

Confronting Climate Change*

Mondays, time 11:15am-1:45pm

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1 Executive summary

This course on the climate crisis acquaints the students with the psychological factors underlying ecocide and anthropogenic climate change and the possible avenues for its mitigation, with a particular focus on climate justice and Indigenous knowledges and ways of relating to nature. In parallel with reading and discussing primary literature on these topics, students work on research projects, complementing theory with practice and placing it in the local geopolitical context.

2 Motivation

This course engages with the single most important problem that we face today, both as individuals and collectively as a species: anthropogenic **climate change**, an accelerating global catastrophe caused by human actions (UN Environment Gap Programme, 2023). It is intended to complement local community efforts by Cornellians and Ithaca townspeople concerning climate change and climate justice.¹ To that end, it offers students (1) exposure to primary literature across multiple relevant disciplines, notably political science, psychology, sociology, and anthropology; and (2) opportunities for hands-on action.

In pursuit of the first of these goals, students read, present, and discuss primary-literature publications (peer-reviewed journal papers and book chapters) on climate change and climate justice. A particular focus is made on findings and ideas that can help in planning for effective action. The second goal is served by the end of semester projects being explicitly tied to action. For instance, students may choose to work on identifying and cataloging climate-related issues embedded in Cornell's curriculum, daily operations, planning, endowment, and governance, as well as corresponding issues arising in Ithaca, Tompkins County, and New York State. Another possibility is designing, planning, and carrying out local nonviolent direct action (NVDA) aimed at advancing climate justice.

The foregrounding of **climate justice** is of key importance here, for at least two reasons. First, while technologies for mitigating climate change exist, their deployment is predicated on political will, rather than abstract science or engineering (e.g., Nightingale *et al.*, 2020; Sheather, 2021). This makes it a matter of social justice, akin to combating poverty and other sources of preventable suffering (Edelman, 2020, ch.32; Edelman, 2023a, ch.6). Moreover, given the enormity of the climate crisis and its roots in capitalism (cf. Edelman, 2023a, ch.5), nothing short of a radical transformation of the global socio-economic system will serve to reverse its catastrophic effects on the planet (Edelman, 2023b).

The second reason for stressing climate justice is that the deployment of purely technological solutions is all but assured to spell further disaster for those members of the planet's populations who have contributed the least to climate change, yet are poised to suffer the most from its consequences (Nightingale *et al.*, 2020; Vaishnav, 2023). One such group is the people in the Global South. Notably, another group that has historically always suffered the most from ecocide is the Indigenous peoples throughout the world, who are even now at the forefront of the struggle for environmental justice (Martínez-Alier, 2023), just as

¹The *Cornell on Fire* collective; see <https://cornellonfire.org>.

the Western science is rediscovering the critical importance of **Indigenous knowledges and practices** in ecosystem stewardship (Wall Kimmerer, 2013) and in pedagogy (Jimenez and Kabachnik, 2023).

For all these reasons, the focus of this course is not on climate change mitigation technologies (which are the subject of much research and teaching at Cornell), but rather on the human aspects of climate change and climate justice. For these to be acted upon, they must be explored and evaluated by the people who are inheriting the present catastrophe — the younger generation. Climate change pedagogy is increasingly recognized as critically important for the future of the planet (Kretz, 2014; McCowan, 2022, 2023; Suarez *et al.*, 2024). This course is an attempt to meet these challenges, in a setting that combines traditional instruction with applied projects. The reading list on the next page exemplifies the sources that the course participants may consult in their work.

3 Notes for participants

This section contains essential information for participants: format description, inclusion statement,² ground rules for discussion, and credit requirements.

3.1 The prerequisites

Sophomore standing or permission of instructor.

3.2 Diversity, inclusion, and ground rules for discussion

Unlike in a large-enrollment lecture-based course, in which some students may choose, and succeed, to remain virtually anonymous, in a small-class seminar setting you are required to speak in front of the class (when presenting) and are expected to contribute to the discussion on other occasions. Because *your* informed opinion on every aspect of the material is unique and valuable, I shall strive to facilitate the conversation so as to make all voices heard. In this, I'll be counting on your help, and on the help of your classmates.

