

The Politics of Nature

Seminar Leader: Amy Chandran

TIME/PLACE

Office Hours: TBC

Course Description:

How does our conception of nature shape our political realities and fortunes? While today we are more aware than ever of the pressures posed by limited resources, fragile ecosystems, and rapidly changing climates, the history of political thought reveals a long-standing awareness of the interdependence between nature, the political edifice and the mediating force of technological development. By tracing out a series of core concepts, this course surveys a series of complex dynamics of dependence, control, crisis, and escape, that govern the interplay between man and his environment.

The interdependence of the natural world, the artificial world we create, and the political edifice, often appears as a puzzle: how should we approach nature? What power, if any, does it hold over us? What is the role of artifice and technology in producing and mediating society's most pressing challenges? How ought we reconcile our dependence upon nature with the desire and need to control certain forces of nature? If today we are more aware than ever of our own impact on our environment, a much longer tradition pays testament to the fact that this complex interplay is a two-way street. Man is, and continues to be, shaped in imperceptible ways by the technologies he produces, as these work with and on nature. This course excavates this rich tradition of social and political texts, through four distinct units that trace this relationship up to the contemporary moment. It offers students an opportunity to gain a wider appreciation of the historical contours of these pressing questions, as well as a renewed look at some of the most topical difficulties of today, including social media, climate change and the impact of our built environments.

All materials for the course will be posted on Canvas.

Reading/Course Outline (Subject to minor changes)

Week 1: What is nature?

What ideas of nature have proven influential at different points of history? This week, to introduce different themes of the course, we will read two contrasting works from 1909 that speak to the potential impacts on human society and its experience of the natural world, as technologies develop. We will consider what kinds of concerns and hopes have taken shape as our approaches to nature have evolved, and read a lecture that surveys the development of the concept of nature.

Readings: (~40 pgs)

Raymond Williams, "Ideas of Nature," in *Problems in Materialism and Culture* (London: Verso, 1990).

E.M. Forster, [The Machine Stops](#), *The Cambridge and Oxford Review*, (1909).

Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, "[The Futurist Manifesto](#) - (1909)" in *Documents of 20th Century Art: Futurist Manifestos*. trans. Apollonio, Umbro (New York: Viking Press, 1973) 19-24.

Part I: Nature at the Origins — Harmony, Dominion & Government

Week 2: Creation, Harmony and Worship of Nature:

Humanity's oldest interactions with untamed nature approached the natural world as divine. This week we will examine the view that developed across various pagan traditions. We will also contrast this with the Christian conception of nature as created, that came to displace these traditions. We will examine how these respective visions differed, and the significance for the question of whether man is a part of, or separate from, nature.

Readings: (~40 pages)

Thomas Carlyle, "The Hero as Divinity. Odin. Paganism: Scandinavian Mythology," *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*, ed. David R Sorensen and Brent E. Kinser (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).

The Bible, *Genesis* I-III.

G.K. Chesterton, *The World St Francis Found* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1924).

Week 3: Natural Sociability & the Naturalness of Property

Are humans naturally political? Weeks 3 and 4 survey this question by way of two closely related debates that unfolded in examinations of the natural relations of human beings. The first concerns the naturalness of property—can property be secured prior to the establishment of government? Is private property "natural"? If many writers argued that the possibility of private property was tied up with the establishment of government, how did this shape their understanding of natural sociability?

Readings:

Aristotle, *Politics*, 2nd ed. trans. Carnes Lord, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2013) Book I, II, VII [excerpts].

Thomas Aquinas, Pars. II-II, Q 66 a1-2, *Summa Theologica*, translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province, (New York: Benzinger Bros. 1948).

John Locke, "Chapter V—On Property," *The Second Treatise on Government*, ed. C. B. Macpherson (Hackett Publishing, 1980).

Week 4: The Naturalness of Government, the Fall and "States of Nature"

The second debate examines the naturalness of government with respect to "the fall,"—the Christian teaching that original sin brought about changes to the original order established by God. Theologians from Augustine to Aquinas, asked whether in the state of "natural innocence" or a state of "pure nature" government would have arisen or been required. Closely connected to questions of "dominion," the existence or absence of a "government" prior to the fall held implications for how closely tied the political realm might be tied to questions of man's sinfulness and, or, salvation. Moreover, the complex consideration of various "states" of nature, can readily be seen as a precursor to image of the "state of nature" that would famously appear at the advent of modern political thought in Thomas Hobbes's landmark work, Leviathan.

Readings:

Thomas Aquinas, pars I, Q94, *Summa Theologica*, translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province, (New York: Benzinger Bros. 1948).

