



Sociology UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

SOC6110H Political Sociology II The Politics of Risk and Disaster Course Outline - Summer 2025

Instructor: Steve G. Hoffman, Associate Professor of Sociology

Email: steve.hoffman@utoronto.ca

Office: Room 17186, 700 University Avenue

Office hours: By Appointment

Instructor Web Site: <https://steveghoffman.org>

Course day, time, and location: Tuesdays & Thursdays, 10:00 AM – Noon EST, Room 17020

Course Website: <https://q.utoronto.ca>

Course Description (w/ Goals and Outcomes)

A procession of risk and disaster – ecological collapse, extreme weather, industrial toxicity, the failures of complex socio-technical systems, mass pandemics, the threat of authoritarianism – seems to be settling in as a new normal. The impact of this procession can range from inconvenient (e.g. campus closures due to an ice storm) to catastrophic. This seminar focuses on the politics of risk and disaster. The topics, readings, and scholars will cover are very transdisciplinary. However, the center of gravity will be the contributions of sociology. We will grapple with broad questions around risk and disaster, such as what social theorists think they are and how this has shifted over time and place. We will also consider how different groups, institutions, and professions constitute risk, how they deal with disaster, and what they imagine of the future. The course will raise social and historical problems related to political economy, the unequal distribution of disaster vulnerability, environmental injustice and racism, the legacies and continued effects of settler colonialism and industrial capitalism, the politicization of science, and the scientization of politics.

A key feature of learning is the willingness to make mistakes. As the economist and systems theorist Kenneth Boulding said, “Nothing fails like success because we don't learn from it. We learn only from failure.” With this in mind, do not feel shy to speculate in this class, even when you are unsure if the speculation is “right” or “wrong.” None of us are perfect, so I encourage you to be bold enough to occasionally fail. The flip side of this is that our seminar needs to be a space where a speculative idea can be constructively criticized. You should feel free to disagree with one another or with me. However, your obligation during seminar and in written work is to offer reasonable, constructive, and rigorously argued reasons for your disagreements.

Course Requirements

In cases where there is a legitimate reason beyond your control, there will be no penalty for turning in assignments late. Please try not to abuse this, however. Turning assignments in past the deadline on the syllabus is not good for you or for me.

COMPONENT	DESCRIPTION	DUE DATE	RELATIVE WEIGHT
1. Class Participation	Engage with course content, discussions, discussion leadership, and active listening.	Ongoing	25%
2. Online discussion board	Post brief reflections on assigned readings before each class along with questions to discuss.	Ongoing – each Monday and Wednesday by 11:59 PM.	25%
3. Synthetic Essay #1	Write a synthetic essay that draws together assigned readings from first half of the course.	Friday, May 23, 2025	25%
4. Essay #2	Write either a synthetic or a topical essay that draws together assigned readings from the second half of the course.		25%

1. Class Participation

This is a graduate seminar, so your attendance each week is, of course, essential to our collective success. Please come promptly and prepared. Make sure you do the readings before class, participate in the discussion board, and be ready to grapple with the readings and topics raised in a constructive fashion.

2. Online discussion board

We will use the online discussion board as a place to post some initial reflections on each set of readings before class. These can be rough and do not need to be fully fleshed out. They should be about a paragraph or so. Write more if you find it helpful. The focus of your reflections can be key themes (or omissions) that struck you as important and/or interesting in the assigned readings. Also, your reflections should reflect themes that we might discuss as a group. In addition, please post a few questions oriented to discussion that we can try to address when we meet.

Please post your reflections and discussion questions no later than 11:59 PM on the Mondays and Wednesdays before our seminar meetings. This way we can read one another's reflections and questions either before or during class. To avoid last minute technical glitches, posting ahead of time is always a good idea. Please create a back-up copy of what you write in case Quercus is not uploading properly, which can happen from time to time.

The discussion board is a good place to raise issues that you find puzzling, challenging, concerning. It is also a good place to propose applications, extensions, and criticisms of different authors' analysis, arguments, and interventions. Your reflections and questions will help provide

the structure to our group conversations. We may not be able to cover every question you raise on the discussion board during our meetings, so if there is something that you want to be sure to discuss please be proactive in bringing it up.

