

Governing Disaster

ENVST-UA 450

New York University
Department of Environmental Studies
Fall 2023

Instructor

Professor Dean Chahim (dean.chahim@nyu.edu)

Student Hours (i.e. come talk with me): Tuesdays 1pm-3pm, or by appointment.

→ **Please sign up for a time in advance here:** <https://tinyurl.com/chahim-meetme>

Student Hours Location: Department of Environmental Studies, 285 Mercer Street, Office 906 or via Zoom (by prior arrangement)

Course Information

Meeting Times: Monday and Wednesday, 9:30-10:45am

Meeting Location: 70 Washington Sq S (Bobst) Room LL146

Credits: 4 Units

Prerequisites: None.

Course Description

How do governments and markets maintain their power and legitimacy in a world of accelerating disasters, from floods and droughts to heat waves and pandemics? To answer this question, the course examines the mutual constitution of modern government, markets, and disasters: how governments and markets produce ostensibly “natural” disasters and how such disasters, in turn, legitimate the powers of government and deepen market rule. It traces the governmental, technological, and scientific techniques through which environmental hazards are not only reconfigured to protect certain populations over others, but also how certain hazards become knowable and visible as a “disaster,” while others are made unknowable, invisible, or routine in the interests of maintaining ruling class power.

This course meets the Governance requirement in the Environmental Studies major, or an elective requirement in the Environmental Studies major or minor.

Course Goals and Objectives

By the end of this course, you should be able to:

- Identify the social, political, and economic dimensions of disasters, in addition to their biophysical dimensions.
- Understand the co-constitutive relationship between states, markets, and disasters.

- Analyze the distribution of costs and benefits in disaster prevention and management strategies.
- Explain the relationships between power, ignorance, technology, and knowledge surrounding disasters.

Accessibility

I want to make this class work for everyone. Having dealt with disabilities in my own life, I take these accommodations seriously. If you have a disability or chronic medical condition, please meet with me as soon as possible during office hours to discuss your particular learning needs and also contact the Moses Center to arrange an appointment to discuss your needs. Since accommodations require early planning, please contact the Moses Center and I as soon as possible. Their contact information is below:

Henry and Lucy Moses Center for Students with Disabilities

Telephone: 212-998-4980

Website: <http://www.nyu.edu/csd>

Email: mosescsd@nyu.edu

Academic Resources

- **On Reading:** See Edwards, Paul N. "How to Read a Book, v.5.0," n.d. pne.people.si.umich.edu/PDF/howtoread.pdf.
- **On Research:** Luker, Kristin. 2010. *Salsa Dancing into the Social Sciences: Research in an Age of Info-Glut*. First Harvard University Press paperback edition. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- **On Writing:** Graff, Gerald, and Cathy Birkenstein. 2021. *"They Say / I Say": The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing*. Fifth edition. New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc.
- **Access your course materials:** [Brightspace](https://brightspace.nyu.edu/d2l/home/311008) (https://brightspace.nyu.edu/d2l/home/311008)
- **Databases, journal articles, and more:** [Bobst Library](http://library.nyu.edu) (library.nyu.edu)
- **Assistance with strengthening your writing:** [NYU Writing Center](http://nyu.mywconline.com) (nyu.mywconline.com)
- **Obtain 24/7 technology assistance:** [IT Help Desk](http://nyu.edu/it/servicedesk) (nyu.edu/it/servicedesk)
- **Tutoring and academic skills workshops are offered by the University Learning Center:** www.nyu.edu/cas/clc
- **Support for personal and health-related issues at the Wellness Exchange:** (212) 443-9999 (24/7 confidential calls): www.nyu.edu/999

Grading

Participation (10%)

This class is based primarily on close readings of texts. We will run the class as a seminar. I will open and conclude each session with some framing remarks for our discussion, but the rest of the time will generally be devoted to in-depth discussion of the readings, either as a whole class or in small groups/pairs. There are no long lectures that can be recorded, no extensive slide decks, and no textbook.

There is, in other words, no substitute for being in class. It is essential for your learning - and that of your peers - that you come to class prepared and participate actively in the ways that are comfortable to you. You will not be tested or evaluated on whether or not you understood the texts or have the "right" opinions, but rather whether or not you have read and come up with your own thoughts about them.

Everyone starts with the full 10% for participation, but *regularly* missing class, coming unprepared, or remaining unengaged with class discussion and activities will result in a lower grade. I emphasize "regularly" because I understand that things happen - missing class or being a little underprepared a few times over the semester (because of illness, family emergencies, outside work obligations, etc.) is understandable and will not be counted against you. If I notice a pattern of absences, lack of preparation, or disengagement, I will let you know and give you a chance to improve before reducing your grade.

Please just write to me if you are sick (you do not need to specify any details), and do not come to class. Being sick will not count against you - and it is better to keep everyone safe.

I understand that not all students feel comfortable volunteering to speak in front of large groups. For this reason, we will do many alternative forms of participation, including small-group activities and discussions. If you are still having trouble participating, we can talk about alternatives - please come see me.

