The World We Made, 
the World that Made Us: 
Humans in the Environment 
from the Ice Age to the Anthropocene

FYSEM-UA 704
Spring 2019

Dr. John O’Hara
Office: Silver Center for Arts and Science, Room 908A
Email: john.ohara@nyu.edu
Office Hours: Tuesdays 10:00am-12:00pm

Seminar
Mondays 11:00am-1:45pm
Silver Center, Room 406

Course Description

In a time of unprecedented man-made climate change, the term Anthropocene has gained currency as the geological epoch defined by human impact on the world. But what exactly does that mean, and when did it start? In this course, we will explore the long history of the back-and-forth relationship between humans and the environment, and examine how past human activity has shaped the world around us. We will review the interactions of climate and environment with the evolution of our species, and explore the effects of the ice ages on human societies and cultures, and on our dispersal across the globe as the ultimate invasive species. We will discover the effects of climate change on societies as diverse as the ancient Middle East, the pre-Columbian Maya, and the Norse settlers of Iceland and Greenland. We will also see how past peoples did not simply react to environmental change, but often induced it, from the earliest domestication of animals and plants, to the manipulation of entire landscapes. We will examine cases where past societies collapsed due to climatic change, and other examples of societies which continued to thrive despite it, and we will take an anthropological approach to explore how past societies understood environmental change, and its political, social, cultural, and economic ramifications.
Objectives

This is a seminar designed for honors students in the College of Arts and Science, and as such this course has a number of complementary goals. Firstly, it is designed to enhance your scientific and academic literacy. Too often, the scientific process is treated as a black box, here we will aim to explore how we know what we know, we will engage with a broad array of academic knowledge, and we will grapple with how it is created. We will move from the isotopic analysis of ice cores to the reconstruction of ancient cities, and you will be encouraged to think critically and offer your own opinions. It’s okay to say you don’t know, as long as you attempt to engage with the data.

Secondly, the seminar is intended to introduce you to methods of research in both the natural sciences and the social sciences and humanities, as it is important to be able to wield both kinds of knowledge, and approach the world from multiple perspectives at once. Along with the reading and writing skills we will practice, your goal for the course will be to complete a substantial piece of independent research, which will help hone the critical and analytic abilities you will need for success in your future.

Finally, this seminar is designed to be a formative social and intellectual episode in your life as an undergraduate student in the liberal arts. It is not enough to just show up and listen, and this class is not simply about absorbing information - you must offer opinions, ask questions, and present your own ideas in a convincing fashion. Presentations will be an important component in your grade – if you don’t like public speaking, the only way to get better is to practice in an encouraging environment!

The learning outcomes of this course are to:

- Understand the mechanisms of climate change, past and present
- Review the effects of climate change on human biological evolution, and on the development of human societies and cultures
- Demystify scientific literature, question conclusions, and explore data
- Cultivate a stronger engagement and with academic literature, and become more comfortable wielding scientific data
- Form and present original, coherent and well-reasoned arguments to one's peers
- Become comfortable speaking publicly

There is no single textbook for this course. We will read extensive sections of the following texts, all of which may be accessed for free as ebooks via Bobcat. These texts, and all other readings, will be posted to NYU Classes.

Reading
I will be assigning 60-100 pages of reading each week. You are expected to read everything, although it is ok if you do not immediately understand some of the content - in that case, we will work through the papers in class. Those who have not completed the reading will be treated without mercy. Each student will be assigned several papers to read closely, critique, and lead discussion on over the course of the semester. When you are assigned to lead discussion of a paper, please read it carefully and thoughtfully, and come prepared with several discussion points. All students will write two short (2 page) summaries of a given week’s readings over the semester, reviewing the arguments of the papers assigned that week, comparing and contrasting them, and situating them in the bigger picture.

Classroom Policies

- The success of this course depends on your close reading and viewing of the texts and films prior to class as well as your questions, reflections, and classroom participation. If you don’t understand something, you’re probably not the only one, so ask questions in class and we can work through it together.

- Please arrive at class on time and be prepared with all readings, notes and assignments. I can tell when you haven’t done the reading. Sad!

- Absences will adversely affect your participation grade. If you cannot make it to class for any reason, you are expected to contact me by email to explain your absence.

- Please take the time to read the NYU Honor Code and information on Academic Integrity: http://cas.nyu.edu/page/academicintegrity. In workshopping your paper, we will discuss how to cite sources in your paper, so there is no excuse for plagiarism. Plagiarism will result in a zero for the assignment and the dean will be notified.

- Students with a disability or learning difficulty should register at the Moses Center and show their letter of registration to the instructor. More information on the Moses Center is available here: http://www.nyu.edu/life/safety-health-wellness/students-with-disabilities.html

- You may find the NYU Writing Center to be a valuable resource. Information about hours and how to set up an appointment is available here: http://www.nyu.edu/cas/ewp/html/writing_center.html

- The University Learning Center provides tutoring, academic skills workshops, and help with specific classes, paper writing, study skills, as well as review for exams. All sessions are offered on a walk-in basis and feature tutoring by experienced upper-level students: www.nyu.edu/cas/clc

- The Wellness Exchange: Support for personal and health-related issues. (212) 443-9999 (24/7 confidential calls): www.nyu.edu/999
Course Assessment

1. Attendance and Participation (10%)
   You are expected to read the assigned texts closely and carefully, attend all classes, arrive at class promptly, and contribute actively and in an informed manner to seminar discussions.

