General description:

This course explores urban spaces that are viewed as problems or “in decline”. Cities, or at least parts of cities, have long been framed as a problem, particularly in large sprawling federalist societies like the United States and Canada. Exactly what those problems are, who they affect, and what should be done (or not done) about them vary over time and space. This is a seminar on the social construction of urban problems. We will explore the tension between on-the-ground challenges such as deprivation, crime, and depopulation, on the one hand, and the way that these problems are deployed by political and economic elites to motivate (or in some cases avoid) change, on the other.

Text/ Readings:

Most course readings are retrievable through the University of Toronto Library System; the remainder will be provided to students directly (details TBA).

Policies:

Zoom/ Online Access: Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, this course will be conducted online. I will email you the zoom address for the class at least one day beforehand.

Penalties for late term work: Written term work (assignment and final paper) will incur a penalty of 10 percent per day (with nothing accepted one week after the deadline).

Academic integrity: Plagiarism is an academic offense at the University of Toronto. Plagiarism includes quoting (or paraphrasing) the work of an author (including the work of fellow students) without proper attribution. Students also should not submit any academic work for which credit has previously been obtained or is being sought, without first discussing it with the instructor.

Disability services: The University of Toronto is committed to accessibility. If you require accommodations or have any accessibility concerns, please visit the following website as soon as possible: http://studentlife.utoronto.ca/accessibility

Evaluation:
Class Participation and Reading Presentation (10 percent): This is a seminar, so it is crucial for students to engage with the readings as seriously as possible. I ask that you do the readings beforehand and be ready to discuss them. I also ask that you select one of the “readings that can be presented this week” and prepare a short presentation to the class on it. For the latter, please focus on three elements: 1) the argument of the article; 2) its relationship to the course material for that week; and 3) pertinent details about the author and their perspective.

Urban problem assignment (30 percent): This assignment involves the analysis of an urban problem. It consists of a bullet-point memo that you will submit, and a 10 minute presentation to the class on November 3 or 10. Details of the assignment are posted on Quercus.

Final paper and presentation (60 percent): The final paper is an academic consideration of the problem you presented for your earlier assignment. It involves both a submitted paper and a presentation on November 17 or 24. Details have been posted on Quercus. The paper itself will be due one week after the end of classes, December 1.

Schedule:

Week 1 (September 8): Course introduction

Week 2 (September 15): Features and types of distressed space/ urban political economy

Required Reading:


Question to consider before class: Much of the Global North is composed of societies where public consultation and input is required for a problem to be considered worthy of intervention. But it is also true that some groups have more influence over this process than others. Can you think of examples from your research or professional experience where one group or even person had a disproportionate influence over a policy being made?

Week 3 (September 22): Racial capitalism

Required Readings:


Question to consider before class: What are the overlaps between racism and capitalism? Can you think of forms of capitalism that are not influenced by some form of racism? Can you think of forms of racism that are not influenced by capitalism?
Readings that can be presented this week:


**Week 4 (September 29): The political uses of urban problems**

**Required Readings:**


**Question to consider before class:**

Readings that can be presented this week:


**Week 5 (October 6): Removing the problem**

**Required Readings:**


**Question to consider before class:** Most urban planners now concede that the urban renewal period was a heavy-handed destruction of perfectly functional communities. Other corners of the field continue to point to the challenges of concentrated poverty. Is it ever appropriate to deal with concentrated poverty through demolition and dispersal? Are there ways to make it more humane and effective than it was under urban renewal?

**Readings that can be presented this week:**


**Week 6 (October 13): Avoidance, containment, policing**

**Required Readings:**


**Question to consider before class:** Though places like Jane-Finch are treated by white citizens in the GTA as “no go zones”, will it eventually gentrify and become occupied by the very people that now pathologize it? Can you think of examples of neighbourhoods (in any city) that have never gentrified or integrated?

**Readings that can be presented this week:**


**Week 7 (October 20): Mixing populations**

**Required Readings:**


**Question to consider before class:** Is it possible to advocate for social mix without adopting a paternalistic attitude toward the poor? Is it possible to oppose social mix without advocating for concentrated poverty? Is stable, integration possible? Is it desirable?

**Readings that can be presented this week:**


**Week 8 (October 27): Reconciliation, justice, empathy, relief**

**Required Readings:**


**Question to consider before class:** Are there more humane ways of tackling urban problems? What are some criteria for a more progressive approach to urban challenges? What are the
obstacles to implementing such an approach? Will some problems eventually expire on their
own?

Readings that can be presented this week:

Pottie-Sherman, Y. (2018). Austerity urbanism and the promise of immigrant- and refugee-

Week 9 (November 3): Urban Problem Presentations

Week 10 (November 10): Urban Problem Presentations

Week 11 (November 17): Term Paper Presentations

Week 12 (November 24): Term Paper Presentations