

School of the Environment
Munk School of Global Affairs and Public Policy
University of Toronto

JSE1708H – The Development of Sustainability Thought

Winter Session 2019

Instructor:

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This course will examine how attitudes towards human nature and non-human nature have changed over the period from Mesolithic times until the present in Western society. By reading and discussing historical arguments and contemporary documents we will attempt to uncover the underlying assumptions about the world that were characteristic of different periods in the history of Western culture. The underlying question is whether contemporary concerns about sustainability require fundamental changes in the way we conceive of ourselves and our environment.

Organization: Lecture Period: Tues, 10:00 -12:00 Rm. B019 (315 Bloor St West)
 Seminar Period: Thur, 10:00-12:00 Rm. B019 (315 Bloor St West)

The course will be divided into ten sessions, starting on Jan 8. There will be no classes on the weeks of Jan 21 and Mar 4 as I will be away. We will also have to reschedule the discussion session on Mar 21. The last class will take place in the week of April 1.

Following a general introduction during the first week, succeeding weeks will be divided into two parts: a two hour lecture on Tuesdays, and two 60 minute seminar periods on Thursdays. Each student will take part in one of the two seminar periods, which will begin with a presentation by one or more students, and be followed by general discussion. See attached schedule for expected dates and topics but please note that there may need to be some changes in this schedule.

The topics covered in the course are:

- Week 1. The Challenge and the Question
- Week 2. Origins: Hunter-gatherer Societies
- Week 3. Early influences: Judeo-Christian and Greek Roots
- Week 4. The Lost World: The Medieval Perspective
- Week 5. Modernity, Part I: The Genesis of Modern Science
- Week 6. Modernity, Part II: The Rise of Market Society
- Week 7. Second Thoughts, Part I: Critics in a Rapidly Changing World
- Week 8. Second Thoughts, Part II: the Environmental Critique
- Week 9. Procedural and Regenerative Sustainability
- Week 10. Where Do We Go from Here?

In each week, there will be a lecture and a set of required readings associated with that week's topic. The discussion of each topic will occur in the seminar periods two days after the lecture.

Description and Rationale:

This is a course about ideas and their effects. It is based upon the belief that if we are to solve sustainability problems we must understand their roots - that is, we must understand the attitudes, behaviours and ways of thinking, which have given rise to these problems. To do this we must re-examine the ideas about human and external nature that we have come to accept as conventional wisdom.

The question at the core of the course is what kinds of changes are required to achieve a sustainable future. Some analysts have concluded that such changes can be made through reforms without radically altering the fundamentals of modern frameworks of thought - the currently predominant assumptions about the external world and how it works, and about human nature and social relationships. Others disagree. They hold that there is something *basically* wrong with how we have been treating the environment and each other, and that we must challenge the current conventional wisdom about the world and our place in it. Within this group there are differences of opinion about what is basically wrong and what challenges should be mounted, but such analysts share the view that the problems are fundamental.

This is not a merely academic debate. Virtually all choices about sustainability goals, strategies and tactics turn, at least to some degree, on views about whether reforms or more radical changes to basic modes of thinking are needed.

JSE1708H is devoted to examining this problem. It focuses on the rise of the ideas that underlie modern understandings of the world and our place in it, what they replaced, and what effects they had. The set of beliefs upon which the course is based can be put in the form of six statements. Together they provide the rationale for the course.

- Powerful, but largely concealed and unexamined assumptions about human nature and 'external' nature guide the formation of world views, ideologies and beliefs.
- The basic assumptions involved here are not static; indeed they have changed significantly over time, usually through slow and subtle evolution but sometimes dramatically and radically.
- The development of modern science and technology, economics and industrialism, and education and institutions, has been guided by a more-or-less consistent set of assumptions about human and external nature which are qualitatively different from pre-modern ideas.
- A variety of philosophical, social, spiritual and political criticisms of the assumptions underlying modern industrial society emerged with the rise of modernist thought and continue to be expressed today.
- In recent years, building on those critiques, many thinkers have argued that current sustainability problems pose a significant challenge to the attitudes, beliefs, values and practices characteristic of modern industrial society.
- It is therefore useful to examine these assumptions and the critiques made of them, in order (i) to determine to what extent current sustainability problems are rooted in the basic assumptions of industrial society, and (ii) to develop appropriate analyses, critiques and

proposed solutions that do not simply treat the symptoms and thus perpetuate the diseases of modern society.

Readings:

All required readings are available online through the U of T Library Syllabus Service. For each week, there are also suggested additional readings. These are listed in online title page for each week, which will also contain the weekly discussion topics, in the form of several related questions. These questions will form the basis of the presentations and discussions in the seminar period.

Many books could be recommended as overall supplements to the book of readings. Seven that are useful are:

Morris Berman, *The Reenchantment of the World* (New York: Bantam Books, 1984);

John S. Dryzek, *The Politics of the Earth – Environmental Discourses* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

Carolyn Merchant, *Radical Ecology* (New York: Routledge, 1992);

Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation* (Boston: Beacon, 1957); and

Richard Tarnas, *The Passion of the Western Mind* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1991);

Derek Wall, *Green History: A Reader in Environmental Literature, Philosophy and Politics* (London: Routledge, 1994).

