**SS386 – The Collapse of Civilization and Its Prevention**

**Spring 2017**

**Weir 208**

**TR 11:00-12:15**

**Instructor:** Taylor Dotson

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**Office Hours:** M 11-12; R 1-2; or by appointment

**Course Description:**

According to many environmental scientists, we are living in an unprecedented era of human-driven environmental change: the Anthropocene. We appear to be living through an age characterized by ever increasing economic productivity and ever increasing levels of material wealth – for some – but also heretofore unseen degrees of ecological degradation. Many are concerned about not only the challenges possible to contemporary technological civilization by climate change but also resource depletion, the dying off of a considerable portion of the planet’s species, and inequality – not to mention political instability. Is there much hope for humanity?

The goal of this course is to critically examine the sustainability of human civilization. How have previous societies failed to organize themselves within their socioecological limits? What positive lessons can be drawn from earlier human settlements regarding the political, cultural, economic, and technological causes of collapse? In addition to researching potential answers to these questions, students will explore and evaluate contemporary proposals for bringing human animals into better harmony with local and planetary ecosystems.

**Pre-requisites/Co-requisites:** None

**Place in Curriculum**: General Education Core requirement, Area 4 – Social Sciences

**Course Learning Outcomes**:

This course explores the political, economic, cultural, and environmental dimensions of civilizational problems. By the end of the course, it is anticipated that students will be able to: (1) Recognize and articulate the myriad possible contributors to civilizational collapse, (2) Problematize different ideas concerning “progress”, (3) Explain the limitations of growth-based economics as well as possibilities for alternative systems, and (4) Speak and write intelligently regarding one of the impediments to the survival of contemporary technological civilization and what might be done about it.

**Program Learning Outcomes**:

Students will:

1. Identify, describe, and explain human behaviors and how they are influenced by social structures, institutions, and processes within the contexts of complex and diverse communities.

2. Articulate how beliefs, assumptions, and values are influenced by factors such as politics, geography, economics, culture, biology, history, and social institutions.

3. Describe ongoing reciprocal interactions among self, society, and the environment.

4. Apply the knowledge base of the social and behavioral sciences to identify, describe, explain, and critically evaluate relevant issues, ethical dilemmas, and arguments.

**Course Requirements**:

**Required Texts:**

1) Wright, Ronald. 2004. *A Short History of Progress*. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press.

2) Diamond, Jared. 2005. *Collapse*. New York: Penguin.

3) Jackson, Tim. 2009. *Prosperity Without Growth*. New York: Earthscan.

**Note:** Other required readings will be emailed out by the instructor as a pdf. It is strongly encouraged that students print out and annotate electronically received readings.

**Assignments**

The structure of this course requires careful reading in preparation for engaged class discussion. Students will be expected to have extracted the main arguments and evidentiary basis for claims within the readings, taking copious notes, prior to that day’s class. Students are strongly encouraged to do the assigned readings in groups so that more class lecture and discussion time can be devoted to going beyond the readings rather than merely review them.

Students may miss no more than two classes without incurring a significant penalty to their attendance grade (full letter grade per day). Moreover, any absence will negatively affect the student’s participation grade. Penalties can only be avoided by completing an additional reading and writing assignment.

This course consists of readings, class discussions, midterm exam, presentation, and final group research project.

**Participation:** Students will be graded on their appearing prepared to discuss and respond to questions regarding that day’s reading, which entails comprehending the author’s main claims, logic, and evidentiary bases. Periodically, I will informally ask a few students (selected randomly) to be prepared to discuss the following class day’s readings at length in order to ensure that participation is broadly distributed among the class.

**Students on their laptops or otherwise preoccupied with a digital device will receive a zero for that day’s participation grade**. Students are encouraged to take handwritten notes so as to avoid the alluring pull of email and other computerized distractions. Listening attentively but otherwise not participating will earn students a non-zero (but also non-passing: e.g., <50%) participation grade. Finally, students should put their phones on vibrate and keep them in their book bags or pockets.

**Short Essays:** Students will write two short essays (~800-1000 words) reflecting upon and applying ideas learned in class along with some background research. Topics TBA.

