

Sociology 4755 – Climate and Society
Tues. & Thurs. 12:30-1:45
ICC 219B

Professor Tim Bartley, Earth Commons Institute and Department of Sociology

Office Hours: Tues. 1:45-2:15 (chat after class), Thurs. 2:00-4:00 (drop-in) or by appointment (email to arrange a time)

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Course Description

Climate change and global heating are caused fundamentally by society—that is, by the social organization of economic and political activity over the past century. At the same time, climate change and global heating have profound implications for current and future societies around the world, as people move, adapt, innovate, and resist. This seminar examines this reciprocal relationship between climate and society.

In this seminar, we will consider what scholars have already discovered about climate-society relationships and ask new questions about how societies are changing in the midst of the current climate crisis. Based on research in sociology and other social sciences, we will consider questions like the following:

How have societies in different places and times dealt with changes in their surrounding environments? How did so many modern societies become so dependent on fossil fuels, and why are some less dependent than others (even at similar levels of income)? What role have social movements, climate-forcing industries, political polarization, social marginalization (especially as related to race, ethnicity, class, and indigeneity), cultural understandings of the environment, emotions, and extreme weather events played in responses to—or denials of—climate change? How do communities respond to natural disasters? Under what conditions do they band together or fall apart? To what extent—and in what circumstances—has climate change contributed to civil conflict, mass displacement, and refugee crises? How is climate change shaping the future of work? How are bottom-up activism, monitoring, and “citizen science” being mobilized to address climate change, and how do they intertwine with experts and elites? What opportunities does the current climate crisis provide for rethinking relationships between economies, environments, polities, and societies? How have other kinds of environmental hazards been reduced, and what implications does this have for climate change?

After a prologue, featuring glimpses of climate and social change, part 1 of the course examines social experiences and perceptions of climate change. Part 2 considers how the current climate crisis arose, with particular attention to the political-economic processes leading to fossil fuel dependence and political impasse. Part 3 critically examines some potential consequences of climate change, including migration and political conflict. To conclude, Part 4 looks at activism, advocacy, and policy change for a low-carbon future.

Readings

Norgaard, Kari Marie. 2011. *Living in Denial: Climate Change, Emotions, and Everyday Life*. MIT Press.

Other required readings (see the schedule below) posted on Canvas.

Course Requirements

Engagement with the Readings: Reading is a crucial component of this class. You should plan to complete all readings by the date on which they are assigned and to be prepared to participate in discussions, raise additional questions, and answer questions about the readings in class. Keep in mind that just looking at the readings is not the same as reading them carefully. Please plan to set aside particular times to read for this class. I think you'll find the readings to be engaging, and they'll give us a lot to dig into during our class sessions. We will start with some journalistic accounts of climate change and its implications and then move toward books and articles that stem from original social scientific research.

Attendance and participation: This is a small, discussion-based seminar. We will use our class time to discuss the readings in depth and think together about implications, extensions, and examples. I will add context and background at various points, but this will not be a lecture-oriented class. To make this format work, it is crucial that you are present, prepared, and engaged in the class sessions—and that you take seriously the work of reading, processing, and reflecting on this material. You can earn up to 15 points for being present and actively engaged in every class session. (Being actively engaged means that you don't allow yourself to get distracted, you frequently contribute to discussions, and your contributions are informed by the readings and other relevant material.) One unexpected/unexcused absence is forgivable if you are actively engaged at all other times, but poor attendance will make it difficult to earn even half of these points. I will periodically take notes on your contributions, and I will be happy to share my comments after class or during office hours. I will also occasionally ask you to write some brief in-class reactions and reflections, the completion of which will contribute to your participation grade.

