FYS-UA XXX:
At World’s End: Studying Societal Collapse in the Past and Present
Tues./Thur. 2-3:15pm – Location TBA

Sarah Adcock
[Email address]
Office Hours: TBA; also by appointment
Office: TBA

Course Description:
Why do societies collapse, and when they do, what happens next? What does it mean to say a society has collapsed? And what might the failures of past societies tell us about our future? Using case studies on collapse from the past (Western and Eastern Roman Empires; the Maya), the present (the post-Soviet world; Detroit), and the future (the zombie apocalypse), students will learn what societal collapse is and how it functions. We will examine the potential causes of collapse as well as its social and material effects, and we will explore the usefulness of collapse as an analytic framework and examine potential alternatives. This course emphasizes the importance of the current moment in shaping interpretations of the past and will include discussions of contemporary topics relating to collapse, including environmental change, urban ruins, and the Anthropocene. This course will enable students to bring knowledge about societal collapse to current conversations in scholarly fields, as well as to discussions of collapse in popular culture.

Course Goals & Objectives:
By the end of the quarter, students will:
1) Have a broad understanding of societal collapse across time and space.
2) Understand the importance of taking into account the impacts of current socio-historical circumstances when considering interpretations of the past.
3) Have developed skills to critically read, synthesize, and discuss archaeological and anthropological literature and to present original ideas in writing.
4) Be able to relate archaeological studies of societal collapse to current conversations in ancient studies, anthropology, and allied disciplines, as well as to discussions in popular culture.

Course Requirements:
1) Participation in Class Discussion: Please read the assigned material carefully before each class. Discussion is a key part of skills you are expected to develop in this course and in your undergraduate education more broadly. Active participation in class that is helpful to others is part of the course grade. In this regard, quality of participation matters more than quantity.
(2) **Response Papers:** During the quarter, students will write three 2-page (double-spaced) response papers. These papers should critically discuss at least one text (excluding short newspaper articles) and how it relates to previous reading assignments and class discussion. Students may select which weeks they would like to submit their response papers, but the first paper must be submitted before the end of the 3rd week of the semester. The second response paper must be submitted before the end of the 5th week, and the final response paper must be submitted by the end of the 10th week. The response papers must be handed in via email by noon on the day we are discussing the relevant text in class. Papers will be given a quality grade and will be returned with detailed comments. The purpose of this assignment is for students to practice developing original ideas, based on class readings, in written form.

(3) **Debates:** Three of the class sessions will be structured as formal debates. Groups of students will be assigned to present each side of the debate and lead class discussion. The debate will be structured such that each side will first present evidence from the original texts in support of their position. After that, each side will have a chance to present evidence from previous reading assignments as further supporting evidence, followed by a general discussion.

(4) **Midterm Exam:** An in-class midterm consisting of identification and short essay questions will be administered during 7th week.

(5) **Take-home Final Exam OR Final Paper:** Students will choose between a final short essay take-home exam or a final paper (10-12 pages). Students who choose the final paper option will be expected to use the analytical frameworks developed from class reading assignments to discuss a particular archaeological example of collapse. The paper should address how the archaeological evidence might challenge or support current understandings of societal collapse. Students are encouraged to talk to the instructor early on about selecting a topic and how to locate the relevant literature.

(6) **Reflection Piece:** Students will be asked to write a (1-2 page) personal reflection on how the course (through the readings, class discussions, and/or the final research paper) has changed their thinking about collapse. This assignment will be counted as part of the class participation grade and is due at the end of the quarter.

**Criteria for Course Grade:**

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<tr>
<th>Component</th>
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<tr>
<td>Class Participation</td>
<td>5%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Response Papers</td>
<td>20%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Debates</td>
<td>10%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Midterm Exam</td>
<td>30%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Final Exam OR Paper</td>
<td>35%</td>
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**Course Structure:**
Unless otherwise noted, all course sessions will be structured as half-lecture/half-discussion (approx. 40 minutes each). Three of the class sessions will be structured as debates. (Please see Course Requirements for further information.)

**Policies:**

- You are expected to come to class on time and prepared to engage in discussion. Frequent absences or lateness will significantly impact your participation grade.
- Digital versions of reading assignments can be found under Library Course Reserves on NYU Classes.
- A sign-up sheet for office hours will be available on NYU Classes. If you would like to meet with me, please sign up for an appointment at least twelve hours in advance. If your schedule conflicts with my office hours and you would like to meet, send me an email, and I will work to accommodate you.
- Due dates for all written work are indicated on the syllabus. Barring catastrophic events, extensions will not be granted the day before or day of a paper deadline. Lacking an approved extension, work submitted after the deadline is subject to a grade penalty.
- **Disability Disclosure Statement:** Academic accommodations are available for students with disabilities. The Moses Center website is [www.nyu.edu/csd](http://www.nyu.edu/csd). Please contact the Moses Center for Students with Disabilities (212-998-4980 or mosescsd@nyu.edu) for further information. Students who are requesting academic accommodations are advised to reach out to the Moses Center as early as possible in the semester for assistance.
- **On Academic Integrity, Plagiarism, and Cheating** *(adapted from the website of the College of Arts & Science):* “Academic integrity means that the work you submit is original. Obviously, bringing answers into an examination or copying all or part of a paper straight from a book, the Internet, or a fellow student is a violation of this principle. But there are other forms of cheating or plagiarizing which are just as serious — for example, presenting an oral report drawn without attribution from other sources (oral or written); writing a sentence or paragraph which, despite being in different words, expresses someone else’s idea(s) without a reference to the source of the idea(s); or submitting essentially the same paper in two different courses (unless both instructors have given their permission in advance). Receiving or giving help on a take-home paper, examination, or quiz is also cheating, unless expressly permitted by the instructor (as in collaborative projects).”
- Plagiarism will result in an automatic zero on any given assignment, and in extreme cases may result in an F for the course. You must not, under any circumstances, copy or paraphrase direct quotes from the course material (or any other source) without properly attributing the author(s). The University’s policy on academic integrity and student conduct can be found in full here: [https://cas.nyu.edu/content/nyu-as/cas/academic-integrity.html](https://cas.nyu.edu/content/nyu-as/cas/academic-integrity.html).