Francisco Suárez, 'What Kind of Corporeal or Political Life Men Would Have Professed in the State of Innocence'. trans. Matthew Gaetano. *Journal of Markets and Morality* 15 (2012): 541-63.

Thomas Hobbes, Chapter 13-14, *Leviathan*, ed. Richard Tuck, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

Part II: “New Worlds” and “New Science” —Nature under the Microscope

Week 5: The Scientific Premise and the Naturalistic Fallacy

Hobbes’s “State of Nature” reflected a wider transformation in political and moral thinking. With the discovery of “new worlds” abroad and the new developments in the natural sciences, the idea that nature might provide some moral consensus or that humans could readily access a natural order, came under scrutiny. Among the propagators of an alternative vision was not only Thomas Hobbes, but also Francis Bacon, Rene Descartes and Sir Isaac Newton. In the eighteenth century, the challenge took on greater clarity in Hume’s articulation of what would come to be known as “the naturalistic fallacy.” In his analysis of human understanding Hume stressed that nature is value free and that alternative approaches would be required to come to moral and political consensus.

Readings:

Francis Bacon, *Novum Organum*, [[excerpts](#)], ed Joseph Devey, M.A. (New York: P. F. Collier & Son 1902).

Francis Bacon, *New Atlantis*, ed Gerard B. Wegemer (Dallas, Texas: CTMS Publishers, 2020).

Isaac Newton, *Opticks: or a Treatise of the Reflections, Refractions, Inflections and Colours of Light*, (West End of St Paul’s: William and John Innys, 1721).

David Hume, *A Treatise on Human Nature* [excerpts] (London: Printed for John Noon, at the *White-Hart*, near *Mercer’s-Chapel* in *Cheapside*), 1739, (available at Online Library of Liberty)

Week 6: The Romantic Complaint and a Return to Nature

The radical upheaval instigated by seventeenth century innovators did not go wholly unchallenged. One important reply was voiced by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who suggested that it was the eclipse of nature that had produced such calamitous wars among humankind. Rousseau’s account of nature, however, marked a turn toward the consideration of nature as historically defined. Although holding forth the virtues of a rustic crudeness, Rousseau also recognized the impossibility of return. We will compare this to related transcendentalist writers, such as Emerson, who also insisted on reasserting the value of nature amid the unfolding array of modern transformations.

Readings:

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Excerpts from “The First Discourse” and “The Second Discourse,” *The Major Political Writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, trans. and ed. John T Scott, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012).

Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature*, in *Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Robert E. Spiller, Alfred R. Ferguson (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971).

Week 7: Nature and Historical Progress—Overcoming Nature

From this new view of nature, a new political and moral project gradually developed. Nature, working upon history, revealed the possibility of progress, rather than any fixed set of truths. The difficulty posed by man's natural condition was subtly transformed—emboldened by the advances of the Enlightenment, thinkers proposed new heights for human progress and a new vision of the political achievements that might be possible.

Readings:

Nicholas de Condorcet and Keith Michael Baker (trans), “Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind: Tenth Epoch,” *Daedalus* Vol.133 (3) (2004), pg 65-82.

Immanuel Kant, “Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose” in *Kant Political Writings*, H.S. Reiss ed., H.B. Nisbit trans. (Cambridge University Press, 1991).

Part III: Industrialization and Exploitation—Nature and the Machine

Week 8: Industrialization and The Machine

As the age of Enlightenment and industrialization took hold social commentaries increasingly lamented the “war with rude Nature” that marked the new “mechanical age” unfolding. This week we take account of the various ways in which 19th Century writers diagnosed the changes—not only with respect to the demise of metaphysical and moral science, but especially in the realm of politics where it was feared the mechanical spirit had also taken hold.

Readings:

Thomas Carlyle, “Signs of the Times,” in *A Carlyle Reader: Selections from the Writings of Thomas Carlyle*. G. B. Tennyson (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

Samuel Butler, *Darwin Among The Machines*, in *The Press* (Christchurch, New Zealand: 13 June, 1863).

John Ruskin, *Unto this Last & other Writings*, ed. Clive Wilmer, (Penguin Classics, 1986).

Week 9: Alienation from Nature

This week we will turn to a different formulation of the complaint brought on by developments in economic and industrial life—the alienation experienced from man's own nature or “species-being.” While this critique echoed earlier sentiments, the accompanying suggestion that man might discover a solution by embracing life's material dimensions and humankind's shared potential brought together the shifting visions of history, nature and power in a new and transformative consensus.

