**UNNATURAL DISASTERS**

**INSTRUCTOR: LYLE FEARNLEY**

**SUBJECT DESCRIPTION**

When tsunamis flood cities, earthquakes turn highways to rubble, and epidemics of disease break out, we often blame Nature for bringing disaster onto vulnerable human populations. To prevent future catastrophe, we place our faith in science and technology, hoping to better control Nature's forces next time. Yet the fault lines of disaster often fall along pathways laid out by human activities and plans, bringing unequal affliction to the already vulnerable, and exposing the role of technology and design in shaping--as well as mitigating--disaster.

In this course, we explore these human, social and cultural dimensions of natural and technological disasters. The course begins by exploring how the idea of a 'natural' disaster, devoid of divine intervention or religious meaning, first emerged. Through a series of cases from around the world, the course then explores why contemporary disasters can be considered "unnatural:" how do disasters expose and exacerbate the contours of social inequality? How has human technological intervention increased vulnerability to disaster? How are science, technology, economy and politics implicated in disaster response? And how can the variations of culture, belief and cosmology be included in our understanding of disasters?

**LEARNING OBJECTIVES**

* Identify and explain the social and cultural dimensions of natural disasters
* Apply concepts and methods of social and cultural analysis to understand natural disasters
* Appraise the risks of technological intervention and design, particularly in terms of the relation between social, technological and natural systems
* Define and compare how cultural and social differences are reflected in varying experiences of natural disaster

**MEASURABLE OUTCOMES**

* Elucidate and analyze social and cultural dimensions of natural disasters in written summaries of assigned texts
* Synthesize and apply key concepts relating to the social and cultural causes and consequences of a recent disaster through an essay that investigates and illustrates these concepts
* Appraise the risks and vulnerabilities of a social, cultural, political or technological system through case study of an individual disaster
* Analyze and differentiate the experiences of natural disaster based on comparison of cultural and social factors, in the form of an in-class written exam

**COURSE REQUIREMENTS**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Assessment Items** | **Percentage** | **Period** |
| Class Participation (including short reading responses, quizzes, class discussion, etc.) | 20% | Throughout the Term |
| Group Case Study of Disaster | 15% | Throughout the Term |
| Essay | 35% | Week 10 |
| Final Exam (Mandatory) | 30% | Week 14 |

**Grade Scale**

A – 90-100

B – 80-89

C – 70-79

D – 60-69

F – 0-59

The numbers above indicate the final cumulative average score and the corresponding letter grade.

**Instructional Methods and Expectations**

The seminar meets twice per week. Generally speaking, reading assignments will be due for Monday's class, and on Monday we will focus on discussing the reading and elucidating key concepts. The Thursday class will center on the case study of an actual disaster. Student groups will begin the seminar by presenting the facts of the case and appraising the social, cultural, political and technological factors that contributed to shaping the outcomes of disaster. The seminar will then proceed to apply the key concepts learned from that week's reading to the disaster case study. Sometimes discussion will be supplemented by other materials provided by the instructor, including films and guest speakers.

**COURSE POLICIES**

* Attendance is mandatory. More than one unexcused absence will result in a penalty of 5% reduction of the overall grade. More than three will result in a failing grade.
* There will be no make-up quizzes or exams, unless the student has a valid medical or other emergency.

**Academic Integrity**

Students are expected to produce their own work, whether individually or in groups. Do not copy work from the internet or other published sources without proper citations. This is plagiarism and if a student is found to be doing so, he or she will be subject to disciplinary measures including potentially failing the course.

Plagiarism is the use of some one's intellectual work without acknowledgement. This 'someone' could be your friend, a classmate, the author of an internet website such as Wikipedia, a writer of a book, or more. It is a serious offense. It is the policy of the university that students who plagiarize will be severely disciplined. Full acknowledgement for all information obtained from sources outside the classroom must be clearly stated in all written work submitted and in all oral presentations, including images or texts in other media and for materials collected online. All ideas, arguments, and direct phrasings taken from some one's work must be identified and properly footnoted. Quotations from other sources must be clearly marked as distinct from the student's own work.

**Consultations**

Office hours: By appointment. Office: 1.402.18.

**CLASS SCHEDULE AND ASSIGNMENTS**

**WEEK 1**

Monday, January 22

Introduction to Course.

Thursday, January 25

Assignment Due:

Mark Elvin, "Who was responsible for the weather?"

**WEEK 2: Unfortunate Events and Blame**

Monday, January 29

Assignment Due:

E.E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic Among the Azande*, 1-53

Thursday, February 1

**Week 3: Natural Disaster**

Monday, February 5

Assignment Due:

Walter Benjamin, "Lisbon Earthquake" from *Selected Writings. 1931-1934, Vol. 2, Pt. 2* (Harvard University Press, 2005).

Voltaire, "The Lisbon earthquake.” In Ben Ray Redman, ed., *The Portable*

*Voltaire*, (New York: Penguin, 1977): 556-569.

Rousseau, "Letter to Voltaire." In: Paul Edwards, ed., *Voltaire: Selections*

216-230.

Thursday, February 8

Svend Erik Larsen, "The Lisbon Earthquake and the scientific turn in Kant's philosophy."

**Week 4: Social Autopsy of Disaster**

Monday, February 12

Assignment: Eric Klinenberg, *Heat Wave*: 1-78.

Thursday, Febraury 15

Case Study: Paris Heat Wave, 2003

**Week 5: Social Ecologies**

Monday, February 19

Assignment Due: Klinenberg, *Heat Wave*: 79-164

Thursday, February 22

Case Study: Bangladesh famine, 1974

**Week 6: Risk and Catastrophe**

Monday, February 26

Assignment Due: Charles Perrow, *Normal Accidents*, Introduction (3-14), Chapter 1 (15-31) and Chapter 3 (62-100)

Thursday, March 1

Case Study: Japan 3.11 Triple-Disaster, 2011

**Week 7 BREAK**

**Week 8 Risk Society**

Monday, March 12

Assignment Due: Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*: 19-90.

Thursday, March 15

Case Study: Tranboundary Haze, Southeast Asia, 2013-????

**Week 9: Beyond Risk**

Monday, March 19

Assignments Due: Sheila Jasanoff, "Beyond Calculation"

Andrew Lakoff, "The generic biological threat."

Thursday, March 22

Case Study: SARS pandemic, China and Southeast Asia, 2002

**Week 10: Disaster Nationalism**

Monday, March 26

Assignment Due: Vivian Choi, "Anticipatory States: Tsunami, War and Insecurity in Sri Lanka."

Thursday, March 29

Case Study: Indian Ocean Tsunami, Aceh, Indonesia, 2004

**Week 11: Disaster Capitalism**

Monday, April 2

Vincanne Adams, *Markets of Sorrow, Labors of Faith:* 22-97.

Thursday, April 5

Case Study: Sichuan Earthquake, China, 2008

**Week 12: Biopower and Emergency**

Monday, April 9

Assignment: Michel Foucault, “Right of Death and Power over Life.”

Peter Redfield, “Doctors, Borders and Life in Crisis.”

.

Thursday, April 12

Case Study: Ebola in West Africa, 2014

**Week 13: Climate Crisis**

Monday, April 16

Jerome Whitington, "Singapore's pluripotent climate futures."

Thursday, April 19

Review

**Week 14: Final Exam**