

Pol107: What Went Wrong?

This is a course 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 are not sufficient to eliminate these damaging marches of folly.

This course will try to answer these questions through an examination of the record of various avoidable disasters across different levels of analysis, from the local to the international. These cases allow us to explore prominent political science explanations that may account for recurring failures. In this way, our exploration of the morbid record of things gone wrong will also serve as an introduction to political science and to the way in which political scientists develop research questions and hypotheses. 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 different political and social-

science explanations? What can each explanation contribute to our understanding of the tendency of societal projects to go so badly wrong?

The Basics:

Asynchronous lectures: lecture videos will be posted on Quercus every week.

Synchronous Q&A sessions: Wednesday, 17:00-19:00, we will announce these sessions ahead of time on Quercus.

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Office Hours:

Sign up on Quercus for Wednesday afternoon and evening (either before or after the Q&A session), and by appointment.

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POL107 in the Time of COVID19

While designing this disaster-focused course, I did not expect us to be conducting it in the middle of one. As you all know, we are dealing with unprecedented times and a unique set of challenges. None of us ever expected to teach or take a university course this way. It is as sub-optimal to us as it is to you. In a very short time we have all been asked to re-imagine the university experience anew. This means that we are still trying to adjust to this new reality and that this will be a semester of trial and error. This is doubly true for POL107, which is a relatively new course and is part of a new political science curriculum.

Our success will require a lot of flexibility, patience and open mindedness on everybody's part as we work together to find the best way to navigate these very troubled waters. If lucky, we can discover not only effective ways to work around the limitations that this remote setting imposes, but also ways to capitalize on the new opportunities that it offers. In other words, since we were handed a big crate of lemons, let us hope that by working together, and with the help of some tequila and salt, we can all enjoy refreshing margaritas by the end of this course.

To get us to Margaritaville, as a teaching staff, we have worked hard over the summer to develop a flexible and (hopefully) engaging structure for this course. We hope that the combination of delivery platforms (both synchronous and asynchronous) and assessment methods allows for a rewarding learning environment. Consequently, the course has numerous required components. We encourage you to read the syllabus carefully in order to make sure that you understand all course requirements and policies.

Asynchronous vs synchronous delivery

POL107 has both synchronous and asynchronous components. We hope that you can manage this combination of delivery methods in a way that works with your particular preferences and life circumstances.

The most important asynchronous components of the course are our lecture videos . Every week you will gain access to several pre-recorded lectures. These videos contain all the lecture material that you require in order to succeed in this course. You can expect to spend 2-3 hours a week watching the lecture videos. We recommend that you take notes while watching the lectures. Research has shown that taking notes by hand may help you remember the material better than typing notes into your computer. This may be a good time to practice these note taking skills. You can find additional advice and

tips for effective note taking [here](#). We also strongly recommend that you keep up with the schedule of the course. Watch the lectures on the week in which they are posted so that you are not swamped at the end of the course. The lectures are crucial for your ability to participate in our weekly tutorials in an effective and productive way. Lastly, familiarity with concepts, arguments and examples that are covered in the lecture videos is required in order to complete course assignments.

Importantly, lecture videos and all other course materials should not be uploaded to any other platform or shared outside this course. You can download the videos to your computer for your own personal use as a student in this course. Any use or distribution of these materials that goes beyond this scope is prohibited. This is also true for any recorded tutorials or synchronous lectures. Our courses often tackle controversial topics. We should all be able to participate in class discussions openly and freely, knowing that our privacy is respected and protected. Accordingly, we strongly encourage adherence to the 'whatever happens in POL107, stays in POL107' rule.

Beyond the videos, we also hope to hold synchronous Q&A sessions (Wed. 17:00-19:00) on some weeks. These sessions are optional. The meetings will not introduce new required material. Instead, these synchronous sessions offer an opportunity to expand on the material covered in the videos in a more interactive environment. While answering your queries we may discuss additional case studies, cases from the news, critical discussion of course material, etc. Please watch the weekly videos before joining the synchronous session. We will assume that all those joining us for the meeting are familiar with the topics covered by the videos and readings that week. Importantly, I will not prepare a lecture for these meetings. In order for these sessions to be effective you need to come prepared with questions and/or critiques. While we can discuss administrative issues in these Q&A meetings, we hope that most of the discussion will be devoted to engagement with actual course material.