Even matters of “consensus” are not always easy to talk about, as the rare dissenters who dare voice their opposition know full well; how then should we approach potentially controversial topics? With care and compassion, diligence, openness, and daring: care for our shared humanity; diligence with regard to the relevant knowledge and findings; openness to informed dissent; and daring to venture into uncharted territory, as befits good education.

If at any point during the semester (no matter whether in class or after hours) you feel that you need to talk about any of these things, please let me know immediately — doing so will be my top priority.

3.3 Credit and grading

There are three components to getting credit for this course:

1. **Discussion.** By 9am on the Monday for which readings have been assigned, post on the Canvas discussion board questions or comments on the material (at least 10 weekly posts should have been made by the end of the semester). Be prepared to raise these questions in class.

²The remarks in section 3.2, which are specific to this course, are intended to supplement the official Cornell statement on diversity and inclusion, which covers dimensions such as gender, race, socio-economic background, etc., and which can be found here: <https://diversity.cornell.edu/>.

2. **Presentation.** By Labor Day (September 2, no class), choose and post the date of your presentation.

A typical presentation should include:

- A brief introduction to the topic and an overview of the background to the paper(s) and the relevant methodology (if applicable);
- The paper's findings / arguments;
- A critique of the approach / ideas;
- A summary of the conclusions and their significance for the seminar's theme.

It is recommended that the presenting teams meet/Zoom with the instructor ahead of their presentations, to address any questions and coordinate the details.

3. **Final project.** By Labor Day (September 2, no class), choose and post the topic of your final project. Group projects are encouraged. Some possible topics are listed in section 5 below; others might be accepted, by coordination with the instructor. Be prepared to present your completed project at the last meeting of the semester. Submit a brief written summary of the project by the end of the exam period.

Final grade components (for planning your time investment; no actual numerical assessment of anything will be made in this seminar):—

Weekly questions	30%
Presentations:	20%
Final project:	50%

4 Themes

This section lists the major themes covered by the course, along with a sample of readings for each (the reading list will be finalized close to the beginning of the semester).

4.0 Background reading

The first set of readings consists of books that provide the backdrop for the entire semester.

- Doctorow, C. (2023). *The Lost Cause*. Tor Books, New York, NY.
- Wall Kimmerer, R. (2013). *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*. Milkweed Editions, Minneapolis, MN.

4.1 The roots of the climate crisis

What socioeconomic factors and historical processes brought us to this juncture?

- Edelman, S. (2023a). *The Consciousness Revolutions: From Amoeba Awareness to Human Emancipation*. Springer, Cham, Switzerland (ch.5).
- Saldanha, A. (2020). A date with destiny: Racial capitalism and the beginnings of the Anthropocene. *EPD: Society and Space*, 38(1), 12–34.

- Park, J. T. (2015). Climate change and capitalism. *Consilience: The Journal of Sustainable Development*, 14(2), 189–206.
- Baer, H. A. (2020). Climate change and capitalism. In S. A. Hamed Hosseini, J. Goodman, S. C. Motta, and B. K. Gills, editors, *The Routledge Handbook of Transformative Global Studies*, chapter 19, pages 259–272. Routledge, London.
- Sheather, J. (2021). The conflicts that killed COP26. *BMJ*, 375, n2798.
- Skotnicki, T. and Nielsen, K. (2021). Toward a theory of alienation: futurelessness in financial capitalism. *Theory and Society*, 50, 837–865.
- White, R. (2018). Ecocide and the carbon crimes of the powerful. *The University of Tasmania Law Review*, 37(2), 95–115.

4.2 The state of the planet

What is the present state of the global climate and where are things headed?

- Sampson, R. N. (1991). The politics of the environment. *Journal of Soil and Water Conservation*, 46(6), 398–400.
- Smith, J. (2017). Climate change: scientific evidence and the industry of denial. *The Missouri Review*, 40(3), 187–201. Review.
- UN Environment Gap Programme (2023). *Emissions Gap Report 2023: Broken Record — Temperatures hit new highs, yet world fails to cut emissions (again)*. United Nations, Nairobi.
- Armstrong McKay, D. I., Staal, A., Abrams, J. F., Winkelmann, R., Sakschewski, B., Loriani, S., Fetzer, I., Cornell, S. E., Rockström, J., and Lenton, T. M. (2022). Exceeding 1.5°C global warming could trigger multiple climate tipping points. *Science*, 377, eabn7950.
- Milkoreit, M. (2023). Social tipping points everywhere? — patterns and risks of overuse. *WIREs Climate Change*, 14, e813.
- Kemp, L., Xu, C., Depledge, J., Ebi, K. L., Gibbins, G., Kohler, T. A., Rockström, J., Scheffer, M., Schellnhuber, H. J., Steffen, W., and Lenton, T. M. (2022). Climate endgame: Exploring catastrophic climate change scenarios. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science*, 119(34), e2108146119.

