

Civilizational Collapse and its Prevention

Spring 2021

DE [Zoom Room](#) + Canvas Page

TR 9:05-10:20

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Office Hours: Given the constraints of the pandemic and online delivery, I will make myself available on both Zoom and on the course Discord server. Zoom hours: TWR 11-12; Discord: M through Friday, 9 to 5. Feel free to use the group chat to discuss course issues with each other, but I can't promise timely responses after 5pm or on weekends.

Course Description: According to some scientists, we are living in an unprecedented era of human-driven environmental change: the Anthropocene. Our age appears characterized by ever increasing economic productivity and ever-increasing levels of material wealth – at least for some – but also heretofore unseen degrees of ecological degradation. Many people 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. What hope is there 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 and creating more stable societies.

Mode of Instruction: This class will be held entirely online as a “synchronous” class. Usually, one day per week will be reserved for student presentations, while the other will be composed of a brief lecture and instruction on the homework for the following week/topic selection. When major assignments are due, classtime will consist of short Q&A sessions/drop-in hours.

Pre-requisites/Co-requisites: None

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

Course Learning Outcomes: This course explores the decisions, thinking processes, technical structures, and forms of organization that lead to technoscientific mistakes. Course assignments will help students hone their analytical, writing, and oral presentation skills. By the end of the course, students should be able to: (1) Problematize common understandings of “progress” (2) Recognize and describe at least two different cause and effect relationships contributing to civilizational collapse (3) Contrast divergent solutions to civilizational problems, which may include degrowth, ecomodernism, polycentric governance, rewilding, etc. (4) Present a cohesive oral argument regarding the causes of a civilizational threat and what might be done about it.

Program Learning Outcomes: Students will: (1) Identify and communicate orally and in written language while attending to audience, purpose and context. (2) Apply strategies such as reading for main points; seeking key arguments, counterarguments, rebuttals; locating supportive documentation for arguments; reading from the perspective of different stakeholder lens; and rhetorically evaluate texts (3) Evaluate how well supported one's own arguments and those of others by quality sources and evidence; integrate support for their own claims with information from sources that are used and cited ethically and appropriately (4) Delineate a research problem or question. (5) Identify and gather information to address problem, and evaluate evidence and data for credibility (6) Develop conclusions, solutions, and outcomes that reflect an informed, well-reasoned evaluation (7) Draw on historical and cultural perspectives to evaluate contemporary issues, modes of thought, and or modes of expression; Recognize and articulate the diversity of human experience across a range of historical periods and/or cultural perspectives (8) Discern the ethical and civic consequences of decisions and civilly engage with others when taking a position on those decisions

Course Requirements:

Required Texts:

For most weeks there will not be a specific assigned reading. Rather, students will be assigned a set of questions about a case and tasked to locate sources to that will enable them to answer those questions. Often PDFs of or URLs for suggested readings will be posted to Canvas.

Attendance and Participation:

Attendance and participation is required. Credit will be given in for doing one of the following 1) Student attends Zoom session and contributes in a least one significant way 2) Student attends Zoom session or watches the recording, then submits a 100+ word reflection that can be composed of some combination of a) questions about the material or case studies b) responses to a point made by the professor or another student c) effort to draw connections between that day's material and previous days.

Classwork/Homework: Students will be assigned to briefly research an assigned example or case of a collapse, civilizational problem, or pathway forward (roughly every week). Students will usually submit a slide "deck" (i.e., presentation) of their findings as part of a group by 11am the day of class. On some weeks, the assignment will be an individual reflection. There are only five possible grades: 1) inadequate (0.5 pts) 2) major deficiencies (0.75 pts) 3) minor problems (0.9 pts) 4) solid (1 pts) 5) awesome (1.1 pts)

Presentations: On certain weeks, particular groups of students will be selected ahead of time to describe their findings to the rest of the class. This will be graded as credit/no credit, with comments provided to assist in students' development as competent communicators. In either case, students will be expected to respond to questions from classmates and the professor (orally or in writing). Student should expect to present at least four times during the semester. Don't stress out too much about these. They're about learning from each other's' research.

Synthesis Essays (2): Two essays assigned in the middle of the semester will ask students to synthesize what they learned throughout the previous weeks and attempt to use that learning to make sense of our current moment in history. I recommend making notes to yourself as you work on the homework assignments, which will make the synthesis essays relatively easy to complete. This may require some additional research (but hopefully not too much).