Synchronous meetings will be recorded so that, if interested, you could watch them after the fact if circumstances prevented your attendance. Again, you will not be penalized for not attending or watching these sessions. While we certainly believe that doing so is valuable and will enrich your course experience, these synchronous Q&A meetings are optional.

We will try to hold several Q&A meetings throughout the term. Please follow the Quercus announcements for additional information regarding time and platform. You will need a computer (preferably one equipped with a microphone and camera) & internet connection in order to participate in synchronous class activities.

Since POL107 is a large course, lectures are not the best setting for an interactive discussion. Accordingly, the most important synchronous component of the course is the tutorial. Tutorials offer a small group setting that encourages discussion and participation. Our tutorials will meet for an hour on most weeks to discuss course readings and lecture materials. As detailed below, assessment of your attendance and informed participation in the tutorials counts toward your final mark in this course.

The last interactive asynchronous component of our course is the message board. The message board offers us the ability to continue our conversation throughout the week. As detailed below, some of the assignments in this course ask you to post several messages throughout the term. However, beyond the required posts, we hope that the message boards can become a useful, active and productive forum for discussion. We encourage all of you to take advantage of the course message boards (while adhering to the basic expectations of Netiquette)

Importantly, aside from the aforementioned tutorial participation, all the assignments in this course are asynchronous. You will be asked to write a take-home essays, post message board entries, and record a

short podcast. We will provide a detailed description of each of these assignments in a later section of this document.

To summarize, the core synchronous and asynchronous components of our course are:

Lecture videos: Asynchronous

Optional live Q&A sessions: Synchronous

Tutorials: Synchronous

Message boards: Asynchronous

Assignments: Asynchronous

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Course Readings

Like all political science courses, this course requires a fair amount of reading. You can expect to spend 2-5 hours a week on course readings, depending on your skill.

Useful discussion and productive learning is impossible in the absence of proper preparation.

Each Week's readings introduce examples of disasters or policy failures and/or examples of 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.

All of the readings are available electronically through the library's online resources or freely on the internet. The [Library's research portal](#) is a good place to start your search. As a UofT student you have free access to an endless number of books, scholarly articles and newspapers. Google scholar and google books are also effective research tools.

The readings for this seminar include academic articles and book chapters, 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 case studies. Keep this aim in mind when doing the readings. In some cases, you are asked to watch a movie, a TV show 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.

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Course Requirements

Tutorials

Tutorials meet for one synchronous hour on most weeks (your TA will provide the full schedule for your tutorial group). Attendance is a pre-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.

Tutorials are not lectures. Most of the learning in the tutorials is done through collective discussion and analysis. Active participation is

therefore key for the success of the tutorial. Accordingly, participation accounts for a significant portion of your grade. Crucially, familiarity with the readings and the lectures is an essential per-requisite for productive participation. During our meetings you can participate by speaking in class, using the class chat (if online), or posting messages on the tutorial's message board.

Tutorial participation counts for 20% of your final grade.

What Went Wrong Podcast

Each student is expected to pick a case study from the course's approved list of cases. Your TA must approve your choice to ensure that there is sufficient diversity of cases in each tutorial group. Once your selection is approved, you can start researching your case. As a first step, you are expected to produce a short, 5 minute long (max.) podcast about your case. It is up to you to decide what to highlight, and what to exclude or include in your podcast. effective podcasts will combine both descriptive and analytical components. In other words, your podcast should tell us the story of what went wrong in your case study but also offer some analysis, preferably utilizing course concepts, on why things went wrong.

Your TA will post a podcast schedule for your tutorial group. Each week several students will post their respective podcasts to the tutorial's message board.

By listening to your colleagues' podcasts, you will gain access to a variety of cases of 'what went wrong.' Providing helpful feedback to each other will be helpful and will count toward your participation grade.