2. Homework Assignments (30%)
   These assignments will take the form of three brief (2 page) critical discussion papers. The first is a report on the arguments presented at, and your own opinions on, the “Don’t Bring Extinct Creatures Back to Life” Debate held on 1/31, and is due on 2/8. The other two assignments will be reviews, evaluations and commentaries on the readings assigned for a given week. You are free to choose the weeks on which you submit your discussion summaries, any two weeks will do.

3. Discussion Leading (10%)
   You will be assigned a number of readings throughout the semester to present, review, and critique, and you will lead your fellow classmates in discussing the content, merits, and implications of that paper.

4. Group Oral Presentation (15%) (Presented on 5/6 and 5/13)
   In groups of three, you will be expected to give one group presentation (20 minutes in length, with each participant speaking for an equivalent length) using slides, on a topic of your choice, in the style of a presentation at an academic conference. You will be graded primarily on content and the quality of your research, but (just like at conferences!) presentation style and engaging the audience is also important. After your presentation, you will be expected to answer questions from your fellow classmates.

5. Tentative Bibliography and Final Paper Outline (5%) (Due 4/16)
   In preparation for your final paper, you will submit a 2-3 page outline of an essay on an appropriate theme, with a tentative bibliography, and we will discuss and workshop it during office hours.

6. Final Paper (30%) (Due 5/8)
   This will be a substantial work of independent research (8-10 pages) on a relevant topic of your choice. The topic will be developed in consultation with me during class and in office hours.
## Class Schedule

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Topics, Readings &amp; Assignments</th>
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| Week 1 | 1/28 | **Introduction:** The Causes, Mechanisms, and History of Climate Change  
**Assignment:** Attend “Don’t Bring Extinct Creatures Back to Life” Debate on Thursday 1/31 |
| Week 2 | 2/4  | **The Ultimate Invasive Species:** Modern Human Evolution and Dispersal  
**Assignment:** Two-page report on “Don’t Bring Extinct Creatures Back to Life” Debate due via email on Friday 2/8  
**Readings:**  
*Read first:*  
*For discussion:*  
| Week 3 | 2/11 | **A Lost World:** Pleistocene Landscape and Environment  
**Readings:**  
*Read first:*  
*For discussion:*  
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No Class</th>
<th>2/18:</th>
<th>President’s Day</th>
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<tr>
<td>Week 5</td>
<td>2/25:</td>
<td><strong>Mid-Holocene Madness</strong>: Human Adaptation to a Changing World</td>
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**Readings:**

**Read first:**

**For discussion:**


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<th>Week 6</th>
<th>3/4:</th>
<th><strong>The First GMOs</strong>: The Neolithic Revolution and Where It Got Us</th>
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**Readings:**

**Read first:**

**For discussion:**
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<th>Week 7</th>
<th>3/11:</th>
<th><strong>Taming Mother Nature</strong>: The Spread of Agriculture and Control of the Environment</th>
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<th>Week 9</th>
<th>3/18:</th>
<th><strong>Spring Break</strong></th>
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<td><strong>Spring Break</strong></td>
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<th>Week 9</th>
<th>3/25:</th>
<th><strong>The Lasting Footprint</strong>: The Americas before Columbus</th>
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<td><strong>Readings:</strong></td>
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For discussion:


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<th>Week 10</th>
<th>4/1: <strong>Collapse?</strong> The Rise and Occasional Fall of State Societies</th>
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<td><strong>Readings:</strong></td>
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<td>Read first:</td>
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<td><strong>For discussion:</strong></td>
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## Week 11: 4/8

### The Columbian Exchange: Making the Modern World

**Readings:**

**Read first:**

**For discussion:**


## Week 12: 4/15

### Things Get Cold: The Medieval Warm Period and the Little Ice Age

**Tentative Bibliography and Final Paper Outline Due**

**Reading:**

**Read first:**

**For discussion:**
Büntgen, U. *et al.* (2016). Cooling and societal change during the Late Antique Little Ice Age from 536 to around 660 AD. *Nature Geoscience* 9, pp.231-237

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<th>Week 13</th>
<th>4/22: <strong>Situating the Anthropocene:</strong> Contemporary Climate Change and its Archaeological Context</th>
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<td><strong>Reading:</strong></td>
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<td>For discussion:</td>
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<td>Week 14</td>
<td>4/29: <strong>Field Trip:</strong> The American Museum of Natural History</td>
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<td>Week 15</td>
<td>5/6 <strong>Student Presentations</strong></td>
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<td>Week 16</td>
<td>5/13 <strong>Student Presentations</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Final Paper due by email on 5/14</strong></td>
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