Reading Responses (55%)

Reading responses will be short, one paragraph credit/no-credit writing exercises that demonstrate your comprehension and reflection on the readings and help seed our discussions. The point of this exercise is to: (a) help you understand and critique what you have read, (b) enable you to connect what you have read to other texts and to your own experience and knowledge, (c) seed our class discussions, and (d) provide you with a reference to come back to as you write your essays.

Reading responses are due at 8PM on Sundays and Tuesdays, in order to give me time to read them before class. You are of course welcome to submit both responses on Sunday if you prefer.

Of course, I do understand that things happen. For this reason, you may skip two reading responses over the course of the semester without any deduction to your grade.

Reading Response Rubric

The responses will be given credit if they comply with the following criteria:

1. **Identify a key idea in text.** What is one of the central themes or arguments of the text, i.e., what is one of the points the author is trying to make? Refer to specific parts of the text where you see them articulate this argument. This does not, and should not, be a summary of everything the reading does, but rather one salient part you think is especially important.

AND:

2. **Connect to other texts and/or your own life experience and knowledge:** How does this reading connect with others you have read in the class, or for other classes? This doesn't have to be a rigorous analysis - think more a brainstorming of relationships. Alternatively, you can also write about how the readings connect to your own experiences or prior knowledge. I encourage you to do both.

OR:

3. **Questions and/or critiques:** What question(s) does the reading raise for you? What doesn't make sense? Or, what critique might you make of the author's arguments or evidence, in light of other readings, knowledge, or experiences you have familiarity with? What seems to be left unaddressed, or appears to be simply wrong? We'll use all of these in class to discuss.

Final Paper (or Project) (35%)

To build on and synthesize what you have learned, you will write a 12 to 15-page (double spaced) research paper (or do a creative project*) that addresses some theme from the class related to the governance of disaster. The goal of this paper is to integrate theory and empirical cases. You do not have to do original, primary research (but are of course welcome and encouraged to do so). However, the paper must draw connections between and seriously engage at least five of the readings from our syllabus and at least five outside academic sources (peer-reviewed journal articles or books, primarily) that you find on your own. Some adjustments to these minimums may be allowed if you are doing your own original research - talk to me about this.

A more detailed prompt will be distributed in class along with a grading rubric, but for now know that the 35% weight of the grade for this paper will be distributed between an initial topic idea (5%, credit/no credit), paper proposal (10%, graded), and the paper itself (20%, graded).

Governing Disaster - Syllabus

*If you would like to propose a website, video, map, or other format, please get in touch with me. In such cases, a much shorter write-up may be acceptable.

Class Grade

The final class grade will be assigned as follows:

A 95-100%	A- 90-94%	
B+ 87-89%	B 83-86%	B- 80-82%
C+ 77-79%	C 73-76%	C- 70-72%
D+ 67-69%	D 63-66%	
F 0-62%		

Late Work

Late reading responses will receive half credit. Late assignments for the final paper will be accepted only on a case-by-case basis for serious emergencies, given that it is essential to do these on time to get feedback.

Required Texts

The following required texts are required. Texts with asterisks are available to read online freely through NYU's library, although I still recommend getting a print copy if you can. For Davis' book, I encourage you to plan early to find used editions online for a much lower price (try Better World Books or Alibris). It is also available as an e-book for a reduced price from Verso, the publisher.

Texts not listed here will be available in PDF on NYU Brightspace.

1. *Adams, Vincanne. 2013. *Markets of Sorrow, Labors of Faith: New Orleans in the Wake of Katrina*. Durham: Duke University Press.
2. *Bond, David. 2022. *Negative Ecologies: Fossil Fuels and the Discovery of the Environment*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
3. Davis, Mike. 1998. *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster*. New York: Metropolitan Books.
4. *Ley, Lukas. 2021. *Building on Borrowed Time: Rising Seas and Failing Infrastructure in Semarang*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

In the course schedule below, these texts' citations have been abridged.

How to read

To make the best use of your reading time, I highly recommend reading Paul Edwards' guide - see reference above, under Resources.

Course Schedule

Note: these readings are subject to slight changes as we go (i.e., I may reduce or re-order them based on our progress). I will announce any such changes in class, but also please check NYU Brightspace for the most up-to-date list before beginning your reading.

In addition to the main texts, we may consider some brief news articles related to the week's themes. You are encouraged to post such articles to the discussion board or reference them in your reading responses, as well.

Unit I: Unnatural Disasters

Week 1

Wed, Sept. 6 **A Disastrous Present?**
In-class discussion, no readings.

Week 2

Mon, Sept. 11 **Producing Inexorability**
Davis, Mike. 1998. *Ecology of Fear*, 3-92.

Wed, Sept. 13 **"Separate and Unequal"**
Davis, Mike. 1998. *Ecology of Fear*, 93-194.

Week 3

Mon, Sept. 18 **Modern Risk**
Beck, Ulrich. 1992. *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*. London; Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage Publications, 19-50.

Wed, Sept. 20 **Nature and the Question of Agency**
Mitchell, Timothy. "Can the Mosquito Speak?" In *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity*, 19-53. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002.