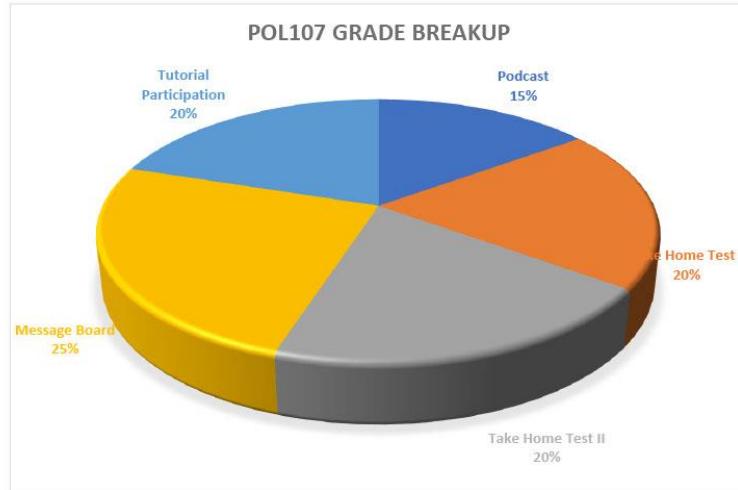
The podcast counts for 15% of your final grade.

Take Home Tests

As part of the course requirements, you are expected to complete two take home tests. The tests will cover all course material (lectures, readings and tutorials). You will have a week to complete the test. The tests will cover all course material: lectures, readings & tutorials. Each test will cover 20% of your grade. The first test will be posted on Wednesday, October 13 (19:00) and will be due on the same time (19:00) the following week (October 20). The second test will be posted on Wednesday, November 24 (19:00) and will be due on the same time the following week (December 1),

Message Boards

Throughout the course you are expected to post at least 8 posts on your tutorial's message board. You can find information regarding the type and number of posts we expect you to submit here. Overall, your message board posts cover 25% of your grade.



Important Dates

October 13

First take home test is posted (19:00)

October 20

Tests are due (19:00)

October 27

Last date to post first two message board posts

November 24

Second take home test is posted (19:00)

December 1

Tests are due (19:00)

December 8

Last day to submit message board posts for grading

Rules and Regulations

Communication and email policy

Please see the FAQ section on the course Quercus where commonly asked questions about the course, assignments, etc. will be addressed. We encourage you to use the FAQ message board for any non-personal questions regarding the course. Students are also encouraged to ask questions and voice concerns during synchronous Q&A meetings, office hours, or tutorial sessions. Always check the FAQ board before emailing us- your question may have already been asked and answered.

If email is strictly required, general inquiries about the course can be made to the head TA or directly to your TA. This is a very large course and we may be handling a large volume of emails. We encourage you to consider other means of communication (as described above) before sending an email. Of course, if the issue at hand is private or urgent, you should feel free to email us. In general, we will do our best to reply to your emails within reasonable time. Most of us are usually away from our email accounts over the weekend.

Assignments

All tests should be double spaced, 12 font, with proper margins and page numbers. essays that go beyond the stated word limit for the assignment, or that do not conform to the directions above, may be penalized.

Unless otherwise specified by your TA, essays should use in-text citations. If notes are needed, please use footnotes and avoid end-notes.

Assignments should be submitted as pdf files.

Extensions

If you are unable to submit papers at the appointed time, you must request permission for an extension. In almost all cases, requests for extensions and deferrals should be submitted ahead of time, to the head TA. 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 or late registration in the course are NOT grounds for an extension.

Late Assignments

Late submission penalty is 4% per each late day or fraction of a day, weekends included. The cut off time for the determination of a late day is 7pm. All assignments should be uploaded to Quercus.

Please note that it is your responsibility to submit all of your message board postings before the specified deadlines. We will not accept late message board submissions.

