

Practical Approaches to Saving the World*

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And it is not our part here to take thought only for a season, or for a few lives of Men, or a passing age of the world. We should seek a final end to this menace, even if we do not hope to make one.

The Lord of the Rings, vol. 1, Book 2, chapter 3, “The Council of Elrond”
— J. R. R. TOLKIEN

1 Motivation

What does “the world” mean to you? Does it need saving? Does it merit saving? Can it be saved? How? What might the new world look like?

In this seminar, we shall focus on the single most important concept that underlies these questions and binds them together: *suffering*. A world in which suffering is pervasive and endemic would seem to be in trouble for this reason alone, no matter what else can be said about it.¹ A focus on suffering is thus indispensable both in identifying the causes of the world’s troubles and in working out possible remedies.

1.1 The key concept: preventable suffering

Of the many inconvenient truths that define the human condition (Edelman, 2020), the ubiquity of suffering is the most glaring one. Quoting from Ursula K. Le Guin’s novel *The Dispossessed* (1974b, p.60),

Suffering is the condition on which we live. And when it comes you know it. You know it as the truth. Of course it’s right to cure diseases, to prevent hunger and injustice, as the social organism does. But no society can change the nature of its existence. We can’t prevent suffering. This pain and that pain, yes, but not Pain. A society can only relieve social suffering — unnecessary suffering. The rest remains. The root, the reality.

The key phrase uttered by Le Guin’s protagonist — “unnecessary suffering” — marks an opening for us. This semester, let us concentrate on the challenge of, first, identifying the causes of such *preventable* suffering, and, second, on thinking of ways to abolish it.

1.2 The tools: readings, thinking, discussions

The plan is for us to read a selection of papers, academic and other, as well as optional book-length materials, and to discuss these in class (virtually, due to the pandemic-related constraints). Each week, the discussion will be led by a team of student presenters, whose role will be not so much to exhaustively cover that week’s readings, as to highlight key points and to facilitate and steer the discussion. An annotated reading list, with the materials grouped by weekly theme, appears below in section 3, following some important notes for seminar participants.

¹In particular, the abolition of suffering arguably takes precedence over the pursuit of happiness, if the latter is construed in purely individualistic terms, as in (Edelman, 2012).

2 Notes for participants

This section contains essential information for participants: the inclusion statement,² ground rules for discussion, and credit requirements.

2.1 Diversity, inclusion, and ground rules for discussion

Unlike in a large-enrollment lecture-based course, in which some students may choose, and succeed, to remain virtually anonymous, in a small-class seminar setting you are required to speak in front of the class (when presenting) and are expected to contribute to the discussion on other occasions. Because *your* informed opinion on every aspect of the material is unique and valuable, I shall strive to facilitate the conversation so as to make all voices heard. In this, I'll be counting on your help, and on the help of your classmates.

Even matters of “consensus” are not always easy to talk about, as the rare dissenters who dare voice their opposition know full well; how then should we approach potentially controversial topics? With care and compassion, diligence, openness, and daring: care for our shared humanity; diligence with regard to the relevant knowledge and findings; openness to informed dissent; and daring to venture into uncharted territory, as befits good education.

If at any point during the semester (no matter whether in class or after hours) you feel that you need to talk about any of these things, please let me know immediately — doing so will be my top priority.

2.2 Credit and grading

There are three components to getting credit for this seminar:

1. **Attend** and contribute to the discussion during the weekly meetings.
2. By noon on each Monday, submit via **email questions** on the readings assigned for the corresponding class. Be prepared to ask these questions in class.
3. Participate in **two** separate weekly **presentations**. Each presentation/discussion will be led by a team of two to four students. The presenters should be ready for clarification questions and interruptions at any time during the presentation.

IMPORTANT: please choose your two topics and co-presenters by Tuesday, Sept. 8. A link to an online tool for signing up for presentations will be made available on the instructor's home page.

A typical presentation should include

- a brief introduction to the theme and an overview of the background to each paper and its methodology;
- the findings, as illustrated by the plots or (in the absence of graphics) by a concise verbal description;
- a critique of the paper's approach;

²The remarks in section 2.1, which are specific to this course, are intended to supplement the official Cornell statement on diversity and inclusion, which covers dimensions such as gender, race, socio-economic background, etc., and which can be found here: <http://diversity.cornell.edu/>.

- a summary of the paper’s conclusions and their significance for the weekly theme and for the seminar’s topic at large.

The presenting teams are required to meet with the instructor ahead of their presentation, to address any questions and coordinate the details.

4. The day after the last meeting, submit via email a written summary of your impressions and lessons from the seminar, in a **short-essay** form (about 1000 words, PDF). It is advisable to start working on this essay well before the end of the semester.

Final grade components:

Presentations:	44%
Weekly questions	26%
Participation in the discussions:	10%
Final essay:	20%

3 Weekly themes and readings

Representative readings, grouped by topic, are listed below. They also appear in alphabetical order at the end of the document. [Note: in what follows, **IT** refers to Edelman, S. (2020). *Life, Death, and Other Inconvenient Truths*. MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, to be published on Oct. 13, 2020; view-only access to a PDF copy will be arranged via Cornell Box file sharing system.]