TIP: Best to avoid discussion questions that can be answered with a simple “yes” or “no.” Questions that begin with the adverbs “how” or “why” (e.g. “How does misinformation shape democratic elections?” or “Why does misinformation matter for democratic elections?”) are usually more effective than questions that start with “have” or “do” (e.g. “Does misinformation shape democratic elections?”).

3. *Synthetic essay #1*

For the first paper assignment, you will write a 10-15 page synthetic essay that pulls together the course readings from the first half of the course. You should select at least eight (8) of the assigned readings up to our 5/22 meeting. You may include more than 8 if you prefer. Imagine that you are editing a collection of essays focused on the politics of risk and disaster. The selected readings are the chapters of this edited collection and you, as the editor, are in charge of writing the introductory chapter. Your introduction should go beyond summaries of each reading by pulling them together into a synthetic argument that sheds light on coherent set of problems or puzzles in this area of scholarship. Your chapter should offer an original argument that both draws the chapters together and makes its own contribution to this subfield of social scientific research.

4. *Essay #2 (option of synthetic or topical)*

For the second paper assignments, you have the option of writing another synthetic essay, this time pulling together readings from the second half of the course. Or, you could write on a topic or case of your choosing, as long as it clearly relates to the politics of risk and disaster. This can be directly related to your dissertation research or something else. Either way, the expectation is that you incorporate at least eight (8) of the course readings from the second half of the class schedule, so readings assigned for the 5/27 class and forward.

General formatting guidelines for papers:

- 12 point font, double spaced.
- At least 1” margins on all sides.
- Check spelling and read your work before turning it in.
- Use proper citation conventions.
- Avoid totalizing terms such as “always,” “never,” “totally,” and “completely,” or phrases like “since the beginning of time...”, which lead to weak theorizing because they oversimplify the human condition

Rubric:

Graduate	
Truncated Refined Letter Grade Scale	Numerical Scale of Marks
A+	90 - 100%
A	85 - 89%
A-	80 - 84%
B+	77 - 79%
B	73 - 76%
B-	70 - 72%
FZ**	0 - 69%

Session Topics & Readings

05/06

Introductions

- WATCH: “Made in Bangladesh”
<https://www.cbc.ca/player/play/video/1.1992857>
- WATCH: “Made in Bangladesh: 10 Years Later”
<https://www.cbc.ca/player/play/video/1.7103803>

05/08

Knowing disaster

- Perry, Ronald W. 2018. “Defining Disaster: An Evolving Concept.” Pgs. 3-22 in *Handbook of Disaster Research*. Edited by Havidán Rodríguez, William Donner, and Joseph E. Trainor. New York City, NY: Springer International Publishing.
- Knowles, Scott Gabriel. 2011. “Ch. 5: What is a Disaster?” from *The Disaster Experts: Mastering Risk in Modern America*. Philadelphia, PA: The University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Hagen, Ryan. 2021. “Acts of God, Man, and System: Knowledge, Technology, and the Construction of Disaster.” Pp. 32-50 in *Critical Disaster Studies*. Edited by Jacob A.C. Remes and Andy Horowitz. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Kelman, Ilan. 2023. “Disaster by choice: Our actions creating catastrophe.” *Avert Magazine*. January 9: <https://www.avert.ca/disaster-by-choice-our-actions-creating-catastrophe/>

In case you want more background readings:

- Tierney, Kathleen. 2014. *The Social Roots of Risk: Producing Disasters, Promoting Resilience*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Peek, Lori, Tricia Wachtendorf, and Michelle Annette Meyer. "Sociology of disasters." In *Handbook of environmental sociology*, pp. 219-241. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2021.

