What Went Wrong?

A Post Mortem of Political Disasters, Catastrophic Policy Failures, and Epic Marches of Folly.
Wednesday 12:00-14:00
OI3321

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Office Hours:
Wednesday 15:00-16:00

This is a seminar about disasters that human beings inflict on themselves. It explores the unfortunate chronicle of deaths foretold.

Why do individuals, groups, and societies make repeated, and in hindsight, often easily predictable, damaging mistakes? Why do they persist in courses of action they should have known—or in fact knew—were likely to produce disastrous results? Why is it that smart, well-trained, conscientious people continue to be the source of catastrophes they could have seen coming? From botched economic reforms to ruinous urban planning, from failed wars to slow-moving environmental calamities, history is replete with examples of man-made disasters. It seems that all the accumulation of knowledge, scientific and technological progress, and the evolution of societal and political norms is not sufficient to eliminate these damaging marches of folly.

The seminar will try to tackle these questions through the examination of the record of various avoidable disasters across different levels of analysis, from the local to the international. Through these cases we will explore prominent social science explanations that seek to account for such recurring failures. We will therefore be able to pose questions not only about disaster, but also about the study of disaster. How does the puzzle of self-inflicted, apparently avoidable catastrophe appear when seen through the lens of the different political and social-science explanations? What can each one contribute to understanding and perhaps ameliorating the tendency of societal projects to go so badly wrong?
Course Readings

This is an intensive seminar which involves a significant amount of reading. Useful discussion is impossible in the absence of such preparation. Should you choose to enroll in this course, please be prepared to do the work. If you fail to keep up with this basic responsibility you are affecting the overall value of the seminar.

Each week’s readings introduce several examples of disasters or policy failures as well as one or more theoretical frames that may offer an explanation for these unfortunate events. Over the course of the seminar we will cover a broad swath of empirical cases in an attempt to explore the applicability and generalizability of our theoretical discussion to different types of scenarios and environments. Similarly, the theories we explore also cover a broad spectrum: from micro accounts that focus on individual decision makers to structural, societal and organizational explanations.

Almost all of the readings are available electronically through the library’s online resources or freely on the internet. Most of the books are available as E-books through the library. Less academic books are readily available at most public libraries. In some cases, the syllabus includes hyperlinks that can direct you to the required reading. If needed, I will post some of the more difficult to find sources on the course’s Quercos page, but other than that, it is your responsibility to find the sources. Looking for sources is part of the researcher’s job, and may direct you to related articles should you have the time and interest.

The readings for this seminar include academic articles and books, but also news articles, magazine reviews and accidents reports. Some of the readings can be technical (as in the case of accident reports) but our interest is less in the mechanics of a specific accident. Instead, the class focuses on commonalities that cut across the case studies. Keep this aim in mind when doing the readings. In some cases, you are asked to watch a movie or a youtube clip as part of your weekly reading assignment. Movies are easily accessible through the library or through online streaming services.

Lastly, I maintain the right to make minor changes to the attached reading list throughout the term, especially if any new articles appear or related controversies flare up. Any such changes are not likely to affect the overall weekly workload.
Course Requirements

The seminar meets for two hours each week. Attendance is, obviously, a per-requisite for active participation. Poor attendance record may lead to a final participation grade of zero. Generally, no accommodation will be offered for missed attendance.

Participation

This is a seminar –not a lecture course! Most of the learning is done through collective discussion and analysis. Active participation is therefore crucial for the success of the seminar. Accordingly, participation accounts for a significant portion of your final grade. Crucially, familiarity with the readings is an essential per-requisite for productive participation.

Research Proposal and Paper

As part of this research seminar, students are expected to develop an independent research project. In order to facilitate this process, each student is expected to attend my office hours at least once before reading week to discuss ideas for a research project. Following these meetings each student will submit a 1-2 pages of research proposal. Students are expected to post the proposals on Quercus and to provide comments and constructive feedback to fellow students. This proposal will then be developed into a 15-20pp research paper to be submitted at the end of the year.