Introduction

1. **(Sept. 7) INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW.** The key concept: *preventable suffering*. The key disciplines: psychology, sociology, anthropology, history, political science.

Readings:

- (a) **IT**: [ch.32, Suffering].

Optional:

- (a) Hepburn, R. W. and Murdoch, I. (1956). Vision and choice in morality. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes*, 30, 14–58.
- (b) **IT**: ch.31 (Stupidity), ch.25 (Politics).

3.1 Part I: Some of the causes of preventable suffering

2. **(Sept. 14) INEQUALITY. POVERTY. POWER.**

Readings:

- (a) Royce, E. C. (2009). Poverty as a social problem. In *Poverty and power: a structural perspective on American inequality*, chapter 1, pages 1–26. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., Lanham, MD.
- (b) Hickel, J. (2017). Is global inequality getting better or worse? A critique of the World Bank’s convergence narrative. *Third World Quarterly*, 38(10), 2208–2222.

- (c) Neal, J. W. and Neal, Z. P. (2011). Power as a structural phenomenon. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 48, 157–167.
- (d) **IT**: ch.27 (Poverty), ch.26 (Power), ch.25 (Politics).

Optional:

- (a) Hickel, J. (2019c). A letter to Steven Pinker (and Bill Gates, for that matter) about global poverty. *Class, Race and Corporate Power*, 7(1), 3. Available at <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/classracecorporatempower/vol7/iss1/3>.
- (b) Mahault, B., Saxena, A., and Nisoli, C. (2017). Emergent inequality and self-organized social classes in a network of power and frustration. *PLoS One*, 12(2), e0171832.
- (c) *Our Broken Economy, in One Simple Chart*, by David Leonhardt (The New York Times, Aug. 7, 2017)

3. **(Sept. 21)** LACK OF HEALTHCARE. MEDICALIZATION.

Readings:

- (a) Hupfeld, S. (2009). Rich and healthy — better than poor and sick? An empirical analysis of income, health, and the duration of the pension benefit spell. *Journal of Health Economics*, 28, 427–443.
- (b) Forget, E. L. (2011). The town with no poverty: the health effects of a Canadian Guaranteed Annual Income field experiment. *Canadian Public Policy – Analyse de politiques*, xxxvii(3), 283–305.
- (c) Brinkmann, S. (2014). Languages of suffering. *Theory & Psychology*, 24, 630–648.

Optional:

- (a) Diener, E. and Chan, M. Y. (2011). Happy people live longer: subjective well-being contributes to health and longevity. *Applied Psychology: Health and Well-Being*, 3(1), 1–43.

4. **(Sept. 28)** DEGRADATION OF THE ENVIRONMENT.

Readings:

- (a) Li, A. M. L. (2017). Ecological determinants of health: food and environment on human health. *Environmental Science and Pollution Research*, 24, 9002–9015.
- (b) Cunsolo, A. and Ellis, N. R. (2018). Ecological grief as a mental health response to climate change-related loss. *Nature Climate Change*, 8, 275–281.
- (c) Ellis, E. C., Magliocca, N. R., Stevens, C. J., and Fuller, D. Q. (2018). Evolving the Anthropocene: linking multi-level selection with long-term social-ecological change. *Sustainability Science*, 13, 119–128.

Optional:

- (a) Godfrey-Smith, W. (1979). The value of wilderness. *Environmental Ethics*, 1, 309–319.
- (b) Hamilton, C. (2015). The theodicy of the “Good Anthropocene”. *Environmental Humanities*, 7, 233–238.

5. **(Oct. 5) WORK.**

Readings:

- (a) Chetty, R., Grusky, D., Hell, M., Hendren, N., Manduca, R., and Narang, J. (2017). The fading American dream: Trends in absolute income mobility since 1940. *Science*, 356, 398–406.
- (b) Hochschild, J. L. (2017). Race, class, politics, and the disappearance of work. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 40(9), 1492–1501.
- (c) Graeber, D. (2020). The future of work. In R. Skidelsky and N. Craig, editors, *Work in the Future: The Automation Revolution*, chapter 16, pages 157–173. Palgrave Macmillan, London.

Optional:

- (a) Graeber, D. (2006). Turning modes of production inside out or, Why capitalism is a transformation of slavery. *Critique of Anthropology*, 26(1), 61–85.

6. **(Oct. 12) BULLSHIT. PROPAGANDA. IGNORANCE.**

Readings:

- (a) **IT**: ch.36 (Truth).
- (b) Peters, M. A. and Jandrić, P. (2017). Dewey’s democracy and education in the age of digital reason: the global, ecological and digital turns. *Open Review of Educational Research*, 4, 205–218.
- (c) Peters, M. A. (2017). Ecopolitical philosophy, education and grassroots democracy: the “return” of Murray Bookchin (and John Dewey?). *Geopolitics, History, and International Relations*, 9(2), 7–14.

Optional:

- (a) **IT**: ch.29 (Religion).
- (b) **IT**: ch.30 (Science).