Final Project: Students will have two choices for their final project. Some options can only be undertaken individually, while others can be pursued by groups of up to four students. 1)

Review of a book (approved by the professor) investigating an historical collapse, contemporary challenge, or proposed solution to a civilizational threat (individual or pair, depending on length of the book) 2) Deeper/broader investigation of a particular civilizational challenge, which may include historical comparisons, contemporary proposals, etc. (groups of up to four people). This will culminate in a paper and a presentation, roughly 4 pages/4-5 minutes per person.

Course Schedule: *Subject to change*

Section I: “Progress”

Tue Jan 19 – [Live] Review of Course & Syllabus – “What is Progress?”

Thu Jan 21 – “Progress Traps” and Joseph Tainter’s Models of Collapse

Tue Jan 26 – Presentations

Thu Jan 28 – Jared Diamond’s Theory of Collapse and Critiques

Section II: Causes of Collapse

Tue Feb 2 – Presentations

Thu Feb 4 – Economic Inequality and Instability; Acemoglu & Robinson; Peter Turchin

Tue Feb 9 – Presentations

Thu Feb 11 – Pernicious Political Polarization and Decline

Tue Feb 16 – Presentations

Thu Feb 18 – Work on Synthesis Essay [**Professor will be available during class time for Q&A**]

Tue Feb 23 – Work on Synthesis Essay [**Professor will be available during class time for Q&A**]

Section II: Solutions [I Think I need something here about inequality/democracy]

Thu Feb 25 – Degrowth versus Ecomodernism. What notions of Progress? Is Decoupling Possible? [**Synthesis Essay Due**]

Tue Mar 2 – Presentations

Thu Mar 4 – Doing Better? Bhutan, Botswana, Cuba, Japan, Taiwan, Tikopia

Tue Mar 9 – Presentations

Thu Mar 11 – Finding Resilience and Regenerativity

Tue Mar 16 – [Film Day]

Thu Mar 18 – [Holiday]

Tue Mar 23 – Presentations

Thu Mar 25 – Polycentric Governance; Elinor Ostrom and Governance of CPRs

Tue Mar 30 – Presentations

Thu Apr 1 – Work on Synthesis Essay [**Professor will be available during class time for Q&A**]

Tue Apr 6 – Pick Groups/Projects [**Synthesis Essay II Due**]

Section III: Application

Thu Apr 8 – Final Project Work Day

Tue Apr 13 – Final Project Work Day. **[Professor will be available during class time for Q&A]**

Thu Apr 15 – Final Project Work Day. Progress report due. **[Professor will be available during class time for Q&A]**

Tue Apr 20 – Final Project Work Day. **[Professor will be available during class time for Q&A]**

Thu Apr 22 – **[Live]** Final Project Presentations

Tue Apr 27 – **[Live]** Final Project Presentations

Thu Apr 29 – **[Live]** Final Project Presentations

Final Paper Due Monday May 3rd by 9am (may be earlier for seniors)

Grading: Students will be provided with a rubric for all major assignments

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 15%

Presentations 10%

Homework 20%

Synthesis Essays (2) 30%

Final Project 25%

Academic Honesty: New Mexico Tech's Academic Honesty Policy for undergraduate and graduate students is found in the student handbook, which can be found at: <http://www.nmt.edu/student-handbook>. You are responsible for knowing, understanding, and following this policy.

For this course, the biggest risk lies in plagiarism, whether unintentional or not. Students are required to appropriately cite any idea that they use that came from class readings or research texts, even if the student modifies that idea. Not only is this more honest, but it demonstrates to the professor that you read and learned the material. Students may not repurpose text written for another class or have other students compose sections of their papers for them.

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 for Disability Services (ODS) as soon as possible. To schedule an appointment, please call 835-6209, or email disability@nmt.edu.

Counseling Services:

New Mexico Tech offers individual and couples counseling, safety assessments, crisis intervention and consultations through The Counseling Center. These confidential services are provided free of charge by licensed professionals. For more information, please call 835-6619, email counseling@nmt.edu or complete an Intake Form on our website at <https://www.nmt.edu/cds/>. All services are provided via phone or Zoom during the Covid-19 pandemic.

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.”

Title IX Reporting:

Sexual misconduct, sexual violence and other forms of sexual misconduct and gender-based discrimination are contrary to the University’s mission and core values, violate university policies, and may also violate state and federal law (Title IX). Faculty members are considered “Responsible Employees” and are required to report incidents of these prohibited behaviors. Any such reports should be directed to Tech’s Title IX Coordinator (Dr. Peter Phaijah, 20D Brown Hall, 575-835-5187, titleixcoordinator@nmt.edu). Please visit Tech’s Title IX Website (www.nmt.edu/titleix) for additional information and resources.