Unit II: Techniques of Government

Week 4

Mon, Sept. 25 **Power**
Rose, Nikolas, and Peter Miller. 1992. "Political Power beyond the State: Problematics of Government." *The British Journal of Sociology* 43 (2): 173-205.

Wed, Sept. 27

Managing Emergency

Collier, Stephen, and Andrew Lakoff. 2021. *The Government of Emergency*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, xi-xix, 1-35, 329-340.

Week 5

Mon, Oct. 2

Politics of Ignorance

Petryna, Adriana. 2013. *Life Exposed: Biological Citizens after Chernobyl*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1-33.

Wed, Oct. 4

Calculability

Collier, Stephen J. 2014. "Neoliberalism and Natural Disaster: Insurance as Political Technology of Catastrophe." *Journal of Cultural Economy* 7 (3): 273-90.

Week 6

Mon, Oct. 9

No Class - Indigenous People's Day

Wed, Oct. 11

Market Rule, Pt. 1

Adams, Vincanne. 2013. *Markets of Sorrow, Labors of Faith: New Orleans in the Wake of Katrina*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1-98, 176-190.

Fri, Oct. 13

Paper Topic Due

Week 7

Mon, Oct 16

Bonus Week: **Necropolitics and the Disaster of an Occupation**

Erakat, Noura. "The Violence of Demanding Perfect Victims." *Jadaliyya* - جدلية. Accessed October 11, 2023.

<https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/45383>.

Klion, David. "Have We Learned Nothing?" *N+1* (blog), October 11, 2023. <https://www.nplusonemag.com/online-only/online-only/have-we-learned-nothing/>.

Mbembe, Achille. "Necropolitics." *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (January 1, 2003): 11-30. **NOTE: this is not the whole text**

Rebel Architecture - The Architecture of Violence. Al Jazeera English, 2014. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ybwJaCeeA9o>.

Wed, Oct. 18

Market Rule, Pt. 2

Pulido, Laura. 2016. "Flint, Environmental Racism, and Racial Capitalism." *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 27 (3): 1-16.

Johnson, Lacy M., and Cheryl Beckett, eds. 2022. *More City than Water: A Houston Flood Atlas*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Unit III: Ordinary Disaster

Week 8

Mon, Oct. 23

Chronicity and Slow Violence

Cazdyn, Eric. 2012. *The Already Dead: The New Time of Politics, Culture, and Illness*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1-12.

Nixon, Rob. 2011. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1-22.

Wed, Oct. 25

Paper/Project Workshop

No readings but bring your paper topic to workshop in groups.

Week 9

Mon, Oct. 30

Thresholds

Bond, David. 2022. *Negative Ecologies: Fossil Fuels and the Discovery of the Environment*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1-68.

Wed, Nov. 1

Universalizing Disaster

Bond, David. 2022. *Negative Ecologies: Fossil Fuels and the Discovery of the Environment*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 69-113.

Fri, Nov. 3

Paper Proposal Due

Week 10

Mon, Nov. 6

Endurance

Ley, Lukas. 2021. *Building on Borrowed Time: Rising Seas and Failing Infrastructure in Semarang*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1-18, 85-120.

Wed, Nov. 8

Improvement

Ley, Lukas. 2021. *Building on Borrowed Time: Rising Seas and Failing Infrastructure in Semarang*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 151-196.

Week 11

Mon, Nov. 13

Remediation

Cram, Shannon. 2023. *Unmaking the Bomb: Environmental Cleanup and the Politics of Impossibility*. Berkeley: University of California Press, selection TBA.

Wed, Nov. 15

Permanence

Guest Lecture/Discussion with Shannon Cram (University of Washington)

Cram, Shannon. 2023. *Unmaking the Bomb: Environmental Cleanup and the Politics of Impossibility*. Berkeley: University of California Press, selection TBA.

Week 12

Wed, Nov. 20

Governing the Ordinary

Chahim, Dean. 2022. "Governing Beyond Capacity: Engineering, Banality, and the Calibration of Disaster in Mexico City." *American Ethnologist* 49 (1): 20-34.

Wed, Nov. 22

No Class - Thanksgiving Recess

Unit IV: Governing Otherwise

Week 13

Mon, Nov. 27

Resistance

Ahmann, Chloe. 2018. "'It's Exhausting to Create an Event out of Nothing': Slow Violence and the Manipulation of Time." *Cultural Anthropology* 33 (1): 142-71.

Governing Disaster - Syllabus

Wed, Nov. 29

Mutual Aid

Firth, Rhiannon. 2022. *Disaster Anarchy: Mutual Aid and Radical Action*. London: Pluto Press, selection TBA.

Week 14

Mon, Dec. 4

Alternative Visions

Readings TBA

Wed, Nov. 6

Wrap-up

No readings; read your own responses and write a reflection on your own intellectual journey and what core themes have emerged in the class.

Governing Disaster - Syllabus

Week 15

Mon, Dec. 11

Presentations

No readings; prepare a 5-minute presentation on your final paper.

Wed, Dec. 13

Presentations

No readings; prepare a 5-minute presentation on your final paper.

Fri, Dec. 15

Final Paper Due