

Syllabus

Social SSM1120 –Social Dimensions of Sustainability

Instructor: Professor Johnston

Email: josee.johnston@utoronto.ca

Office Hours: M-Thu on Slack 4pm-5pm or by appointment on ZOOM

Course Technology

- The course content will be hosted on Quercus
- The lectures will take place on ZOOM
- Communication will take place over SLACK

Course Description

This course is focused on studying and understanding human-nature interactions, and the social processes that shape and threaten the natural world. The course will focus on the following question: how is sustainability a profoundly social challenge? Students will be challenged to gain a better understanding of the interrelationship between social problems and environmental problems, as well as the ways that humans themselves are part of nature. Students will be asked to consider how social scientific insights can inform and improve sustainability efforts. The course will cover topics such as the social construction of nature, the political economy of environmental destruction, environmental inequalities and injustices (including Global North-Global South relations), corporate projects to address social sustainability (as well as critiques of greenwashing), public engagements with environmental science, consumer politics and green identities, the politics of climate change and environmental knowledge production, as well as environmental activism and varied initiatives to address sustainability, such as green jobs programs.

Learning Outcomes

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

1. Demonstrate a general knowledge and understanding of the social dimensions of sustainability.
2. Identify and critically evaluate social causes and consequences of environmental problems; with particular emphasis on recognizing the appropriate solution(s) that can be applied in various settings
3. Assess the efficacy with which various actors (e.g., states, citizens, social movements, corporations) seek to address environmental problems, and evaluate the strengths of various approaches (e.g., market approaches, state efforts, civil society) to promote sustainability.

Class Structure

Most classes will be structured around lecture content interspersed with classroom discussion and in-class exercises. You are expected to regularly attend class and engage in class discussion. In class discussions, you should listen to the instructor as well as your classmates. Each week, the class will include student-led introduction to the readings, followed by a group discussion of the topic.

The emphasis of this class on learning through careful reading, reflection, writing and classroom dialogue.

Required Texts

There are two required texts for this course, in addition to research articles (which you are responsible for locating through the U of T library system).

1. *An Invitation to Environmental Sociology*, by Michael Bell, Loka Ahswood, Isaac Sohn Leslie and Laura Hanson Schlachter. Sixth Edition. 2020. Sage. This book is available through the [UTM bookstore \(Links to an external site.\)](#), and it is also available electronically through [Vitalsource \(Links to an external site.\)](#) (and other e-reader services).

Link to textbook at [UTM bookstore \(Links to an external site.\)](#):

[https://www.campusebookstore.com/integration/AccessCodes/default.aspx?bookseller_id=96&Course=UTM+2021A+SOC304H5S+EBOOK+180DAYS&frame=YES&t=permalink \(Links to an external site.\)](https://www.campusebookstore.com/integration/AccessCodes/default.aspx?bookseller_id=96&Course=UTM+2021A+SOC304H5S+EBOOK+180DAYS&frame=YES&t=permalink (Links to an external site.))

2. MacKendrick, Norah. 2018. *Better Safe than Sorry: How Consumers Navigate Exposure to Everyday Toxics*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press. Available at [U of T bookstore \(Links to an external site.\)](#) & [available through the library as an e-book \(Links to an external site.\)](#)

Evaluation

Component	%	Due date
Integrated case competition	10	tbd
Topic Introduction	10	One per semester
Participation	15	Weekly
Quercus comprehension quiz	10	Feb 26
Reflection paper Phase 1 (RP1)	5	Feb 5
Reflection paper Phase 2 (RP2)	5	March 5
Reflection paper Phase 3 (RP3)	25	April 9
“Convince me” Pitch	20	April 12

*Evaluation elements are described below.

Course Schedule

Week 1. Introduction to Class

Date: January 15

Reading:

- Syllabus

To do:

- Class meets for introductions, to discuss syllabus, and decide on schedule for upcoming [topic introductions](#).

ENVIRONMENTAL PROBLEMS

Week 2. Environmental problems and the social construction of nature

Date: January 22

Readings:

- Bell et al.,: Chapters 1 and 9
- Pellow, D. N., & Nyseth Brehm, H. (2013). An environmental sociology for the twenty-first century. *Annual Review of Sociology*[Links to an external site.](#), 39, 229-250.

Brief introduction to Jonathan Vroom, Robert Gillespie Academic Skills Center

Week 3. The material dimension of environmental problems: Consumption, markets, capitalism

Date: January 29

Readings:

- Bell et al., Chapters 3 and 4
- York, Richard. 2017. "Why Petroleum Did Not Save the Whales." *Socius: Sociological Research for a Dynamic World*[Links to an external site.](#). 3: 237802311773921. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2378023117739217>.

