

For those interested in this course:

I will be available to meet with students on Monday, August 17th and Wednesday, August 19th from 1:00-2:45 pm to answer any questions and chat about the course. You can join these conversations through the Zoom link on this Canvas site. You can also reach out to me by email (pwhitmarsh@fas.harvard.edu) or through Canvas with any questions.

Enrollment in this seminar will be limited to 10 students, and you can apply through this [form](#). Applications are due on August 21st, and you will hear from me before the registration deadline.

HL90: Fighting the Climate Crisis from Earth Day to Extinction Rebellion

Meets at: 1:30-2:45 Mondays and Wednesdays

Instructor: Dr. Patrick Whitmarsh

Contact: pwhitmarsh@fas.harvard.edu

Office hours: T 11-12:00 and W 2:45-4:15, or by appointment

Course Description

Humanity currently faces a rapidly worsening environmental situation in the global climate crisis: rising seas and ocean acidification, deforestation and ecosystem collapse, and species extinction at alarming rates. Behind these worrying developments, however, lies a human history of imperialism, industrialization, and exploitation that remains inextricable from the so-called natural world. Recent efforts in climate justice, such as Extinction Rebellion and the Green New Deal, have sought to counter this history by imagining new visions for sustainable societies. In this class, students will explore the ways that storytelling and history intersect with the discourse on the global climate crisis, as well as the ways that rights for people of color and those in marginalized communities play a crucial role in the environmental movement. Social justice is climate justice.

The course is divided into three units: the first covers the post-1945 economic boom and early environmental movements of the 1960s, leading to the establishment of the first Earth Day; the second covers 1971 to 2001, from the oil crises of the 1970s to the terror attacks of September 11th, 2001; and the final unit looks at the period from 2002 to the present, tracing the increasing politicization of climate change and its acknowledgement as a world problem by nations all over the globe. Throughout these units, we will study documents from environmental history (including Rachel Carson's landmark work, *Silent Spring*, and Bill McKibben's *The End of Nature*), politics, popular culture, and fiction by writers such as Ursula K. Le Guin, Nnedi Okorafor, Abdul Rahman Munif, and Ted Chiang. While exploring these documents, students will reflect on historical outcomes and unrealized possibilities, as well as the delicate connections between past, present, and future—how what we do today affects what happens tomorrow.

Course Goals

- Discuss the history of environmental awareness from about 1945 to the present, with a focus on the growth of the fossil economy
- Closely examine role of cultural production in the emergence of environmental awareness, including the rhetorical structures and strategies of different genres (e.g. literary texts, environmental writings, images, advertisements, etc.)
- Gain a deeper understanding of the ways that human activities and processes are entangled with planetary processes such as the carbon cycle, species diversity, and others
- Explore and discuss ways that humanity can act sustainably
- Familiarize ourselves with relevant literary writings
- Familiarize ourselves with relevant historical documents
- Explore the scholarly discourses of climate change studies and environmental criticism
- Improve critical and analytical thinking skills through focused class discussions of the materials
- Improve critical and analytical writing skills through assignments on specific topics

Assignments and Grade Breakdown (see "Assignments" for more details)

- Carbon footprint exercise (1 page; due Week 2—5%)
- Short response paper #1 (4-5 pages; due Week 4—15%)
- Action-based assignment (1 page; due Week 6—10%)
- Short response paper #2 (4-5 pages; due Week 9—15%)
- Final paper (8-10 pages; due end of semester—25%)
 - Analytical option (research/argument paper)
 - Creative option (place-based essay)
- Attendance (see attendance policy in "Course Policies"—30%)

Schedule

*Readings are to be completed by the day they are listed

**This schedule is subject to slight changes

Required Texts:

Silent Spring (Rachel Carson)

The End of Nature (Bill McKibben)

The Collapse of Western Civilization: A View from the Future (Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway)

All three texts are available inexpensively online. I will be working from the Library of America version of Carson's *Silent Spring* (ISBN 978-1598535600) and the 2006 Random House reprint for McKibben's *The End of Nature* (ISBN 978-0812976083). You are not required to purchase these versions, but may if you wish. Oreskes and Conway's *The Collapse of Western Civilization* is published by Columbia University Press (ISBN 978-0231169547). Don't hesitate to contact me if you have questions about an edition. Ebooks are okay!

Week 1—Introduction

Sept. 2

- [Thinking Like a Mountain](#) (Aldo Leopold, 1948)
- [What is Nature? Culture, Politics, and the Non-Human](#) (excerpt by Kate Soper, 1995)
- [Race, Racism, Police Violence, and the Climate are not Separate Issues](#) (Bill McKibben, 2020) <https://www.newyorker.com/news/annals-of-a-warming-planet/racism-police-violence-and-the-climate-are-not-separate-issues>

In class: listen to Yasiin Bey's "New World Water"

Unit One: The Postwar Boom (1945-1970)

The course's first section explores the economic prosperity and cultural confidence that followed World War II, which included suburban sprawl, increased production of plastics and use of pesticides, and advances in nuclear testing. This postwar national situation dovetailed with the rise of the environmental movement in the U.S., as advocates and writers documented the consequences of humanity's exploitation of the natural world. Students will discuss the cultural legacies of chemical weapons development and nuclear proliferation, as well as emerging ideas about planetary ecology and early climate awareness.