05/13

Theorizing disaster

- Fu, Albert S. 2016. “Connecting urban and environmental catastrophe: Linking natural disaster, the built environment, and capitalism.” *Environmental Sociology*. 2, 4: 365-374.
- Stallings, Robert. 2002. “Weberian political sociology and sociological disaster studies.” *Sociological Forum*. 17: 281-305.
- Vaughan, Diane. 2003. "Rational choice, situated action, and the social control of organizations." Pp. 443-456 in *The Sociology of Organizations*. Edited by Michael Handel.

05/15

Slow Disaster; The Coloniality of Disaster

- Beamish, Thomas D. 2000. "[Accumulating trouble: Complex organization, a culture of silence, and a secret spill.](#)" *Social Problems*: 473-498.

- Bonilla, Yarimar. 2020. "The Coloniality of Disaster: Race, Empire, and the Temporal Logics of Emergency in Puerto Rico, USA." *Political Geography*. 78, April: 1-11.
 - García López, Gustavo A. 2020. "Reflections on disaster colonialism: Response to Yarimar Bonilla's 'The wait of disaster'." *Political Geography*. 78, April: 1-4
 - Rhiney, Kevon. 2020. "Dispossession, disaster capitalism and the post-hurricane context in the Caribbean" *Political Geography*. 78, April: 1-3.
 - Anderson, Ben. 2020. "The Affects of the Disaster." *Political Geography*. 78, April: 1-2.
 - Bonilla, Yarimar. 2020. "The Swarm of Disaster." *Political Geography*. 78, April: 1-3.

05/20

Knowing Risk

- Lupton, Deborah. 2024. "Theorizing Risk" from *Risk*. Routledge.
- Beamish, Thomas D. 2024. "A World at Risk: Modernity, Vulnerability, and Public Tragedy." from *After Tragedy Strikes: Why Claims of Trauma and Loss Promote Public Outrage and Encourage Political Polarization*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Ulrich Beck. 2006. "Living in the World Risk Society." *Economy and Society*. 35, 3: 329-345.

05/22

Community, Democracy, and Environmental Risk

- Jerolmack, Colin, and Edward T. Walker. 2018. "Please in my backyard: Quiet mobilization in support of fracking in an Appalachian community." *American Journal of Sociology*. 124, 2: 479-516.
- Dokshin, Fedor A. 2016. "Whose backyard and what's at issue? Spatial and ideological dynamics of local opposition to fracking in New York State, 2010 to 2013." *American Sociological Review* 81, 5: 921-948.
- Berrey, Ellen and Steve G. Hoffman. Draft Manuscript. "Conspiracy-fueled Challenges to Expertise and the State: How Professional Planners Respond to Unruly Publics".

05/27

Crisis Politics

- Strolavitch, Dara. 2023. "Introduction" and Part I (chapters 1-3) in *When Bad Things Happen to Privileged People: Race, Gender, and What Makes a Crisis in America*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

05/29

Crisis Politics

- Strolavitch, Dara. 2023. Part II (chapters 4-5) & Conclusion in *When Bad Things Happen to Privileged People: Race, Gender, and What Makes a Crisis in America*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

ESSAY #1 DUE FRIDAY, MAY 30, 11:59 PM EST

06/03

Citizen Science and Social Change

- Arancibia, Florencia & Renata Motta. 2019. "Undone Science and Counter-Expertise: Fighting for Justice in an Argentine Community Contaminated by Pesticides." *Science as Culture*. 28, 3: 277-302.
- Kinchy, Abby. 2017. "Citizen science and democracy: Participatory water monitoring in the Marcellus shale fracking boom." *Science as Culture*. 26, 1: 88-110.
- Blacker, Sarah, Aya H. Kimura, and Abby Kinchy. 2021. "When citizen science is public relations." *Social Studies of Science* 51, 5: 780-796.

06/05

The Crisis of Expertise

- Eyal, Gil. 2023. "Sociology of Expertise as Public Sociology." Pp. 294-309 in *Research Handbook on Public Sociology*. Edited by Lavinia Bifulco and Vando Borghi. Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Michaels, David. 2020. Ch. 2 ("The Science of Deception") and Ch. 11 ("The Climate Denial Machine.") from *The Triumph of Doubt: Dark Money and the Science of Deception*. New York City, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Muirhead, Russell and Nancy L. Rosenblum. 2022. "The Path from Conspiracy to Ungoverning." *Social Research: An International Quarterly*. 89, 3: 501-524.