Week 4. The cultural dimension of environmental problems: Why ideology matters

Date: Feb 5

Readings:

- Bell et al., Chapters 7 and 8
- M. Bacon. 2020. Dangerous pipelines, dangerous people: colonial ecological violence and media framing of threat in the Dakota access pipeline conflict, *Environmental Sociology*[Links to an external site.](#) 6:2, 143-153, DOI: 10.1080/23251042.2019.1706262 <https://www-tandfonline-com.myaccess.library.utoronto.ca/loi/rens20>[Links to an external site.](#)
- Recommended:

- Podcast (35 minutes): Media Indigena, with Rick Harp, interviewing David Suzuki: <https://podcasts.apple.com/ca/podcast/media-indigena-indigenous-current-affairs/id1092220986?i=1000503441650> (Links to an external site.)

Submit:

- **RP1** (by 11:59pm)

Week 5. Environmental Injustices: Health and the “invironment”

Date: Feb 12

Readings:

- Bell et al., Chapter 2
- Debra J. Davidson. 2018. Evaluating the effects of living with contamination from the lens of trauma: a case study of fracking development in Alberta, Canada, [Environmental Sociology](#), [Links to an external site.](#) 4:2, 196-209, DOI: 10.1080/23251042.2017.1349638 <https://doi.org/10.1080/23251042.2017.1349638> ([Links to an external site.](#))
- Auyero, J., & Swistun, D. (2007). Amidst garbage and poison: an essay on polluted [Links to an external site.](#)

[peoples and places. Contexts](#), 6(2), 46-51.[Links to an external site.](#)

Week 6. Quercus Comprehension Quiz / Writing Workshop with Jonathan Vroom

Date: February 26

10:10 – 11:10 Quercus quiz

11:15 – 12:15 Jonathan Vroom writing workshop

RISK SOCIETY

Week 7. Risk and Technology

Date: March 5

Readings:

- Bell et al., Chapter 5
- MacKendrick: Chapter 1
- Kristiansen, Silje. 2017. "Characteristics of the Mass Media's Coverage of Nuclear Energy and Its Risk: A Literature Review." *Sociology Compass*[Links to an external site.](#) 11 (7): 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12490>.

Submit:

- **RP2** (due 11:59pm)

Week 8. Protecting bodies in risk society

Date: March 12

Readings:

- MacKendrick: Chapters 3 & 5
- Wakefield-Rann, Rachael, Dena Fam, and Susan Stewart. 2018. "Routine Exposure: Social Practices and Environmental Health Risks in the Home." *Social Theory & Health*[\(Links to an external site.\)](#), no. 0123456789. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41285-018-00084-8>.

Finding Solutions to Environmental Problems

INTEGRATED CASE COMPETITION: MARCH 18TH

Week 9. Solutions: Democracy and the State

Date: March 19

Readings:

- Bell et al., Chapter 11
- MacKendrick: Chapter 2
- Mol, Arthur. 2018. "The Environmental State and Environmental Governance", In Boström, D. J. Davidson (eds.), Environment and Society, Palgrave Studies in Environmental Sociology and Policy, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-76415-3_\(Links to an external site.\)](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-76415-3_(Links to an external site.)). Book available as an e-book in the U of T library.

Week 10. Market solutions: Green Consumerism

Date: March 26

Readings:

- MacKendrick: Chapter 4 and 6 and 7
- Huddart, Emily Kennedy and Darcy Hauslik. "The Practice of Green Consumption," In Boström, D. J. Davidson (eds.), Environment and Society, Palgrave Studies in Environmental Sociology and Policy, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-76415-3> (Links to an external site.). Book available as an e-book in the U of T library.

Week 11. Solidarity and Collective Solutions

Date: April 9

Readings:

- Bell et al., Chapters 10 & 12
- Fischer, Frank. 2018. "Environmental Democracy: Participation, Deliberation and Citizenship." In Boström, D. J. Davidson (eds.), Environment and Society, pp. 257-79. Palgrave Studies in Environmental Sociology and Policy, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-76415-3> (Links to an external site.). Book available as an e-book in the U of T library.

Submit:

- RP3 (due 11:59pm)

Week 12. Convince Me Pitch Presentations (OPTIONAL)

Date: MONDAY April 12 (make-up class)

ZOOM link for EXTRA Monday class date:

<https://utoronto.zoom.us/j/83901731207> (Links to an external site.)

