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PHL 505.01: Issues in the Anthropocene

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ISSUES IN THE ANTHROPOCENE
PHIL 505, Spring 2022

Professor: Christopher J. Preston
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Office hrs: Tues, 4 – 5.30 p.m.

Classroom: Eck 307
Class: T, R, 2 – 3.20 p.m.
Phone: 243-2937

<https://umontana.zoom.us/j/97386287475>
Wed, 10.30 – noon.
<https://umontana.zoom.us/j/99121438009>

1. Course Introduction:

In May of 2019, a working group from the International Commission on Stratigraphy voted to formally recommend a new geological epoch, the Anthropocene. They justified it on the grounds the planet is now both “functionally” and “stratigraphically” shaped by human impacts. It’s a whole new world out there.

This class looks at how an Anthropocene designation has consequences stretching far beyond geology. We will look in particular at how the Anthropocene challenges some of the key concepts that shape environmental thinking, focusing on what it means to say earth has entered a ‘post-natural’ or ‘post-wild’ epoch. With the help of Steve Vogel’s book *Thinking Like a Mall*, we will investigate a range of challenges to the concept of nature. To help us think about the post-natural and the post-wild in practical terms, we will also investigate a number of Anthropocene technologies and practices. These technologies and practices include geoengineering, synthetic biology/de-extinction, and re-wilding. At key points, we will pay close attention to the cultural limits of the Anthropocene designation.

2. Course Objectives:

- Students will learn why geologists think the planet has moved to a new epoch
- Students will understand the challenges the Anthropocene epoch presents to the concepts of “nature” and the “wild”
- Students will examine whether there exists a set of distinctive “Anthropocene technologies”
- Students will critically assess the cultural context of the ideas we discuss
- Students will gain experience at the graduate level by bringing material from outside the assigned readings into their term paper
- Students will practice talking through complicated ideas in environmental philosophy in a respectful and supportive environment

3. Co-convening with PHL 491:

This course co-convenes with PHL 491, an undergraduate-level version of the class. On occasion, I may divide the class into groups (undergraduates in one group, graduate students in a second group) and you may have the opportunity to discuss the class material with your peers. Graduate students are required to show more philosophical depth in their analysis of course topics and are expected to show how our work relates to other philosophical literature. Graduate students may be asked to lead discussions with the undergraduates.

4. Covid-19 Accommodations:

- Mask use is required within the classroom.
- If you feel sick and/or are exhibiting COVID symptoms, please don't come to class. Contact the Curry Health Center at (406) 243-4330.
- If you are required to isolate or quarantine, I will do what we can to give you the support necessary to ensure continued academic progress. There may be occasions when the class is recorded.
- Drinking liquids and eating food is discouraged within the classroom.
- UM recommends students get the COVID vaccine and booster. Please direct your questions or concerns about vaccines to the Curry Health Center.

5. Reading Material:

Steven Vogel, *Thinking Like a Mall: Environmental Philosophy After the End of Nature* (MIT Press, 2015)(V)

Materials on Moodle (M)

Please note that the course requires the use of Moodle. A significant portion of the reading will be posted there, in addition to reminders about assignments, discussion boards, and other important materials. If you have not already done so, please familiarize yourself with Moodle.

6 Proposed Reading Assignments (subject to change):

Week 1 (Jan 18-20). WELCOME TO THE ANTHROPOCENE. **M:** Waters, Subramanian, McKibben.

Week 2 (Jan 25-27). THE END OF 'EARLY GEN' ENVIRONMENTAL THINKING? **M:** Wilderness Act (sect. 1 & 2), Public Law 93-622, European Definition of Wilderness (stop at p. 6), Rolston

(Tuesday). Minter and Pyne, Brannen, AWG, Brannen reconsidering (Thursday).

Week 3 (Feb 1-3). RETHINKING NATURE. **V:** Ch 1 **M:** Gilio-Whitaker.

Week 4 (Feb 8-10). DECONSTRUCTING NATURE. **V:** Ch 2 & Ch 3.

Week 5 (Feb 15-17). ANTHROPOCENE HOPE. **M:** Marris et al., Eco-Modernist Manifesto (Tuesday), Marvier et al., Nye (Thursday).

Week 6 (Feb 22-24). ANTHROPOCENE DESPAIR. **M:** Kingsnorth, Dark Mountain Project Manifesto (Tuesday), Monbiot, Crist (Thursday).

Week 7 (Mar 1-3). CHANGING FRAMES. **M:** Kimmerer (People of Corn, Planting Sweetgrass, Windigo Footprints) (Tuesday), Haraway (Thursday).

Week 8 (Mar 8-10). EXPANDING AGENCY (VOGEL-STYLE). **V:** Ch 4 & Ch 5.

Week 9 (Mar 15-17). VOGEL'S RED LINE ON AGENCY. **M:** Abram **V:** Ch 6.

Take-home mid-term due as an attachment to an email (in MS Word) by 6.00 p.m. on Thursday March 17th.