4.3 Psychological effects

What psychological factors contribute to our experience of, and behavior towards, the climate crisis?

- Hickman, C., Marks, E., Pihkala, P., Clayton, S., Lewandowski, R. E., Mayall, E. E., Wray, B., Mellor, C., and van Susteren, L. (2021). Climate anxiety in children and young people and their beliefs about government responses to climate change: a global survey. *Lancet Planet Health*, 5, e863–e873.
- Sanson, A. V. and Burke, S. E. L. (2020). Climate change and children: An issue of intergenerational justice. In N. Balvin and D. J. Christie, editors, *Children and Peace*, Peace Psychology, chapter 21, pages 343–362. SpringerOpen, Cham, Switzerland.

- Cunsolo, A. and Ellis, N. R. (2018). Ecological grief as a mental health response to climate change-related loss. *Nature Climate Change*, 8, 275–281.
- Jenkins, W., Berry, E., and Kreider, L. B. (2018). Religion and climate change. *Annual Review of Environment and Resources*, 43, 85–108.
- Stanley, S. K. (2023). Anticipatory solastalgia in the Anthropocene: Climate change as a source of future-oriented distress about environmental change. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 91, 102134.
- Ferrarello, S. (2023). Solastalgia: climatic anxiety — an emotional geography to find our way out. *The Journal of Medicine and Philosophy*, 48, 151–160. A Forum for Bioethics and Philosophy of Medicine.
- Schwartz, S. E. O., Benoit, L., Clayton, S., Parnes, M. F., Swenson, L., and Lowe, S. R. (2023). Climate change anxiety and mental health: Environmental activism as buffer. *Current Psychology*, 42, 16708–16721.
- Korteling, J. E., Paradies, G. L., and Sassen-van Meer, J. P. (2023). Cognitive bias and how to improve sustainable decision making. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 14, 1129835.

4.4 Societal effects

What societal factors contribute to our experience of, and behavior towards, the climate crisis?

- Sahlins, M. (1968). The original affluent society. In M. Sahlins, editor, *Stone Age Economics*. Aldin, Chicago.
- Klinenberg, E., Araos, M., and Koslov, L. (2020). Sociology and the climate crisis. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 46, 649–669.
- Dietz, T., Shwom, R. L., and Whitley, C. T. (2020). Climate change and society. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 46, 135–158.

4.5 Ends and means

How do we envisage the desirable and possible future and how should we act now to bring it about?

- Edelman, S. (2023a). *The Consciousness Revolutions: From Amoeba Awareness to Human Emancipation*. Springer, Cham, Switzerland (ch.7).
- Nightingale, A. J., Eriksen, S., Taylor, M., Forsyth, T., Pelling, M., Newsham, A., Boyd, E., Brown, K., Harvey, B., Jones, L., Bezner Kerr, R., Mehta, L., Naess, L. O., Ockwell, D., Scoones, I., Tanner, T., and Whitfield, S. (2020). Beyond technical fixes: climate solutions and the great derangement. *Climate and Development*, 12(4), 343–352.
- Petzold, J., Andrews, N., Ford, J. D., Hedemann, C., and Postigo, J. C. (2020). Indigenous knowledge on climate change adaptation: a global evidence map of academic literature. *Environmental Research Letters*, 15, 113007.