Reading Response Questions/Comments: Prior to each class in which readings are assigned, you should post (on Canvas) a question or comment on one or more of the readings. This can take several forms—(a) a clarification question (e.g., “What does the author mean by ‘hegemony?’”), (b) an analytical or comparative question (e.g., “Is this account consistent with our earlier reading on X, or do they conflict?”), or (c) a comment (e.g., “I really appreciated the idea of Y, because). Your question/comment should demonstrate close engagement with the readings, and it will also help to inform our class discussions. You should plan to post your question/comment *right after you do the reading*, which will hopefully be well in advance of the class. But at the very latest, your question should be posted by 11:30 am, prior to our 12:30 class.

On two occasions, you may skip the task of posting a question/comment without penalty. But please plan to post questions for every class, since you never know what unexpected events could happen at a later point.

Over the course of the semester, your questions/comments should be a mix of types (a), (b), and (c) as described above. You can earn up to 20 points for consistent posting of questions/comments (of these different types) that demonstrate a deep engagement with the readings.

Event Description: There are a number of events happening on campus and in the DC area that are relevant to this class. (I will provide some examples and links to relevant calendars of events, and you are encouraged to find and share others.) I ask that you find one such event to attend and then report back on it by (a) posting a brief description and photo on Canvas and (b) describing it during class. This does not need to be a presentation, but you should plan to tell us a bit about the event, your reactions to it, and how it is related to specific issues or ideas in this class. I will assign you a roughly 4-week period in which to do this, just so the reports are spread throughout the semester. If you see an event of interest, you are welcome to do it sooner than your assigned period (or with permission, to switch to a later time period in order to attend a specific event). If you complete this component of the class during the assigned period (or before), you will earn 10 points.

Synthesis Essays: On three occasions, you will be asked to write a set of essays that describe, compare, or synthesize ideas from the assigned readings—in response to specific prompts/questions. These will be done during class time on the dates noted on the schedule below (Feb. 13, March 26, and April 23). You may use your notes on the readings and/or our class sessions but not the assigned readings themselves or other sources. I will give you advance notice about some general topics that may appear in the prompts/questions so that you can be thinking about them prior to writing. But it will be important to be intimately familiar with the readings and discussions so that you can write effective essays during class time. Each of the three sets of essays is worth 15 points.

Final Project: The class will culminate in a project in which you extend specific ideas or insights from this class. This can take one of three forms:

(1) One option is to develop a way of communicating information about climate and society—informed by the ideas and readings in this class—to other audiences, such as other students, specific groups or clubs, general public audiences in the U.S. or elsewhere, or policymakers. This could be done through written materials, video, web interfaces, or a combination of these.

(2) Or, rather than seeking to *convey* ideas, you might instead *convene* a discussion about ideas from this class with audiences beyond it—again, whether here at the university or elsewhere. Here, the goal would be to facilitate dialogue about some element of climate-society relations in a way that is informed by this course. (In this case, you could document the event with a recording or other means, as well as records of your planning.)

(3) A third option is to do some original inquiry by conducting a pilot “survey experiment.” Survey experiments allow one to see how particular frames or pieces of information shape perceptions. We will see examples in a couple of our readings. This option would involve designing a survey experiment, setting it up in Qualtrics survey platform, recruiting respondents, and writing a paper/report on your findings.

In every case, the project should be (a) clearly rooted in ideas and readings from this class, (b) a significant undertaking, and (c) approved by me in advance. I hope you will be creative and ambitious in designing these projects. You will be asked to submit a short proposal and then present your work-in-progress during the last week of class, both of which will factor into the overall grade for the project. The project is worth 30 points in total.

Grading

Reading responses	25 points
Event description	10 points
Three synthesis essays (15 points each)	45 points
Final project	30 points
Attendance and participation	<u>15 points</u>
	125 points total

Final grades will be based on the number of points you earn as a percentage of the total points possible. This will be rounded to the nearest percent and assigned a letter grade based on the system below.

A 93-100%	B- 80-82%	D+ 67-69%
A- 90-92%	C+ 77-79%	D 60-66%
B+ 87-89%	C 73-76%	F 59% or less
B 83-86%	C- 70-72%	

Class Environment

This will be a dynamic and interactive class. Respect for the material, for each other, and for the classroom environment is essential. At a minimum, this means that we must be willing to communicate openly and be active listeners of each other. Distractions make such an environment very difficult to sustain. Cellphones should be turned off or silenced and put away during class time.