Christopher Watkin, *From Plato to Postmodernism* (London: Bristol Classical Press, 2011).

Assignments:

Students are required to submit a course journal for the first three weeks of term, present a short paper in the seminar discussions, and submit a term paper or project. All assignments are to be submitted electronically, unless special arrangements are made otherwise (e.g. for the final project). All students are also expected to participate actively in class discussions. If the size of the class warrants it, we will divide into two seminar groups on Jan 10, and choose presentation topics that day.

Course journal assignment: Maintain a course journal with weekly entries for the first three weeks of the course (weeks 1-3 in the course outline); unless you will be doing a short paper and presentation on week 2 or 3, in which case you will skip the journal for that week and do one for week 4 instead. The course journal entry for a given week should summarize and evaluate one of the required readings for that week, with explicit reference to one of the questions and issues raised in the discussion questions for that week that are included in the online readings. At the top of each journal entry, please put the weekly topic, your name, a full reference for the reading being discussed, and the question you have chosen to address. A separate title page is not necessary.

You should begin each entry with a short (half-page) summary of the main arguments in the assigned reading *as they bear on the discussion question you have chosen to discuss*, and follow this with a half-page evaluation of those arguments. You should provide your views on the significance, strengths and weaknesses of the ideas and arguments involved *with regard to the discussion question*. Please submit these journal entries electronically.

Be concise. The weekly entries should rarely be more than one typed page long. The art of this assignment has to do with writing clearly and concisely about complex issues. The journal entries should be emailed in before the discussion period addressing that topic (except for week 1). The first is due on Sat Jan 12. The others are due on the Wed of the week the topic is being discussed (so the second entry is due on Jan 16, and the third on Jan 23). They will be returned as soon as possible. Late submissions are subject to a penalty.

The top two marks assigned to your three journal entries will be counted. However, even if you are happy with the marks you get on the first two, you are required to submit a third entry.

If you are not satisfied with your mark on any of these three assignments, you are welcome to rewrite and re-submit them. For each re-submission, you should change either the question being addressed or the reading being discussed.

Short paper and presentation: Each student will give a short presentation on one of the topics from week 2 to week 9. In support of that presentation, the presenter will prepare a short (2-3 page) paper to circulate to her or his fellow students before the presentation. The paper, and the presentation, should address one or both of the discussion questions included in the list of readings for each week. Please use the paper to present your response to the question you have chosen, making whatever use of the required readings, or any other material that you feel is appropriate.

The difference between this short paper and the journal entries (aside from length) is that this paper presents your own arguments about the discussion topic, which you will also be giving in your presentation. Therefore, do not use the paper or presentation simply to summarize the readings. Students will choose their presentation/paper topic on Jan 10. The paper is to be emailed to the other members of the relevant seminar group *by 5:00p on the Tues before the seminar period in question*, and then presented in that seminar period.

The presentation should take no more than 10 minutes and should summarize the main arguments made in the short paper. This presentation, and the short paper on which it is based, will serve as the starting point for the subsequent discussion in the seminar period. All students are expected to have read each short paper from their discussion group, and come prepared to discuss it.

Note that if you are doing a short paper in weeks 2 or 3, you do not need to do a journal entry for that week, but should do one for week 4 instead.

If you are not satisfied with your mark on the short paper, you are also welcome to rewrite and re-submit it.

Term paper assignment: Prepare a short summary essay (maximum 10 double-spaced pages).

The paper should take your proposed thesis topic and, using it as the subject-area of the paper, respond to the second of the session 10 discussion problems: Can current sustainability problems be solved through more intelligent application of conventional modern ideas about humans, the natural world, and the relationship between them, or are fundamental changes to prevailing basic assumptions and attitudes required? (Hint: be very clear what you mean by “fundamental change”.)

The paper should **not** be a summary of the course materials. Nor is it a paper that simply describes the issues you will be discussing in your thesis. It is your attempt to answer the basic question underlying the course—how big a change is required in society to address sustainability concerns—with regard to the subject-area you have chosen for your own thesis. It is thus an attempt to apply the kinds of thinking we have explored in the course to your own research area. (If you have not yet chosen a specific topic-area for your thesis, please pick a topic that is related to your research interests.)

You are also at liberty to submit your project in the form of a piece of art, rather than a paper. This option will be discussed further in class.

Where appropriate, the paper should refer to the course materials. Feel free also to draw from other material. Please submit the paper electronically. It is due by midnight on Sunday, Apr 14.

Tutorial participation: Each student is expected to read all the required readings for each week, and the relevant short paper, before the seminar period, and to participate actively in all seminar discussions.

Evaluation:

Course Journals	30% (15% each; only top two marks count)
Short paper and presentation	30%
Term paper	40%