- Larsen, S. C. and Johnson, J. T. (2016). The agency of place: toward a more-than-human geographical self. *GeoHumanities*, 2(1), 149–166.
- Hernandez, J. and Spencer, M. S. (2020). Weaving Indigenous science into ecological sciences: Culturally grounding our Indigenous scholarship. *Human Biology*, 92(1), 5–9.
- Chanza, N. and Musakwa, W. (2021). Indigenous practices of ecosystem management in a changing climate: Prospects for ecosystem-based adaptation. *Environmental Science and Policy*, 126, 142–151.
- Imoro, Z. A., Imoro, A. Z., Duwiejuah, A. B., and Abukar, A. (2021). Harnessing Indigenous technologies for sustainable management of land, water, and food resources amidst climate change. *Frontiers in Sustainable Food Systems*, 5, 691603.
- Latulippe, N. and Klenk, N. (2020). Making room and moving over: knowledge co-production, Indigenous knowledge sovereignty and the politics of global environmental change decision-making. *Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability*, 42, 7–14.
- Whyte, K. (2020). Too late for indigenous climate justice: Ecological and relational tipping points. *WIREs Climate Change*, 11, e603.
- Osborne, N. and Carlson, A. (2023). Against a nation state of emergency: how climate emergency politics can undermine climate justice. *npj Climate Action*, 2, 46.
- Tom, E., Adams, M. M., and Goode, R. W. (2024). Solastalgia to soliphilia: cultural fire, climate change, and Indigenous healing. *Ecopsychology*.
- Jimenez, J. and Kabachnik, P. (2023). Indigenizing environmental sustainability curriculum and pedagogy: confronting our global ecological crisis via Indigenous sustainabilities. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 28(5), 1095–1107.
- Kurtz, R. (2020). Direct action and the climate crisis: interventions to resist and reorganize the metabolic relations of capitalism. *Radical Philosophy Review*, 23(2), 261–297.
- Clark, J. (2020). What is eco-anarchism? *The Ecological Citizen*, 3(Suppl.C), 9–14.
- Toro, F. J. (2021). Stateless environmentalism: the criticism of state by eco-anarchist perspectives. *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies*, 20(2), 39–53. Special issue: “Anarchist Geographies and Epistemologies of the State”.
- Berglund, O. (2023). Disruptive protest, civil disobedience & direct action. *Politics*, pages 1–19.

5 Sample project topics

5.1 Cornell scorecards

How is our university doing on the relevant fronts: curriculum, daily operations, planning, endowment, and governance? Have there been recent changes, and if yes, in which direction(s)? Who are the point people

5.2 City, county, state scorecards

Same as above, but other local and state entities.

5.3 Local voices

Who are the different community actors and groups advocating for policy change for climate change mitigation and adaptation in the county? What have been their achievements, challenges and lessons? What unites/divides them? What holds back greater mobilization locally? What could help existing change agents?

5.4 Direct action

Who are the key players whose decisions affect how Cornell (the city, the county, the state, the country) is doing on climate? What can *we* do to help those people make the right decisions?

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Readings

- Armstrong McKay, D. I., Staal, A., Abrams, J. F., Winkelmann, R., Sakschewski, B., Loriani, S., Fetzer, I., Cornell, S. E., Rockström, J., and Lenton, T. M. (2022). Exceeding 1.5°C global warming could trigger multiple climate tipping points. *Science*, 377, eabn7950.
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- Dietz, T., Shwom, R. L., and Whitley, C. T. (2020). Climate change and society. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 46, 135–158.
- Doctorow, C. (2023). *The Lost Cause*. Tor Books, New York, NY.
- Edelman, S. (2020). *Life, Death, and Other Inconvenient Truths*. MIT Press, Cambridge, MA.
- Edelman, S. (2023a). *The Consciousness Revolutions: From Amoeba Awareness to Human Emancipation*. Springer, Cham, Switzerland.
- Edelman, S. (2023b). Real systemic solutions to humanity’s problems require a radical reshaping of the global political system. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 46, e155. A commentary on *The i-frame and the s-frame: How focusing on individual-level solutions has led behavioral public policy astray* by N. Chater and G. Loewenstein.

