar 14	Laboria Cuboniks, “ Xenofeminism ” (2015); Terranova, “ Red Stack Attack ” (2014); Bauwens, “ The Political Economy of Peer Production ” (2005); NYCMesh map ; Bauwens, “ Transition to a Sustainable Commons Society in Ecuador and Beyond ” (2014).
Mar 21	Malm, <i>How to blow up a pipeline</i> (2021), selections; Rob Nixon, <i>Slow violence</i> (2011), selections.
Mar 28	Midterm project update paper due.
Apr 4	Hall, “ What is the Minimum EROI that a Sustainable Society Must Have? ” (2009); Tainter, “ Social complexity and sustainability ,” (2006).
Apr 11	The Black Panther Party, Service to the People Programs , selections.
Apr 18	Bostrom, <i>Superintelligence</i> (2013), selections.
Apr 25	Schell, <i>The Fate of the Earth</i> , selections.
May 2	Illich, <i>Energy and Equity</i> (1974); Mohorčich, “ Energy intensity and human mobility ” and “ Mobility in a warming world ” (2020).
May 9	McNeill, <i>Plagues and Peoples</i> (1976), selections. Class wrap-up and review week: work on final projects, bring questions to me.
May 15	Final project paper due.

Additional reading:

Hawken, *Drawdown: The Most Comprehensive Plan Ever Proposed to Reverse Global Warming*

Holly Jean Buck, *After Geoengineering: Climate Tragedy, Repair, and Restoration*

Fetter-Vorm, *Trinity: A Graphic History of the First Atomic Bomb*

Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*

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