Grade Breakup

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<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tr>
<td>Research proposal</td>
<td>15%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Discussant week</td>
<td>15%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pet case</td>
<td>5%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Participation</td>
<td>30%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Research paper</td>
<td>35%</td>
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Academic Integrity

All written assignments must follow academic citation rules. All words and ideas of works of other individuals should be properly acknowledged. For further clarification and information please consult the University of Toronto’s policy on plagiarism. Failure to understand what constitutes plagiarism will not be accepted as an excuse.

In order to promote an atmosphere of academic integrity, this course will uphold the following policy:

Students must attach a signed copy of an Academic Integrity Checklist to their essay. The Checklist form is available on Quercus. Please note that I will not accept your work without this form. Accordingly, we will apply late penalties to your paper (as detailed below) until the Checklist is submitted.
Discussant Week

Each week, a student will serve as class discussant. The discussant will start the class with a short presentation (5-10 minutes) synthesizing the readings and setting the stage for our discussion. The presentation should not summarize the readings but rather find core themes, debates or questions that cut across the assigned readings. In addition, each discussant will submit a short (2-3 page) document offering critical engagement with one or more of that week’s readings.

Pet Case

Throughout the seminar, students will make short (5 minute) presentations of ‘pet cases’: examples of past disasters, accidents, investigations, theories, or any other topic related to the seminar’s theme. The pet case presentations will add breadth to the number of case studies and topics that we can cover through our weekly readings.

Quercus

Important course information will be distributed electronically through Quercus. Research proposals should be uploaded to Quercus as well. Students can use the Quercus interface in order to add constructive criticism of each other’s work. Online activity will count as course participation. Feel free to use the electronic forums and message boards for any course related topics. Please respect basic netiquette conventions when posting messages. To log-in, visit: q.utoronto.ca

Important Dates

January 9
Discussant list sign-up

February 20
Reading week

February 22
Research Proposals are due

April 3
Papers are due
Rules and Regulations

If you are unable to submit papers at the appointed time, you must request permission for an extension or a makeup exam. In almost all cases, requests for extensions and deferrals should be submitted ahead of time. All requests for extensions or deferrals should be submitted in writing. In general, extensions will not be granted unless it is a case of unavoidable and unforeseeable extenuating circumstances. In most cases, supporting documentation is required before any extension is granted. Appropriate documentation must be submitted within one week of the late assignment. Please note: Assignments in other courses are NOT grounds for an extension.

Late submission penalty is 4% per each late day or fraction of a day, weekends included. Papers are to be handed at the beginning of our last meeting. Discussant commentary should be handed at the beginning of that class. Thereafter, the cut off time for the determination of a late day is 5pm. Late-assignments should be submitted to the office of the Political Science Department (on the 3rd floor of Sidney Smith Hall). Students should make sure that late submissions are signed and dated by departmental staff. Only hard copies are acceptable, e-mailed or faxed assignments will not be accepted unless you have obtained prior approval.

All papers should be printed, double spaced (and preferably double sided), 12 font, with proper margins, page numbers and securely stapled. Papers that go beyond the stated page limit for the assignment, or papers that do not conform to the directions above, may be penalized.
Week I: Introduction (Jan. 9)

Week II: Conceptual Models of Decision-Making (Jan. 16)


Week III: Marches of Folly (Jan. 23)


Week IV: Disorganized Organizations? (Jan. 30)

Week V: Our Imperfect Minds (Feb. 6)


Week VI: Seeing Like a State (Feb. 13)


Reading week (Feb. 20)

Research proposals due (Feb. 22)
**Week VII: Are All Disasters Created Equal? (Feb. 27)**


**Week VIII: Boiling Frogs (Mar. 6)**


Week IX: Public policy and Economic Reform (Mar. 13)


**Movie:** The Big Short (2015)

Week X: Life Finds a Way (Mar. 20)


**Clips:** Jurassic Park (1993) I, II & III

**Movie:** Dr. Strangelove Or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love The Bomb

Week XI: Can Experts Save the Day? (Mar. 27)


**Movie:** Dr. Strangelove Or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love The Bomb

Week XII: In Search of Goldilocks  (Apr. 3)


**Papers are due at the beginning of class**