**Presentation:** Pairs of students will be responsible for preparing and giving a presentation that teaches one to two chapters of material to the rest of the class. Presentations will be 15 to 20 minutes and outline the background of the case as well as its connection to course readings/concepts being discussed that week. Basic source material for these presentations will be provided to the student-pairs, who will only perform outside research only if absolutely necessary to put together a cohesive presentation or update the material.

**Book Review:** Pairs of students will read a book together that deals with some destabilizing factor for contemporary technological civilization (see list below). They will write a 1500 word review of that book’s argument, limitations, and connection to course concepts.

**Group Project:** Students will be divided into small groups and dedicate the last few weeks of the course to researching one of the challenges facing contemporary global technological civilization (e.g., Climate Change, Runaway Corporate Capitalism, Inequality, Peak Oil, etc.), characterizing it using relevant course concepts and exploring potential solutions. Considerable in-class time will be set aside for groups to conduct outside research, peer review, and assist one another in improving their thinking and analysis. This research will culminate in a 20 page research paper as well as 20-30 minute presentation. Fairness in grading will be assured through self and peer evaluations.

**Course Schedule**:

**INITIAL REFLECTIONS ON PROGRESS**

**Tue Jan 17 –** Review of Course & Syllabus – Wright, “Gauguin’s Questions” p. 1-28

**Thu Jan 19 –** Wright, “The Great Experiment” p. 29-54

Ideas of Progress, Progress Traps **[Essay 1 Assigned]**

**Tue Jan 24 –** Wright, “Fool’s Paradise” and “Pyramid Schemes” p. 55-106

Optional Advanced Reading, Tainter, “The Nature of Complex Societies” [PDF on Canvas]

Themes: Complexity, Inequality

**Thu Jan 26 –** Wright, “The Rebellion of the Tools” p. 107-132

Optional Advanced Reading, Tainter, “The Study of Collapse” [PDF on Canvas]

Runaway Trains, Dinosaurs, House of Cards

**STUDYING COLLAPSE: PAST AND PRESENT SOCIETIES**

**Tue Jan 31 –** Vikings Part I. Diamond p. 178-247

**Thu Feb 2** – Vikings Part II. Diamond p. 248-276 **[Choose Books for Review][Choose Presenters for 14,16]**

**Tue Feb 7 – [No Class]**

**Thu Feb 9 – [Essay 1 Due] Class Material – TBA [Essay 2 Assigned]**

**Tue Feb 14 –** **[Student Presentations: Romans, Mayans, Chacoans]**

**Thu Feb 16 – [Student Presentations: Modern Failures]**

**Tue Feb 21 –** Diamond, “Why Do Some Societies Make Disastrous Decisions?” p. 419-441

Optional Advanced Reading: Tainter, “Summary and Implications”

**DOING BETTER? STRATEGIES FOR LESSENING DAMAGE**

**Thu Feb 23 –** Diamond, “Opposite Paths to Success” p. 277-308 **[Choose Presenters for 3/2]**

**Tue Feb 28 –** Ostrom, “Reflections on the Commons” and Fleck, “Averting Tragedy” [PDF on Canvas]

**Thu Mar 2 – [Student Presentations: Governing the Commons]**

**Tue Mar 7 –** Diamond, “Big Business and the Environment” p. 441-487

**Thu Mar 9 – Film – TBA - [Essay 2 Due Friday 5pm]**

**Tue Mar 14 – [Spring Break] [Read Book]**

**Thu Mar 16 – [Spring Break] [Read Book]**

**PROSPERITY WITHOUT GROWTH?**

**Tue Mar 21 –** Jackson, “Age of Irresponsibility” and “Redefining Prosperity” p. 17-48

**Thu Mar 23 –** Jackson, “The Dilemma of Growth” and “The Myth of Decoupling” p. 49-86

**Tue Mar 28 –** Jackson, “Keynesianism and the ‘Green New Deal’” and “Ecological Macro-Economics” p. 103-142

**Thu Mar 30 –** Jackson, “The Iron Cage of Consumerism” and “Flourishing Within Limits” p. 87-102 and p. 143-156 **[Choose Presenters for 4/6]**