-----**SPRING BREAK**-----

Week 10 (Mar 29-31). CHANGING FRAMES (PART II). **M:** Tsing (Tuesday), Boehi (Thursday).

Week 11 (Apr 5-7). ARTEFACTUAL EARTH. **M:** Introductory video on climate engineering. Keith, Horton and Keith (Tuesday), Stephens and Surprise (Thursday).

Week 12 (Apr 12-14). SYNTHETIC BIOTECHNOLOGIES. **M:** Calvert, Boldt (Tuesday), Dagnarian and Phelan, Rohwer (Thursday).

Week 13 (Apr 19-21). REWILDING. **M:** Saulitis, Gammon (Tuesday), Martin et al. (Thursday)

Deadline for final paper outline and online office meeting is Monday, April 25th.

Week 14 (Apr 26-28). DE-EXTINCTION. **M:** Revive and Restore, Kohl, Hysolli (Tues), Rohwer and Marris (Thurs).

Week 15 (May 3-5). A CHARMING ANTHROPOCENE: **V:** Ch 7, **M:** Buck.

Term paper due by email (MS Word) before 5 p.m. on Monday, May 9th.

7. Course Requirements:

Please note that for each assignment you will be given points (not a grade). Your goal this semester will be to score as many points as possible. **Instead of worrying about your grade, concentrate on accumulating as many points as you can during the semester.**

(For written assignments, it is required that you use 12 point font, one inch margins all round, and double-spacing. Do not compress or expand anything.)

a) Attendance and participation (15 points). Attendance and participation are generally required in this class (with exceptions due to the Covid situation noted above). As a graduate seminar, we will be discussing what we have read together rather than listening to a lecture. Please come to class prepared to discuss the topics. If you need to miss class for a legitimate reason, please e-mail me as soon as you can so I know what is going on.

b) Reading Questions (15 points). Each week, students are required to post one discussion question on Moodle. We will draw up a list of whether that responsibility falls for you on a Tuesday or a Thursday. This means finding a point of discussion in a reading that you think particularly controversial, interesting, helpful, etc. Your chosen question must be placed on Moodle under the “Advanced Forum” tab by midnight the day before class. Keep them concise and pithy. I will look at the discussion board on the day of class and pick a few topics to steer our conversation. Graduate students are required to post a reply to somebody else’s discussion question at least 5 times during the semester (and more if possible). Undergraduates are encouraged to do the same (though not required).

c) Class Overviews (5 points). At the start of most classes, a graduate student will be asked at random to give a brief (2 minute) overview of the topics and discussion from the previous class. **Take 5 minutes to go over the notes from the previous class before our meeting. Jot down the 5 or 6 major topics we discussed.** You do not need to give a play-by-play account of everything that happened the last time we met. Simply give us all some brief reminders about the key topics that were covered. (I will collect your *hand-written* reminder of the topics right after you offer them).

d) Mid-term (30 points). I shall be giving a take-home mid-term before spring break. I will hand out three questions on which you will write three essay answers. Please turn these in before the end of class on March 17th. The mid-term will test your comprehension of the texts and discussions to date. Your answers should be 10-12 pages long.

e) Final Paper Outline (5 points). You must bring to an office hour a 1 page outline of your final paper **at least** 2 weeks before the due date of the paper (i.e. by Monday April 25th). We will discuss your ideas and I will offer feedback and suggestions on your topic.

f) Final Paper (30 points). On or before Monday, May 9th at 6 p.m., you are required to turn in a 12-15 page term paper on a topic of your choice related to our reading.

8. General Expectations:

Please come to class with the readings for that day already carefully read. Usually we will proceed through the readings in the order listed on the syllabus. Be prepared to be called upon to explain what you think about something in the reading. Be prepared to engage fellow class members politely in discussion. The goal is to work through the ideas *together*.

Attendance is expected. Please let me know as early as possible if you need to miss class for any reason. Please arrive in time to start class at 2 p.m. and do not leave early.

You may not use the internet during class.

Late work will result in a points reduction determined by the circumstances.

Any email I send to the class will be sent to your university email address through Moodle. It is your responsibility to check your university email on a regular basis.

I expect complete academic integrity at every point of the course. Any academic dishonesty will lead to an automatic F for your semester grade (and that of any collaborators) and a meeting with the appropriate academic authorities. There will be no exceptions to this zero tolerance policy on academic dishonesty.

9. Additional remarks:

The University of Montana assures equal access to instruction through collaboration between students with disabilities, instructors, and Disability Services for Students (DSS). If you think you may have a disability adversely affecting your academic performance, and you have not already registered with DSS, please contact DSS in Lommasson 154. Please let me know as soon as possible about any assistance I might be able to offer. I will work with you and DSS to provide an appropriate accommodation.

Finally, please do everything you can to contribute positively to our community of learning this semester. Please treat all other members of the class (including myself and any guest speakers) with a quiet and considered respect at all times. Please support your peers as they struggle with difficult questions and topics. Be prepared to work hard and to help everyone see the material in new and rewarding ways. Seminars require a concerted group effort in order to really take off. You all have a role to play! I hope you will take the role as seriously as I will.