06/10

Predictive politics

- Jasanoff, Sheila. 2020. "Imagined Worlds: The Politics of Future-Making in the Twenty-First Century." Pp. 27-44 in *The Politics and Science of Prevision*. New York City, NY: Routledge.
- Paprocki, Kasia. 2022. "Anticipatory Ruination," *The Journal of Peasant Studies*. 49: 7, 1399-1408.
- Gunderson, Ryan and William Charles. 2023. "A sociology of "climatage": the appeal and counterproductivity of property destruction as a climate change strategy." *Environmental Sociology*. 9, 4: 398-408.

See also:

- Glavovic, Bruce C., Timothy F. Smith, and Iain White. 2022. "The tragedy of climate change science." *Climate and Development*. 14, 9: 829-833.
 - Cologna, Viktoria, and Naomi Oreskes. 2022. "Don't gloss over social science! A response to: Glavovic et al.(2021) 'The tragedy of climate change science'." *Climate and Development*. 14, 9: 839-841.

06/12

Other ways of knowing risk and disaster

- Ward, Jesmyn. 2012. *Salvage the Bones: A novel*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury.
- Scott Parish, Susan. 2021. "Mediating Disaster, or, A History of the Novel." Pp. 133-148 in *Critical Disaster Studies*. Edited by Jacob A.C. Remes and Andy Horowitz. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.

ESSAY #2 DUE MONDAY, JUNE 20, 11:59 PM EST

Academic Integrity

The University of Toronto is committed to the values of independent inquiry and to the free and open exchange of ideas. Academic integrity underpins these values and is a core part of the University's commitment to intellectual life.

Copying, plagiarizing, falsifying medical certificates, or other forms of academic misconduct will not be tolerated. Any student caught engaging in such activities will be referred to the Dean's office for adjudication. Any student abetting or otherwise assisting in such misconduct will also be subject to academic penalties. Students are expected to cite sources in all written work and presentations. See this link for tips for how to use sources well:

(<http://www.writing.utoronto.ca/advice/using-sources/how-not-to-plagiarize>).

According to Section B.I.1.(e) of the Code of Behaviour on Academic Matters it is an offence "*to submit, without the knowledge and approval of the instructor to whom it is submitted, any academic work for which credit has previously been obtained or is being sought in another course or program of study in the University or elsewhere.*"

By enrolling in this course, you agree to abide by the university's rules regarding academic conduct, as outlined in the Calendar. You are expected to be familiar with the *Code of Behaviour on Academic Matters* (<https://governingcouncil.utoronto.ca/secretariat/policies/code-behaviour-academic-matters-july-1-2019>) and *Code of Student Conduct* (<http://www.viceprovoststudents.utoronto.ca/publicationsandpolicies/codeofstudentconduct.htm>) which spell out your rights, your duties and provide all the details on grading regulations and academic offences at the University of Toronto.

Normally, students will be required to submit their course essays to a plagiarism software detection software for a review of textual similarity and detection of possible plagiarism. In doing so, students will allow their essays to be included as source documents in the Turnitin reference database, where they will be used solely for the purpose of detecting plagiarism. The terms that apply to the University's use of the Turnitin service are described on the www.turnitin.com web site.

Accessibility Services

It is the University of Toronto's goal to create a community that is inclusive of all persons and treats all members of the community in an equitable manner. In creating such a community, the University aims to foster a climate of understanding and mutual respect for the dignity and worth of all persons. Please see the University of Toronto Governing Council "Statement of Commitment Regarding Persons with Disabilities" at

<http://www.governingcouncil.utoronto.ca/Assets/Governing+Council+Digital+Assets/Policies/PDF/ppnov012004.pdf>.