**Tue Apr 4 –** Jackson, “Governance for Prosperity” and “Transition to a Sustainable Economy” p. 157-186

**Thu Apr 6 – [Student Presentations – Thinking About Economics and Progress]**

**RESEARCH PROJECTS**

**Tue Apr 11** **–** **Picking Groups + Collecting References [Book Review Due]**

**Thu Apr 13 – [Work Day]  
Tue Apr 18 – [Work Day]**

**Thu Apr 20 – [Work Day]**

**Tue Apr 25 – [Work Day]**

**Thu Apr 27 – [Group Presentations I]**

**Tue May 2 – [Group Presentations II]**

**Thu May 4** – **[Group Presentations III; Papers Due Friday at Midnight]**

**[Finals Week]**

**Grading**:

A = 100-93%; A- = 92-90%: B+ = 89-87%; B = 86-83%; B- = 82-80%; C+ = 79-77%; C = 76-73%; C- = 72-70%; D = 69-60%; F=<60%

**Breakdown:**

Attendance and Participation 20%

Presentation 15%

Essays (2) 20%

Book Review 20%

Final Project 25%

**Counseling and Disability Services:**

**Reasonable Accommodations**

New Mexico Tech is committed to protecting the rights of individuals with disabilities. Qualified individuals who require reasonable accommodations are invited to make their needs known to the Office of Counseling and Disability Services (OCDS) as soon as possible. To schedule an appointment, please call 835-6619.

**Counseling Services**

New Mexico Tech offers mental health and substance abuse counseling through the Office of Counseling and Disability Services. The confidential services are provided free of charge by licensed professionals. To schedule an appointment, please call 835-6619.

**Academic Honesty**: New Mexico Tech’s Academic Honesty Policy for undergraduate students is found starting on page 60 of the NMT Undergraduate Catalog, <http://www.nmt.edu/images/stories/registrar/2014-2015_UNDERGRADUATE_Catalog_FINAL.pdf>

New Mexico Tech’s Academic Honesty Policy for graduate students is found starting on page 59 of the NMT Graduate Catalog, <http://www.nmt.edu/images/stories/registrar/2014-2015_GRADUATE_Catalog_FINAL.pdf>.

You are responsible for knowing, understanding, and following this policy.

**Respect Statement:** New Mexico Tech supports freedom of expression within the parameters of a respectful learning environment. As stated in the New Mexico Tech Guide to Conduct and Citizenship: “New Mexico Tech’s primary purpose is education, which includes teaching, research, discussion, learning, and service. An atmosphere of free and open inquiry is essential to the pursuit of education. Tech seeks to protect academic freedom and build on individual responsibility to create and maintain an academic atmosphere that is a purposeful, just, open, disciplined, and caring community.”

**POTENTIAL BOOKS**

Higgs, Kerryn. 2016. *Collision Course: Endless Growth on a Finite Planet*

Meadows, Donnella, Jorgen Randers, Dennis Meadows. 2004. *Limits to Growth: The 30- Year Update*

Nafeez Mosaddeq Ahmed. 2010. *A User’s Guide to the Crisis of Civilization and How to Save It*

Schor, Juliet B. 2011. *True Wealth*

Zehner, Ozzie. 2012. *Green Illusions*

Wessels, Tom. 2013. *The Myth of Progress*

Mason, Paul. 2015. *Postcapitalism*

Heinberg, Richard. 2015. *Afterburn: Society Beyond Fossil Fuels*

Klein, Naomi. 2014. *This Changes Everything*

Jacobs, Jane. 2004. *Dark Age Ahead*

Greer, John Michael. 2016. *Dark Age America*

Mason, Paul. 2015. *PostCapitalism*

Acemoglue, Daron and James Robinson. 2012. *Why Nations Fail.*

**POTENTIAL PROJECT TOPICS**

Water, Drought, and Climate Change

Peak Oil

Suburbia and Automobility

Politics and Governance (Inability of present forms of government to meet contemporary challenges)

The Scale of Civilization (Is a Global Society Sustainable?)

Alternatives to the Status Quo?

Technology and Magical Thinking

Food (Organic v. Industrial Agriculture)