Accessibility

Students with diverse learning styles and needs are welcome in this course. In particular, if you have a disability/health consideration that may require accommodation, please feel free to approach us and/or the AccessAbility Resource Centre as soon as possible. Accessibility staff (located at 455 Spadina Ave., 4th floor, suite 400) are available by appointment to assess specific needs, provide referrals and arrange appropriate accommodations. Please call 416-978-8060 or email accessability.services@utoronto.ca. The sooner you let us know your needs the quicker we can assist you in achieving your learning goals in this course.

Re-grading and Appeals

If you believe there was an error in grading an assignment or test, you may submit via email a maximum one-page, double-spaced explanation to the TA that graded it detailing why you believe there was an error. You must be as specific as possible, with reference to the assignment and/or comments provided by the TA. If your TA disagrees with your complaint, they will inform the head TA. A different TA will be randomly selected to regrade the assignment in full. Be aware: (1) your entire assignment will be re-graded (not just a particular section); and (2) your overall mark may go up, stay the same, or go down. You must submit regrade requests no later than two weeks after your assignment is returned.

Writing, citing & Academic Integrity

All written assignments must follow academic citation rules. All words and ideas of other individuals should be properly acknowledged. You

can find instructions and useful guidelines for proper citations and bibliographies [here](#) and [here](#). Failure to understand what constitutes plagiarism will not be accepted as an excuse.

If you need further assistance with your writing, either for academic integrity concerns or to improve your writing skills, you can get help through the colleges' writing centers [writing plus workshops](#). You can also schedule [one-on-one meetings](#) at your college writing center.

Plagiarism Detection Tool

Normally, students will be required to submit their course tests to a plagiarism detection software (Ouriginal) for a review of textual similarity and detection of possible plagiarism. In doing so, students will allow their tests to be included as source documents in the tool's reference database, where they will be used solely for the purpose of detecting plagiarism. The terms that apply to the University's use of the Ouriginal service are available [here](#).

Quercus

Important course information, including the weekly lecture videos, will be distributed electronically through Quercus. Unless otherwise specified, we will rely on the Quercus message boards as well. In short, for better or worse, Quercus is your go to portal for all thing POL107. As noted above, feel free to use the electronic forums and message boards on Quercus for any course related topics. [Please respect basic netiquette conventions when posting messages](#).

Week I (Sept. 9-16): Introduction

Throughout the term, please watch all episodes of HBO's series Chernobyl (2019). If possible try to watch the first episode of the series prior to watching this week's recorded lectures.

Joel Achenbach. 2011. "The Century of Disasters," Slate, May 13.

Week II (Sep. 16-23): Conceptual Models of Decision-Making

Allison, Graham T. 2004. "Conceptual Models and the Cuban Missile Crisis." American Political Science Review, 63/3: 689-718.

Which of Allison's models is best suited to explain what went wrong in the following examples?:

NASA's Columbia Accident Investigation Board's Report. 2003. Part II, pp. 99-202 (you do not need to read every word of this report. Scheme through the assigned part of the report and identify the core argument of the investigation board).

Baird, Robert P. 2020. "What Went Wrong with Coronavirus Testing in the US?" The New Yorker, March 16.

Week III (Sep. 23-30): Marches of Folly

Tuchman, Barbara. 1985. March of folly: from Troy to Vietnam. New York: Ballantine Books. Ch. 5.

Whitlock, Craig. 2019. At War With The Truth. The Washington Post, Dec. 9

Musu, Constanza. 2020. War metaphors used for COVID-19 are compelling but also dangerous. The Conversation, April 8.

Recommended viewing: Ken Burns & Lynn Novick's documentary series on the Vietnam War (available on Netflix)

Week IV (Sep. 30-Oct. 7): Our Imperfect Minds

Kolbert, Elizabeth. 2017. "Why Facts Don't Change Our Minds," The New Yorker, February 27

Klein, Ezra. 2020. Why are Liberals More Afraid of the Coronavirus than Conservatives? Vox, May 21.

Week V (Oct. 7-Oct. 14): Disorganized Organizations?

Schein, Edgar. 2010. Organizational Culture and Leadership. San Francisco : Jossey-Bass Pub. pp. 7-34.

MacGillis, Alec. 2019. The Case Against Boeing. The New Yorker. November 11.