In working toward this goal, the University will strive to provide support for, and facilitate the accommodation of individuals with disabilities so that all may share the same level of access to opportunities, participate in the full range of activities that the University offers, and achieve their full potential as members of the University community. We take seriously our obligation to make this course as welcoming and accessible as feasible for students with diverse needs. We

also understand that disabilities can change over time and will do our best to accommodate you. Students seeking support must have an intake interview with a disability advisor to discuss their individual needs. In many instances it is easier to arrange certain accommodations with more advance notice, so we strongly encourage you to act as quickly as possible. To schedule a registration appointment with a disability advisor, please visit Accessibility Services at <http://www.studentlife.utoronto.ca/as>, call at 416-978-8060, or email at: accessibility.services@utoronto.ca. The office is located at 455 Spadina Avenue, 4th Floor, Suite 400.

Additional student resources for distressed or emergency situations can be located at distressedstudent.utoronto.ca; Health & Wellness Centre, 416-978-8030, <http://www.studentlife.utoronto.ca/hwc>, or Student Crisis Response, 416-946-7111.

Equity and Diversity

The University of Toronto is committed to equity and respect for diversity. All members of the learning environment in this course should strive to create an atmosphere of mutual respect. As a course instructor, I will neither condone nor tolerate behaviour that undermines the dignity or self-esteem of any individual in this course and wish to be alerted to any attempt to create an intimidating or hostile environment. It is our collective responsibility to create a space that is inclusive and welcomes discussion. Discrimination, harassment and hate speech will not be tolerated.

Additional information and reports on Equity and Diversity at the University of Toronto is available at <http://equity.hrandequity.utoronto.ca>.

Copyright Statement

Lectures and course materials prepared by the instructor are considered by the University to be an instructor's intellectual property covered by the *Copyright Act*, RSC 1985, c C-42. Course materials such as PowerPoint slides and lecture recordings are made available to you for your own study purposes. These materials cannot be shared outside of the class or "published" in any way. Posting recordings or slides to other websites without the express permission of the instructor will constitute copyright infringement.

Course Extensions – Extenuating Circumstances

Students are expected to submit course work on time. Occasionally, students may not be able to make agreed upon deadlines due to extenuating circumstances. Students are required to make arrangements with their instructors about how to submit late course work. The graduate office highly recommends that course work extensions remain within the term dates in which the course was taught.

Note: submitting work beyond the term end date (not the last day of instruction but the actual end of term, e.g., the last day of a winter term class may be April 3, but the term ends April 30) requires a discussion with the instructor and the graduate office, as well as completion of an SGS request for an extension of course work form. These forms will be considered by the graduate office and are not automatically approved.

Procedures and Rules for Using Generative AI in Assignments

Large Language Models (LLM), Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI), and related machine learning systems have been proliferating. Some of these systems automatically generate essays, computer code, or images using minimal human prompting. This includes Microsoft Co-Pilot, various versions of ChatGPT, and many other writing and research assistants. There are now hundreds of these systems that are readily available.

Here is some general information and resources on generative AI provided by the School of Graduate Studies: [ChatGPT and Generative AI in the Classroom – Office of the Vice-Provost, Innovations in Undergraduate Education \(utoronto.ca\)](https://utoronto.ca/innovations-in-undergraduate-education)

In this class, students *may use* AI tools for conducting background research, asking questions about course themes, assimilating information for general understanding, refining language or grammar (i.e., ESL purposes), identifying secondary literature, or generating computer code that aids in data or thematic analysis.

In this class, students *may not* use artificial intelligence tools to automatically generate essay assignments, discussion reflections, or discussion questions.

The line between appropriate and inappropriate use can get fuzzy if you use an AI tool to generate an early draft and then re-work it into your own language. In general, I do not think this is a very effective way to keep your writing and thinking skills sharp. More on this below. If you find that you are using sentences or passages that were generated by an AI and representing it as your own ideas, the following conditions must be met:

1. Students must submit, as an appendix with their assignments, any content produced by an AI tool, and the prompts used to generate the content. This documentation should include what tool(s) were used, how they were used, and how the results from the AI were incorporated into the submitted work.
2. Any content produced by an AI tool must be quoted and cited appropriately, like any other reference or source material. Many organizations that publish standard citation formats are now providing information on citing generative AI (e.g., MLA: <https://style.mla.org/citing-generative-ai/>).