I discourage the use of laptops in class. It is hard to resist the distractions they offer and even harder to make your attention clear to others when you are using a laptop.

Instead, I recommend that you take notes on paper when you're doing the readings, and then have those notes ready during class time. (There is now a string of studies showing that you tend to learn more when taking notes by hand, especially because it encourages you to decide what is important and paraphrase it, rather than trying to write things down verbatim.) If we need to look at specific readings, we can all pause to get out our laptops/tablets to do so, but I believe our discussions will be much better if we can resist the temptations of screens. If it is essential that you use a laptop, please talk to me so that we can discuss how to do so while still demonstrating your engagement in the discussions.

Policy on Late Work

You should plan to complete all work at the scheduled time and to meet all deadlines. Please get started early to ensure that you don't run into problems as deadlines approach. If you do submit something late, it will be subject to a 10% penalty for each 24-hour period beyond the time it is due. Exceptions are

only possible if you meet both of the following criteria: (1) Truly special and unavoidable circumstances (including religious observances) interfere with the completion of the task on the scheduled date/time AND (2) you notify me in advance of the due date to describe the circumstances that will delay your submission.

Policy on Academic Integrity

The university's description of the [Honor System](#) provides important details on the basic expectations for academic integrity. In this class, all of the work you submit should reflect your own efforts. I encourage you to discuss the course material with others, both inside and outside the class, but the work that you submit should be completed individually.

Using AI text generation tools to complete the requirements for this course is not permitted. AI might be able to produce rudimentary answers to some of the questions we will pose. But rather than making AI smarter, my goal is to help you develop your own thinking. I can only do this if you are the author of the work you submit. (Thanks to Prof. Kathleen McNamara for this framing.) Unless explicitly authorized, I will treat the use of AI text generators as a form of academic dishonesty. More generally, if you are ever unsure about whether/how to use resources beyond our course materials, please ask me about it.

Accommodations and Support

If you have a disability that may affect your academic work or well-being and for which accommodations may be necessary, please let me know within the first two weeks of the course (or in other circumstances, as soon as possible after accommodation becomes necessary). Please also contact the [Academic Resource Center](#), located in the Leavey Center.

Georgetown University and I are both committed to supporting all students, including survivors of sexual misconduct. University policy requires faculty members to report any disclosures about sexual misconduct to the Title IX Coordinator, whose role is to coordinate the University's response to sexual misconduct. Please see [this website](#) for more information on campus resources and reporting.

Student support: There are many resources on campus that are available to you. See this [comprehensive list of self-care resources](#) for details.

Schedule of Topics and Readings (subject to minor revisions)

Prologue: Glimpses of Climate Change and Social Change

Jan. 11—Introduction to the course

Kolbert, Elizabeth. 2022. "Climate Change from A to Z." *The New Yorker*, Nov. 21, 2022.
(Distributed in class and on Canvas)

Jan. 16

New York Times. "Postcards From a World on Fire." Dec. 13, 2021. Choose 1-2 countries on each continent to look at, and make sure to include some that have captions (green arrows) or audio/video (speaker icon). (Link via Canvas)

Mogul, Rhea and Aishwayra Iyer. "Extreme heat is pushing India to the brink of 'survivability.'" *CNN.com* Jan. 6, 2024. (Canvas)

Mackenzie, Kate and Tim Sahay. "Global Boiling." *The Polycrisis*, Aug. 3, 2023. (Canvas)

Goodell, Jeff. Excerpt from *The Heat Will Kill You First: Life and Death on a Scorched Planet*. Little, Brown, & Co., 2023. (Canvas)

Jan. 18

Romm, Joseph. Excerpt from *Climate Change: What Everyone Needs to Know*. Oxford University Press, 2022. (Canvas)

Stillman, Sarah. "Storm Chasers: A migrant workforce trails climate disasters, rebuilding in their wake." *The New Yorker*, Nov. 1, 2021. (Canvas)

Blake, Heidi. "The Great Cash-for-Carbon Hustle." *The New Yorker* Oct. 20, 2023. (Canvas)

Part 1: Perceptions of Climate Change

In this part of the course, we will consider how people perceive the climate around them, whether they see climate change as a problem, and how they make sense of events that may be indications of climate change. This will also involve considering how perceptions of climate change are related to political identities, racial/ethnic categorization, gender identities, occupations, and generations. This will also give us a chance to consider issues of climate justice both domestically and globally.