Readings:

Karl Marx, “On the Theft of the Woods;” “1844 Manuscripts;” “German Ideology” excerpts from *Marx and Engels Collected Works* (International Publishers, New York, Lawrence and Wishart, London, and Progress Publishers, Moscow) volumes 1 – 35.

Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1958).

Week 10: The Difficulty of Technological Progress

This week we turn to two twentieth century authors who perceptively captured the ineluctable force of progress and technological development. Both Weber and Heidegger diagnose a new relation to technology, and accordingly, to nature. Each provides interesting insight into questions of control, mastery, freedom and truth were shaping a new stance towards any remaining conception of ‘nature.’

Readings:

Max Weber, Science as a Vocation [excerpt] in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills trans. and ed (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946) pp. 129-156.

Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and other Essays*, William Lovitt ed. (New York and London, Garland Publishing, 1977).

Part IV: Natural, but Artificial—The Contemporary Challenge

Week 11: The Need for Roots

This week we survey responses to the difficulties posed by the “eclipse” of nature in the twentieth century. The readings invite reflection on how the built environment, the economic edifice, and the mode of modern life enhance or detract from human community and flourishing.

Readings:

E.F. Schumacher, *Small is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered*, (Harper Perennial, 2010).

Wendell Berry, *The Unsettling of America: Culture & Agriculture* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1977).

G.K. Chesterton, *The Outline of Sanity*, (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1927).

Simone Weil, *The Need for Roots: Prelude to a Declaration of Duties Towards Mankind*, (Routledge Classics, 2001)

Carl Schmitt, *The Nomos of the Earth in the International Law of Jus Publicum Europaeum*, trans. G.L. Ulmen, (New York: Telos Press Publishing, 2006).

Week 12: Climate Change, Fatalism, and Contemporary Threats

This week we turn to the pressing difficulties posed by urgent environmental challenges of today. How are these contemporary crises and their political presentation, shaped by man’s overall understanding of nature and its political dimensions?

Readings:

David Runciman, “Optimism, Pessimism and Fatalism” in *Nature, Action and the Future*, ed. Katrina Forester, Sophie Smith, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

David Wallace-Wells, “The Uninhabitable Earth,” *New York Mag: Intelligencer*, July 9 2017, <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2017/07/climate-change-earth-too-hot-for-humans.html>.

Week 13: Artificial Intelligence: Construction, Destruction, Reconstruction—Our New Reality

This week we turn to rapid developments in the realm of social media and the development of increasingly artificial interfaces in the production of human interactions. We will be asking whether and how human ‘nature’ is shaped or changed by these developments, and whether these yield the promised improvements for human convenience and commodiousness.

Readings:

Antón Barba-Kay, *A Web of Our Own Making*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2023).

Byung-Chul Han, *Into the Swarm*, trans Erik Butler (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2017).

Week 14: The Politics of Nature:

To conclude the seminar, we will finish with readings that complement the themes of the semester and return to examine the competing conceptions of nature at the heart of politics.

Assessment:

| Course work component | % | Notes |
|---|-------------|--|
| In class short responses | 25 | During six classes I will ask you to write a short response (on the readings for the day). This will occur in class throughout the semester, and will take about 10-15 minutes. Points will be given out of 10. You may drop your lowest grade, the remaining five will be 5% each of your grade |
| Midsemester Reflection Piece | 20 | This will be a short Reflection statement of 1000-1500 words. |
| Final Reflection Piece | 30 | The final paper will be 2000 (double spaced); on an approved topic of the student’s choosing. |
| Seminar attendance/ Participation/ Discussion Board Posts | 25 | Student participation in the discussion element of the seminar is crucial. Students are also expected to post to a discussion board prior to class at least once every two weeks. These posts (and engagement with the posts of others) will contribute to participation grade. |
| Total Points | 100% | |

Other Policies:

Collaborating with Others:

Group work and collaboration are essential to your learning. It is even recommended that you might get together and read through the works studied in this course together. That said, all of your written work will be solo assignments and must be your original work and produced without the assistance of others unless I specifically state otherwise.

Missed classes and late assignments:

If you have a major health issues or family emergency, please contact me as soon as possible so we can make sure you stay on track. If you miss an in-class response, this will usually be first the one response grade that you are able to drop.

Laptop computer and cell phone use

No phones should be visible during the class. Laptop use is strongly discouraged. Using devices for activities beyond the scope of note-taking or accessing readings will result in a reduced participation grade.

Academic accommodations

Students who need academic accommodations for a disability should contact FAS Disability Access Office (DAO), Smith Campus Center, 4th Floor, (617) 496-8707, dao@fas.harvard.edu.