Barstow, David, David Rohde and Stephanie Saul. 2010. Deepwater Horizon's Final Hours. The New York Times, December 26: A1.

Week VI (Oct. 14-Oct. 21): Seeing Like a State

Scott, James C. 1998. *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed.* New Haven: Yale University Press. Read pp 1-6 and chapter 7 (rural collectivization in Tanzania)

Rubin, Oliver. 2009. The Niger Famine: A Collapse of Entitlements and Democratic Responsiveness. *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 44/3: 279-298.

Week VII (Oct. 21-Oct. 28): Are All Disasters Created Equal?

McEvoy, Arthur F. 1995. The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire of 1911: Social Change, Industrial Accidents, and the Evolution of Common Sense Causality. *Law & Social Inquiry*, 20/2: 621-651

Walker, Peter. 1999. Natural Disasters Are Man-Made. *New Perspectives Quarterly*, 16/5: 15-16

Taylor, Keeanga-Yamahtta. 2020. The Black Plague. *The New Yorker*. April 16.

Native Women's Association of Canada. 2010. Fact Sheet: Missing and Murdered Aboriginal Women and Girls.

Hideki Toya and Mark Skidmore. 2007. Economic development and the impacts of natural disasters. *Economic Letters*, 94/1: 20-25.

Recommended: for those interested in the Triangle Shirtwaiste Fire, listen to this informative episode from the Spectacular Failures podcast.

Week VIII (Oct. 28-Nov. 4): Boiling Frogs

Hardin, Garrett. 1968. The Tragedy of the Commons. *Science*, 162/3859, pp. 1243-1248.

Bazerman, Max H. 2006. Climate Change as a Predictable Surprise. *Climatic Change*, 77/1-2: 179-193.

Schulz, Kathryn. 2015. The Really Big One. *The New Yorker*, July 20.

Week IX (Nov. 4-Nov 8 & Nov. 13-Nov. 18): Public policy and Economic Reform.

Blyth, Mark. 2013. The Austerity Delusion: Why a Bad Idea Won Over the West. *Foreign Affairs*, 92/3: 41-56

Movie: *The Big Short* (2015)

Fall Reading Week (Nov. 12-18)

Week X (Nov. 18-Nov. 25): Life Finds a Way

Sagan, Scott D. 1994. Organized for Accidents. *Security Studies*, 3/3: 509-520

Schlosser, Eric. 2016. World War Three, by Mistake. *The New Yorker*, December 23

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

Week XI (November 25-Dec. 2): Can Experts Save the Day?

Nichols, Tom. 2017. How America Lost Its Trust in Expertise (and Why That's a Giant Problem). *Foreign Affairs*, March/April

Drezner, Daniel. 2017. The Ideas Industry. New York: Oxford University Press. Part I

Acemoglu, Daron. 2020. The Coronavirus Exposed America's Authoritarian Turn: Independent Expertise Always Dies First When Democracy Recedes. Foreign Affairs, March 23.

Week XII (Dec. 2-Dec. 8): Reasons to Worry?

Levitsky, Steven and Daniel Ziblatt. 2018. How Democracies Die. New York: Crown Pub. Ch. 1

Stay @ Home Playlist

For those interested, here are a few recommended shows/movies/podcasts that provide additional examples of things going terribly wrong.

The Inventor: Out for Blood in Silicon Valley, HBO documentary

Thirteen Days (2000 movie version of the Cuban Missile Crisis)

Fyre: The Greatest Party that Never Happened, Netflix Documentary

Floodlines: The Story of an Unnatural Disaster, Podcast series.

Wild Wild Country, a Netflix documentary series

How to F#@k Up an Airport, Podcast series

Spectacular Failures, Podcast series

Famous marketing blunders, Under the Influence podcast (CBC)

Slow Burn, Podcast series

Fiasco, Podcast series

Nice Try! Utopia, Podcast series

Blueprint for Armageddon, Hardcore History WWI podcast series

The Pharmacist, Netflix documentary series

Revolutions, Podcast series