- Ferrarello, S. (2023). Solastalgia: climatic anxiety — an emotional geography to find our way out. *The Journal of Medicine and Philosophy*, 48, 151–160. A Forum for Bioethics and Philosophy of Medicine.
- Hernandez, J. and Spencer, M. S. (2020). Weaving Indigenous science into ecological sciences: Culturally grounding our Indigenous scholarship. *Human Biology*, 92(1), 5–9.
- Hickman, C., Marks, E., Pihkala, P., Clayton, S., Lewandowski, R. E., Mayall, E. E., Wray, B., Mellor, C., and van Susteren, L. (2021). Climate anxiety in children and young people and their beliefs about government responses to climate change: a global survey. *Lancet Planet Health*, 5, e863–e873.
- Imoro, Z. A., Imoro, A. Z., Duwiejuah, A. B., and Abukar, A. (2021). Harnessing Indigenous technologies for sustainable management of land, water, and food resources amidst climate change. *Frontiers in Sustainable Food Systems*, 5, 691603.
- Jenkins, W., Berry, E., and Kreider, L. B. (2018). Religion and climate change. *Annual Review of Environment and Resources*, 43, 85–108.
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- Kemp, L., Xu, C., Depledge, J., Ebi, K. L., Gibbins, G., Kohler, T. A., Rockström, J., Scheffer, M., Schellnhuber, H. J., Steffen, W., and Lenton, T. M. (2022). Climate endgame: Exploring catastrophic climate change scenarios. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science*, 119(34), e2108146119.
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- Kretz, L. (2014). Ecological identity in education: Subverting the neoliberal self. *Leadership and Research in Education*, 1, 4–21.
- Kurtz, R. (2020). Direct action and the climate crisis: interventions to resist and reorganize the metabolic relations of capitalism. *Radical Philosophy Review*, 23(2), 261–297.
- Larsen, S. C. and Johnson, J. T. (2016). The agency of place: toward a more-than-human geographical self. *GeoHumanities*, 2(1), 149–166.
- Latulippe, N. and Klenk, N. (2020). Making room and moving over: knowledge co-production, Indigenous knowledge sovereignty and the politics of global environmental change decision-making. *Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability*, 42, 7–14.
- Martínez-Alier, J. (2023). *Land, Water, Air and Freedom: The Making of World Movements for Environmental Justice*. Elgar, Cheltenham, UK. Open access (freely available on the publisher's website).
- McCowan, T. (2022). Teaching climate change in the university. Technical report, UCL.
- McCowan, T. (2023). The climate crisis as a driver for pedagogical renewal in higher education. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 28(5), 933–952.

- Milkoreit, M. (2023). Social tipping points everywhere? — patterns and risks of overuse. *WIREs Climate Change*, 14, e813.
- Nightingale, A. J., Eriksen, S., Taylor, M., Forsyth, T., Pelling, M., Newsham, A., Boyd, E., Brown, K., Harvey, B., Jones, L., Bezner Kerr, R., Mehta, L., Naess, L. O., Ockwell, D., Scoones, I., Tanner, T., and Whitfield, S. (2020). Beyond technical fixes: climate solutions and the great derangement. *Climate and Development*, 12(4), 343–352.
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- Schwartz, S. E. O., Benoit, L., Clayton, S., Parnes, M. F., Swenson, L., and Lowe, S. R. (2023). Climate change anxiety and mental health: Environmental activism as buffer. *Current Psychology*, 42, 16708–16721.
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- Skotnicki, T. and Nielsen, K. (2021). Toward a theory of alienation: futurelessness in financial capitalism. *Theory and Society*, 50, 837–865.
- Smith, J. (2017). Climate change: scientific evidence and the industry of denial. *The Missouri Review*, 40(3), 187–201. Review.
- Stanley, S. K. (2023). Anticipatory solastalgia in the Anthropocene: Climate change as a source of future-oriented distress about environmental change. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 91, 102134.
- Suarez, D. C., Kircher, C., and Santi, T. (2024). A clear and present pedagogy: Teaching about planetary crisis (when you're in a planetary crisis). *Antipode*.
- Tom, E., Adams, M. M., and Goode, R. W. (2024). Solastalgia to soliphilia: cultural fire, climate change, and Indigenous healing. *Ecopsychology*.

- Toro, F. J. (2021). Stateless environmentalism: the criticism of state by eco-anarchist perspectives. *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies*, 20(2), 39–53. Special issue: “Anarchist Geographies and Epistemologies of the State”.
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- Vaishnav, P. (2023). Implications of green technologies for environmental justice. *Annual Review of Environmental Resources*, 48, 505–530.
- Wall Kimmerer, R. (2013). *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*. Milkweed Editions, Minneapolis, MN.
- White, R. (2018). Ecocide and the carbon crimes of the powerful. *The University of Tasmania Law Review*, 37(2), 95–115.
- Whyte, K. (2020). Too late for indigenous climate justice: Ecological and relational tipping points. *WIREs Climate Change*, 11, e603.