Students are ultimately accountable for the work they submit.

If you have any questions about the use of AI applications for course work, please bring it up with me I will be happy to discuss it.

A few more thoughts on using AI, so you know where I am coming from...

The results of LLMs and generative AI can be impressive and quite human-like. Systems like ChatGPT can automatically produce essays, computer code, lesson plans, poems, reports, letters, and the like. They are likely to keep getting better, at least for the next few years. Already, these tools offer access to automated essays and analysis of reasonable quality. However, think these systems process language, relate to queries, and “learn” in ways that are different from what humans do. This raises several important philosophical and practical questions about

intelligence, learning, writing, and, yes, academic integrity. I am happy to talk about these questions going forward.

Here is the main reason I think these systems learn differently than do humans. These are computational systems that get “pre-trained” on very large swaths of text, images, and other forms of data. Text generators then run probabilities on the word or word strings most frequently associated with the last one, a weighted system of word prediction. I find it helpful to keep it in mind that outputs are driven by probability, not semantics. As such, these systems have no particular tie to the meaning of words and utterances. They have no sense of regret or remorse if they respond with inaccurate information. While their accuracy or “alignment” can and will improve as humans inform them of mistakes through a “tuning process,” they do not have an internalized sense of humility. While this raises interesting possibilities, and even some advantages over human reasoning, it is also why generative AI can be “confidently” wrong. Humans, in contrast, are tied to meaning. Most of us develop a sense of regret or embarrassment if we are wrong or deceitful. We are also susceptible to deception, especially from agents that deliver information with confidence. Yet we know that generative AI systems “hallucinate” in odd, funny, and sometimes obvious ways. Some mistakes, however, can be hard to recognize without domain knowledge. We should treat the information AI systems share with a lot of skeptical caution.

My belief is that we need to learn how to work with these systems in ways that accord to generally agreed upon standards of academic integrity. The procedures laid out earlier are an attempt to capture these standards, as best as I can assess them given the current situation and state of technology. That said, I also think there are many creative uses in the offering. LLMs and generative AI will get used in creative ways and they will be abused in stupid ways. That said, I find their ability to theorize sociologically fairly weak, at least up to now. In addition, they are terrible at self-reflection and weak at explaining how or why they came up with the answers they have provided. So are their designers, whose ability to create technology with effects has developed faster than their ability to understand those technologies and their effects.

It is also important to keep in mind that despite numerous attempts to eliminate various forms of “bias” in AI outputs, social scientists have repeatedly shown that algorithmic systems can perpetuate the race, gender, sexualities, and class biases contained within training data. Furthermore, the widespread usage of AI systems in workplaces, schools, social service provision, and criminal justice has tended to amplify pre-existing discrimination and inequality. Using technology for ill is not inevitable, of course, but I encourage everyone to approach systems with their critical mind.

Finally, AI is being pushed by tech companies motivated by a strong profit motive. These companies are trying to infiltrate their products into as many user contexts as possible. Access, which can take many forms including pay-to-play or exposure to advertisement, is mostly getting organized around profit generation. These companies and their promotional agents are very savvy at justifying this push in lofty terms that appeal to your needs and your insecurities. Technological determinism and notions of “inevitability” loom large in their future imaginary. However, the bottom-line is that most tech firms want you to become dependent on their systems. User beware!

I will leave it up to your discretion, but I discourage you from becoming reliant on AI systems to outline or draft essays. Writing and thinking are closely related processes. Drafting an outline for an essay, if this is a typical step in your writing practice, is part and parcel to your craft. It is a creative first step toward organizing, conceptualizing, and theorizing. All of this involves acquired skills that require regular maintenance, as keeping a knife sharp needs a honing rod and whetstone. I worry that automating acquired skills with predictive systems will compromise our writing, critical thinking, and creativity down the road, leaving us more and more dependent on automated systems, their for-profit access models, and their mediocre outputs.