Jan.23

McGhee, Heather. "The Same Sky." Excerpt from *The Sum of Us: What Racism Costs Everyone and How We Can Prosper Together*. One World Publishing, 2021. (Canvas)

Norgaard, *Living in Denial*, Prologue and Introduction

Jan. 25

Norgaard, *Living in Denial*, chapters 1-3

Jan. 30

Norgaard, *Living in Denial*, chapters 4-5

Feb. 1

Norgaard, *Living in Denial*, chapter 6

Egan, Patrick J. and Megan Mullin. "US Partisan Polarization on Climate Change: Can Stalemate Give Way to Opportunity?" *PS: Political Science & Politics* 57(1):30-35, 2024. (Canvas)

Hai, Zuhad and Rebecca L Perlman. "Extreme weather events and the politics of climate change attribution." *Science Advances* 8, 2022. (Canvas)

Feb. 6

Norgaard, *Living in Denial*, Conclusion (particularly pp.216-222)

Elliott, Rebecca. "The 'Boomer remover': Intergenerational discounting, the coronavirus and climate change." *The Sociological Review* 70.1 (2022): 74-91. (Canvas)

Feb. 8

Wetts, Rachel. "Models and Morals: Elite-Oriented and Value-Neutral Discourse Dominates American Organizations' Framings of Climate Change." *Social Forces* 98(3):1339-1369, 2020. (Canvas)

Cha, J. Mijin, Vivian Price, Dimitris Stevis, Todd E. Vachon, and Maria Brescia-Weiler. Excerpt from "Workers and communities in transition: Report of the Just Transition Listening Project." *Labor Network for Sustainability*, 2021. (Canvas)

Feb. 13

First synthesis essays—to be written during class

Part 2: The Social Production of Climate Change

How did affluent societies become so dependent on fossil fuels? Why were warnings of severe climate change in the 1980s-1990s ignored or undermined? What role did fossil fuel companies, conservative political groups, and scientific communities play in these processes? How did different countries (such as the U.S. and EU-member states) respond to calls for change, and to what extent did this lead them down different paths?

Feb. 15

Pirani, Simon. Excerpt from *Burning up: A global history of fossil fuel consumption*. Pluto Books, 2018. (Canvas)

Feb. 20—No class (university following a Mon. schedule this day)

Feb. 22

Orekes, Naomi and Erik M. Conway. Excerpt from *Merchants of Doubt*, Bloomsbury Press, 2010. (Canvas)

McCright, Aaron M., and Riley E. Dunlap. "Defeating Kyoto: The conservative movement's impact on US climate change policy." *Social Problems* 50(3): 348-373, 2003. (Canvas)

Feb. 27

Meckling, Jonas. "The Globalization of Carbon Trading: Transnational Business Coalitions in Climate Politics." *Global Environmental Politics* 11(2):26-50, 2011. (Canvas)

Levy, David L, and André Spicer. "Contested Imaginaries and the Cultural Political Economy of Climate Change." *Organization* 20 (5):659-78, 2013. (Canvas)

Feb. 29 (Class meeting to be rescheduled—Prof. Bartley will be presenting at a conference.)

Klein, Naomi. Excerpt from *This Changes Everything*. Simon & Schuster, 2014. (Canvas)

Spring break

Part 3: Consequences of Climate Change

How is climate change shaping social processes—such as migration, violent political conflict, and work? Has “climate determinism” taken over our understanding of the consequences of climate change? How can it/should it be avoided? As climate change intensifies, what kinds of adaptations and displacements are likely to occur? What can we learn from existing studies of community responses to natural disasters?