**Course Schedule:**
Class 1 (Jan. 26): Introduction to the Course

- Why do we study collapse and why does it fascinate us?

Small group discussion of the poem “Ozymandias” by Percy Bysshe Shelley

Unit 1: Defining Collapse
Exploring definitions of collapse, its causes, and how we can study it

Class 2 (Jan. 28): What Is Collapse, Pt. 1?

- How have anthropologists and archaeologists discussed societal collapse?
- How do we define collapse, and when is the concept of collapse applicable?


Class 3 (Feb. 2): What Is Collapse, Pt. 2?

- What do collapse events have in common?


Class 4 (Feb. 4): Things Fall Apart, Pt. 1: Exploring Explanations for Collapse

- What are some of the things that have been identified as causes of collapse?
- How have these explanations changed over time?


Class 5 (Feb. 9): Things Fall Apart, Pt. 2: Case Study: Fall of the Western Roman Empire

Gibbon, Edward. (1776). General Observations on the Fall of the Roman Empire in the West. From The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, Chapter 38. http://legacy.fordham.edu/halsall/source/gibbon-fall.html [skim]


Class 6 (Feb 11): Things Fall Apart, Pt. 3 Case Study: Fall of the Eastern Roman Empire

Response Paper 1 must be submitted by this date


Class 7 (Feb. 16): Debate: When did Rome “Fall”? 
Class 8 (Feb. 18): Methodological Approaches to Collapse, Pt. 1

- What are some of the methodologies that have been used to study the collapse of past societies?
- How can these methods work together to give us a clearer picture of social change?


Class 9 (Feb. 23): Methodological Approaches to Collapse, Pt. 2


Class 10 (Feb. 25): Methodological Approaches to Collapse, Pt. 3

Response Paper 2 must be submitted by this date


Unit 2: Interpreting and Analyzing Collapse
Exploring how we interpret and perceive collapse and its aftermath

Class 11 (March 2): When Past and Present Collide: Interpreting Collapse, Pt. 1 Case Study: Classic Maya Collapse, Pt. 1

- In what ways can the present socio-historical moment be projected onto how we think about the past?
- Simultaneously, how can studying the past shape our understanding of our present and the possibilities for our future?


Class 12 (March 4): When Past and Present Collide: Interpreting Collapse, Pt. 2 Case Study: Classic Maya Collapse, Pt. 2


Class 13 (March 9): Debate: What Caused the Maya Collapse?

Class 14 (March 11): *IN CLASS MIDTERM*

Spring Break: March 15-21

Class 15 (March 23): Through a Glass Darkly: Collapse as Mirror of State Rise, Pt. 1

- How do the ways we think about collapse relate to theoretical concerns about state formation and the development of social complexity?
- How might we think about collapse outside of these narratives?


Class 16 (March 25): Through a Glass Darkly: Collapse as Mirror of State Rise, Pt. 2


Class 17 (March 30): After the End: Collapse, Continuity, Resilience, and Regeneration. Pt. 1

- What happens in the aftermath of collapse?
- Is collapse really “the end”?
- What are some alternative ways of theorizing societal change?

Class 18 (April 1): After the End: Collapse, Continuity, Resilience, and Regeneration. Pt. 2

Response Paper 3 must be submitted by this date


Unit 3: Applying Collapse
Exploring how what we’ve learned about collapse in the past relates to the contemporary world

Class 19 (April 6): Collapse and the Contemporary: Life in the Post-Soviet World
Case Study: Post-Soviet Russia, Pt. 1


Class 20 (April 8): Collapse and the Contemporary: Life in the Post-Soviet World
Case Study: Post-Soviet Russia, Pt. 2


Class 21 (April 13): Collapse and the Contemporary: The Urban Crisis and the Death of the American City
Case Study: Detroit, Pt. 1


Class 22 (April 15): Collapse and the Contemporary: The Urban Crisis and the Death of the American City
Case Study: Detroit, Pt. 2

In class discussion of the documentary film Requiem for Detroit?
Class 23 (April 20): Futures Past: Collapse, Ruin, and the Post-Apocalypse

Case Study: World War Z, Pt. 1

- What is the relationship between collapse and ruin? What is the place of ruins in theorizations of collapse?
- How do we see collapse played out in popular culture? What can this tell us about contemporary concerns?


Class 24 (April 22): Futures Past: Collapse, Ruin, and the Post-Apocalypse

Case Study: World War Z, Pt. 1


Class 25 (April 27): A Return to the Contemporary: Jared Diamond’s Collapse, Pt. 1


Class 26 (April 29): A Return to the Contemporary: Jared Diamond’s Collapse, Pt. 2


Class 27 (May 4): Debate: Jared Diamond’s Collapse

Take-home exam handed out

Class 28 (May 6): Conclusions and Reflections: Collapse as Analytic—What Is It Good for?

Reflection pieces due


May 14: *FINAL EXAM/PAPERS DUE* Drop-off location TBA