Week 2

Sept. 7--NO CLASS

Sept. 9

- *Silent Spring*, chapters 1-9 (Rachel Carson, 1962)

In class: watch Pestroy ad

Week 3 (Carbon Footprint Assignment due in class Sept. 16)

Sept. 14

- *Silent Spring*, chapters 10-15 (Rachel Carson, 1962)
- "The Politics of Ecology: Environmentalism and Liberalism in the 1960s" (Keith Woodhouse, 2008)

In class: watch DuPont and Union Carbide ads

Sept. 16

- *Silent Spring*, chapters 16-17 (Carson, 1962)
- "The Manual Pesticide Spray Pump" (Michelle Mart and Cameron Muir, 2018)

In class: discuss carbon footprint findings

Week 4 (Short response paper #1 due in class Sept. 23)

Sept. 21

- "Vaster Than Empires and More Slow" (Le Guin, 1971)
- "The Land Ethic" (excerpt from *A Sand County Almanac* by Aldo Leopold, 1949)

Sept. 23

- "Symbiotism: Earth and the Greening of Civilization" (Peter Westbroek, 2015)

In class: discuss *Earthrise* photograph and first Earth Day marches

Week 5

Sept. 28

- *Plowshare* (AEC, 1961) https://archive.org/details/0418_Plowshare_09_00_47_00
- "The Age of (a) Man" (Masco, 2018)
- "The Clan of One-Breasted Women" (Terry Tempest Williams, 1989)

Sept. 30

- "An End to All This" (Richard M. Koff, 1971)

In class: look at overpopulation posters

Unit Two: The Oil Shock (1971-2001)

The second section focuses on the United States' increased reliance on oil as a source of energy following the prosperity of the postwar years and the social ramifications of this reliance, including the oil shocks of 1973 and 1979. As the oil industry expands and extraction accelerates, writers begin to question the longevity of nature as a concept and the looming threat of environmental disaster. Students will discuss the geopolitical dynamics of U.S. involvement overseas in securing access to foreign oil, the political responses to the country's energy crisis, and the growing public concern about global warming and the burning of fossil fuels.

Week 6 (Action-based assignment due in class Oct. 7)

Oct. 5

- "Petroleum and Progress in Geology" (Hollis Hedberg, 1971)
- "High Drama of Bold Thrust Through the Ocean Floor" (John Steinbeck, 1961) <https://books.google.com/books?id=9IEEAAAAMBAJ&pg=PA110&dq=life+magazine+steinbeck+high+drama&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKewijg9vyktzqAhVRYDUKHYeODp0Q6AEwAHoECAAQAg#v=or>

In class: watch Len Lye's "Birth of the Robot" (1936)

Oct. 7

- "The Petrol Pump" (Italo Calvino, 1974)

In class: divide into groups and look at ExxonMobil ad campaign

Week 7

Oct. 12

- *The End of Nature*, "Part I: The Present" (Bill McKibben, 1989)
- "Crisis of Confidence" speech (Jimmy Carter, 1979) <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/july-15-1979-crisis-confidence-speech>

Oct. 14

- "System Failure: Oil, Futurity, and the Anticipation of Disaster" (Imre Szeman, 2007)

In class: discuss nuclear, chemical, and oil disasters "Santa Barbera (1969) and DH (2010) spills, Love Canal (1940s on), Midland Contamination controversy (1970s on), Three Mile Island (1979) and Chernobyl (1987), Bhopal disaster (1984), Syringe Tide (1987), and others...

Week 8

Oct. 19

- *The End of Nature*, "Part II: The Near Future" (Bill McKibben, 1989)

Oct. 21

- "Shocked! "Energy Crisis," Neoliberalism, and the Construction of an Apolitical Economy" (from *Lifeblood: Oil, Freedom, and the Forces of Capital* by Matthew T. Huber, 2013)
- watch Ronald Reagan's radio address on the oil industry (1986) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KNLE7qLmlJg&t=442s>

In class: listen to Killer Mike's "Reagan"

Week 9 (Short response paper #2 due in class Oct. 28)

Oct. 26

- *Cities of Salt* (excerpt "Abdul Rahman Munif, 1984)
- "Petrofiction: The Oil Encounter and the Novel" (from *Incendiary Circumstances* by Amitav Ghosh, 2005)

Oct. 28

- No readings (lecture/discussion)

Unit Three: The Global Crisis (2002-2020)

The third section addresses the urgency of climate activism and justice in the twenty-first century, with a focus on international movements in response to a global crisis that involves race, migration, and multispecies extinction. We will also discuss the ways that aesthetic expression can galvanize such movements and contribute to social awareness of environmental issues. Comparing creative texts with critical writings and environmental advocacy campaigns, students will examine different cultural expressions and rhetorical strategies in movement for climate justice.

Week 10**Nov. 2**

- "Spider the Artist" (Nnedi Okorafor, 2011) <http://www.lightspeedmagazine.com/fiction/spider-the-artist/>

Nov. 4

- "Racism and the Anthropocene" (Laura Pulido, 2018)

In class: Anthropocene listening session

Week 11**Nov. 9**

- "The Great Silence" (Ted Chiang, 2015)
- "Huia Echoes" (Julianne Lutz Warren, 2018)

Nov. 11

- "Scenes from the Seabed: The Future of Dissent" (from *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* by Rob Nixon, 2011)

Week 12**Nov. 16**

- *Do the Math* (350.org, 2013)

[Do the Math - The Movie](#)

In class: discuss Greta Thunberg and the global climate justice movement

Nov. 18

- The Green New Deal

<https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-resolution/109/text>

Week 13**Nov. 23**

- *The Collapse of Western Civilization: A View from the Future* (Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway, 2014)

Week 14**Nov. 30**

- "All Tomorrow's Warnings" (Rob Nixon, 2020): <https://www.publicbooks.org/all-tomorrows-warnings/>

Dec. 2

In class: Conclusion

Final Paper due Dec. 14 by 11:59 pm