Course Components

1. Topic Introduction

On one occasion, you will give a short presentation (5-10 minutes) to introduce the readings to your peers.

You should connect with other students presenting on the same day so you can organize divide up the readings and decide how to organize and divide up the content.

Substance of presentation

These presentations are not intended to be onerous research projects. Instead, think of it as an opportunity to gain experience introducing complex topics, writing concise oral overviews, generating discussion question, and communicating academic ideas in a clear, accessible way. Student presentations can include a small amount of summary to refresh the collective memory of the class, but in general, presenters should assume that the class members have done the readings. Remember that a key goal of a class presentation is to *energize class discussion*. (For that reason, always try to avoid too much repetition, rambling, and monotone reading from a paper.)

When it comes to organizing the presentation, you have some creative license. Your presentation strategy will depend on your presentation style and skill-set. I recommend including the following: brief summary; methodological issues; key substantive points; connections to other course concepts/readings; questions for discussion.

Above all, you should come to class prepared to answer the question, “why does this topic matter?”. I encourage you to come class with a cultural artifact (e.g., an advertisement, video-clip, new story, consumer product), if you are inspired to do so. This is not required but can be a useful way to introduce the relevance of the topic.

Grading Criteria

Your presentation will be graded on 1) comprehension of the reading(s); 2) sociological imagination; 3) presentation style (e.g., eloquence, timing, clarity).

2. Participation

Participation in the seminar is valued at 15%. Students are expected to come to class having done the readings and participate actively in class discussions.

If you find classroom discussions a challenge for some reason, please speak with me at the beginning of the semester. If you must miss a class, please inform my beforehand.

Unexcused absences and not engaging in classroom discussions will negatively impact your participation grade.

3. Quercus Comprehension Quiz

On February 26th, there will be a short comprehension quiz posted on QUERCUS/Quiz. The quiz will appear between 10:10 and 11:10am. It will consist of approximately 45 short questions (e.g., multiple choice, fill in the blank, true-false). It is an open-book quiz. There will not be a lot of time to search for answers in the readings, so I recommend you take notes as you do the readings to prepare for each seminar.

4. Reflection Paper (RP1) (Phases 1, 2, and 3)

In this course, we will learn sociological concepts that help you to think critically about the environment. Early on in the semester, you will pick a consumption case-study (meat, fashion, or cellphones), and write about this case in three phases.

RP1 (Phase 1): Identify PROBLEM (300-500 words, 1-2 pages).

RP2 (Phase 2): Focus on SOLUTIONS (300-500 words, 1-2 pages).

RP3 (Phase 3): Write the full essay (4000 words / approx. 15 pages).

Full details of this assignment are posted on QUERCUS.

Writing Office Hours for RP 1, 2, and 3

To help you construct the best possible RP, Jonathan Vroom at the Robert Gillespie Academic Skills Center will hold specialized writing office hours to help you with your reflection paper. He is familiar with the design and the requirements of this assignment.

Please make note of Jonathan Vroom's writing office hours:

RP1:

Wed Feb 3, 12:00-2:00

RP2:

Wed Feb 3, 10:00-12:00

RP3:

Mon Apr 5, 12:00-2:00

Wed Apr 7, 10:00-12:00

5. Convince Me Pitch

A pressing issue for environmental sociology – and environmentalism more generally – is how do we fix the mess that humanity finds itself in. How do we protect our fragile environmental home? Your “convince me” pitch should be focused on 1 particular solution for environmental protection. You can make your pitch solo, or with 1 or 2 fellow students. Your presentation can involve props, original video content, music, or a skit. This is an opportunity to be creative.

FORMAT:

Your “convince me pitch” can take 3 forms:

1. **An infographic.** There are [online sources \(Links to an external site.\)](#) that help you design a visually creative infographic.
2. **Short video** (less than 5 minutes) that can also be posted on YouTube, TikTok, or U of T's site [MY MEDIA](#)[links to an external site..](#)
3. **A slide show formatted with audio voiceover and automatic transitions** (less than 5 minutes). If you choose a slide show, it must be [formatted as a video \(Links to an external site.\)](#) that can be watched without having to click through each slide.

Sharing your pitch with the class:

We will collectively review the “pitches” on the last day of class (Monday April 12th). (We may opt to do the review process online using Quercus Discussion board. We will discuss this option as a class.)

You must also submit your pitch on Quercus/Assignments for grading. You can submit your pitch at *any* time throughout the term. The last day to submit is on our last class.

You should also submit a **reference list** to accompany your submission so that we know that your pitch is backed up with credible claims and evidence.