What Went Wrong?

A Post Mortem of Political Disasters, Catastrophic Policy Failures, and Epic Marches of Folly
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 test 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:

Lectures will be held in MS2158 every Wednesday, 5:00-7:00.

Prof. Lilach Gilady (she/her)

Sidney Smith Hall, Room 3034
Email: Lilach.gilady@utoronto.ca

Office Hours:

By appointment, online, every Tuesday 17:30-19:00.
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 semester 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 accident 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.
Course Requirements

Tutorials

Tutorials meet for one 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 pre-requisite for productive participation. During our meetings you can participate by speaking in class 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 choice is approved, you can start researching your case. 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 particular case study but also offer some analysis, preferably utilizing course concepts. After listening to your podcast your audience should have a good understanding of both what went wrong and why.

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 constructive feedback to each other will be helpful and will count toward your participation grade.

The podcast counts for 14% of your final grade.
Tests

As part of the course requirements, you are expected to complete a take home test and an in-class test. The tests will cover all course material: lectures, readings & tutorials. Each test will cover 25% of your grade. The take home test will be posted on Wednesday, October 12 (19:00) and will be due on the same time (19:00) the following week (October 18). The in-class test will be held during our last scheduled lecture (December 7).

Message Boards

Throughout the course you are expected to post at least four posts on your tutorial's message board. You can find information regarding the type and number of posts we expect you to submit here. Read the instructions carefully. Overall, your message board posts cover 16% of your grade.
Greade Breakup

- In-class test: 25%
- Take Home Test: 25%
- Message Board: 16%
- Tutorials: 20%
- Podcast: 14%

Important Dates
October 12

First take home test is posted (19:00)

October 18

Tests are due (19:00)

October 31

Last date to post first two message board posts

December 7

In-class test
December 7

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 before and after lectures, during lecture Q&A, in 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 me 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 written assignments 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 endnotes.

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 your 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 course instructor. 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 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 things 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. 14): Introduction

Throughout the term, please watch all episodes of HBO's series Chernobyl (2019).

If this is your first introduction to political science and you want to learn more about this field, it is recommended that you watch this introductory COVID era video.
Week II (Sep. 21): Conceptual Models of Decision-Making


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

If possible, watch the first episode of Apple TV's Five Days at Memorial.
Week III (Sep. 28): Marches of Folly

Introduction and skim through ch. 5. A link to the March of Folly reading is available on Quercus.
The Domino Theory


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.
The Vietnam War

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3j-3Xi5BcKs
Week IV (October 5): Our Imperfect Minds


Week V (October 12): Disorganized Organizations?


Take-Home Test!
Week VI (October 19): Seeing Like a State


Famine memorial, Ukraine
Week VII (October 26): Are All Disasters Created Equal?

1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire


**Recommended:** for those interested in the Triangle Shirtwaiste Fire, listen to this [informative episode](#) from the Spectacular Failures podcast.
Week VIII (November 2): Boiling Frogs


November 9: Fall Reading Week! (No lecture or tutorials)
Week IX (November 16): Public policy and Economic Reform.


Movie: The Big Short (2015)
Week X (November 23): Life Finds a Way

Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds.

Movie: Dr. Strangelove Or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love The Bomb
Week XI (November 30): Can Experts Save the Day?


Week XII (December 7): Reasons to Worry?

In-class test followed by a shorter lecture

Stay @ Home Playlist

For those interested, here are a few recommended shows/movies/podcasts that provide additional examples of things gone 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

Five Days at Memorial, Apple TV

Dopesick, Disney Plus

The Dropout, Hulu
Credits:
Created with images by srickomkrit - "crack on white background" - EvgeniyQW - "Eye of the Hurricane. Hurricane on Earth. Typhoon over planet Earth. Category 5 super typhoon approaching the coast. View from outer space. (Elements of this image furnished by NASA)"