March 12

Clarke, Kevin. “The Climate Refugees of Honduras.” *America Magazine*, December 11, 2023 (Canvas)

Surma, Katie. “How Climate Change Drives Conflict and War Crimes Around the Globe.” *Inside Climate News* October 26, 2023. (Canvas)

Spilker, Gabriele, Vally Koubi, Lena Schaffer, and Tobias Böhmelt. “There’s grim news on climate change. Will it lead to mass migration and conflict?” *Washington Post* Oct. 15, 2018. (Canvas)

Schaub, Michael. “‘The Great Displacement’ looks at communities forever altered by climate change” (profile of Jake Bittle’s book, *The Great Displacement*). *National Public Radio* February 24, 2023. (Canvas)

March 14

Hulme, Mike. Excerpt from *Climate Change Isn’t Everything*. Polity Press, 2023. (Canvas)

March 19

Daoudy, Marwa. “Rethinking the Climate–Conflict Nexus.” *Global Environmental Politics* 21(3):4-25, 2021. (Canvas)

March 21

Klinenberg, Eric, Malcolm Araos, and Liz Koslov. "Sociology and the Climate Crisis." *Annual Review of Sociology* 46:649–69, 2020. (Canvas)

Peek, Lori, Tricia Wachtendorf, and Michelle Annette Meyer. "Sociology of Disasters." In the *Handbook of Environmental Sociology*, Springer, 2021. (Canvas)

March 26

Second set of synthesis essays—to be written during class

Easter break

Part 4: Toward a Low-Carbon Future? Advocacy, Regulation, and Reform

Can climate activism re-shape public understandings and policies? Are industrial and political alignments shifting in ways that might allow for more significant moves toward decarbonization? To what extent can regulation make a difference? What dilemmas are being faced in shifts from fossil fuel-dependence to alternative forms of energy? Can climate advocacy and social/economic justice efforts be mutually supportive, or are they destined to come into conflict?

April 2

Fisher, Dana R., Oscar Berglund, and Colin J. Davis. "How effective are climate protests at swaying policy—and what could make a difference?" *Nature* 623: 910-913, 2023. (Canvas)

Bugden, Dylan. "Does Climate Protest Work? Partisanship, Protest, and Sentiment Pools." *Socius* 6:1-13, 2020. (Canvas) (See also the vignette texts in the supplemental file)

April 4

Mendez, Michael. Excerpt from *Climate Change from the Streets: How Conflict and Collaboration Strengthen the Environmental Justice Movement*. Yale University Press, 2020. (Canvas)

April 9

Colgan, Jeff D., Jessica F. Green, and Thomas N. Hale. "Asset revaluation and the existential politics of climate change." *International Organization* 75(2): 586-610, 2021. (Canvas)

April 11

Bartley, Tim and Malcolm Fairbrother. "Tackling Toxins: Insights from Case Studies of Pollutants, Regulation, and Industrial Change." Working paper, 2023. (Canvas)

April 16

Carley, Sanya, Tom P. Evans, and David M. Konisky. "Adaptation, Culture, and the Energy Transition in American Coal Country." *Energy Research & Social Science* 37:133-139, 2018. (Canvas)

Roberts, David. "The North Carolina town that's scared of solar panels, revisited." *Vox*, 2015. (Canvas)

April 18

Stokes, Leah and Matto Mildenerger. "The Trouble with Carbon Pricing." *Boston Review* September 24, 2020 (Canvas)

Goldstein, Luke. "Green Industrial Policy in Deep-Red Georgia." *The American Prospect* July 27, 2023. (Canvas)

April 23 --- Third set of synthesis essays—to be written during class

April 25 --- Project workshop: Work-in-progress presentations

April 30 --- Project workshop: Work-in-progress presentations

May 4-9 Final project due (specific date to be determined)