3.2 Part II: Preventing preventable suffering

7. **(Oct. 19) CAPITALISM. GROWTH.**

Readings:

- (a) Freeman, R. E., Parmar, B. L., and Martin, K. E. (2016). Responsible capitalism: Business for the 21st century. In D. Barton, D. Horváth, and M. Kipping, editors, *Re-Imagining Capitalism*, chapter 10, pages 135–144. Oxford University Press, New York, NY.
- (b) Smith, R. (2010). Beyond growth or beyond capitalism? *Real-world Economics Review*, 53, 28–42.
- (c) Hickel, J. and Kallis, G. (2020). Is green growth possible? *New Political Economy*, 25(4), 469–486.

Optional:

- (a) Schwartz, B. (1999). Capitalism, the market, the “underclass,” and the future. *Society*, 37, 33–42.

8. **(Oct. 26)** A NEW HOPE (PSYCHOLOGY AND ECONOMICS).

Readings:

- (a) Pugno, M. (2019a). The economics of eudaimonia. MPRA Paper No. 96251. Available online at <https://mpra.ub.uni-muenchen.de/96251/>
- (b) Dean, H. (2016). Eudaimonia and ‘species being’: A Marxist perspective. In J. Vittersø, editor, *Handbook of Eudaimonic Well-Being*, chapter 34, pages 507–520. Springer, Cham, Switzerland.
- (c) Graeber, D. and Wengrow, D. (2018). How to change the course of human history (at least, the part that’s already happened). Eurozine. Available online at <https://www.eurozine.com/change-course-human-history/>.

Optional:

- (a) Levitas, R. (1990). Educated hope: Ernst Bloch on abstract and concrete utopia. *Utopian Studies*, 1(2), 13–26

9. **(Nov. 2)** A NEW HOPE (SOCIOLOGY AND ECONOMICS).

Readings:

- (a) Hickel, J. (2019a). Degrowth: a theory of radical abundance. *real-world economics review*, 87, 54–68. Published 19 March 2019. Available online at <http://www.paecon.net/PAEReview/issue87/Hickel187.pdf>.
- (b) Hickel, J. (2019b). Is it possible to achieve a good life for all within planetary boundaries? *Third World Quarterly*, 40(1), 18–35.

Optional:

- (a) Pugno, M. (2019b). Happiness, human development, and economic (de)growth. *Annals of the Fondazione Luigi Einaudi*, LIII, 151–172.
- (b) Jackson, T. (2009). *Prosperity without growth: economics for a finite planet*. Earthscan, London.

10. **(Nov. 9)** A NEW HOPE (ANTHROPOLOGY, HISTORY).

Readings:

- (a) Boehm, C., Barclay, H. B., Dentan, R. K., Dupre, M.-C., Hill, J. D., Kent, S., Knauff, B. M., Otterbein, K. F., and Rayner, S. (1993). Egalitarian behavior and reverse dominance hierarchy [and comments and reply]. *Current Anthropology*, 34(3), 227–254
- (b) Graeber, D. (2004). *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology*. Prickly Paradigm Press, Chicago, IL. Available online at <https://www.prickly-paradigm.com/titles/fragments-anarchist.html>.
- (c) Conlon, E. (1986). *The Spanish civil war: Anarchism in action*. Workers Solidarity Movement. Available online at http://struggle.ws/spain/pam_intro.html.

- (d) Bookchin, M. (1968/1986a). The forms of freedom. In *Post-Scarcity Anarchism*, pages 163–192. Black Rose Books, Montreal, Quebec. Available online at <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/murray-bookchin-the-forms-of-freedom>.

Optional:

- (a) Franzini Tibaldeo, R. (2019). Thinking and behaving “otherwise”: An anthropological enquiry into utopia, image and ethics. *Ethics & Bioethics (in Central Europe)*, 9(1-2), 3–10.
- (b) Scott, J. C. (2012). *Two Cheers for Anarchism: Six Easy Pieces on Autonomy, Dignity, and Meaningful Work and Play*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ.

11. **(Nov. 30)** A NEW HOPE (PHILOSOPHY, POLITICS).

Readings:

- (a) Wright, E. O. (2013). Transforming capitalism through real utopias. *American Sociological Review*, 78, 1–25.
- (b) Wolff, R. P. (1970). *In Defense of Anarchism*. Harper and Row, New York, NY. Available online at <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/robert-paul-wolff-in-defense-of-a-pdf>.
- (c) Parsons, L. E. (1905/2004). The principles of anarchism. In G. Ahrens, editor, *Lucy Parsons: Freedom, Equality and Solidarity*. Charles H. Kerr, Chicago, IL. Available online at <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/lucy-e-parsons-the-principles-of-anarchism>

Optional:

- (a) Thompson, E. P. (1959). An English Revolutionary. A lecture to the Williams Morris Society, 1959. Reprinted in the Tribune Magazine, April 23, 2020. Available online at <https://tribunemag.co.uk/2020/04/an-english-revolutionary>.
- (b) Morris, W. (1890). *News from Nowhere, or An Epoch of Rest*. Kelmscott Press, London, UK. Available online at <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/3261>.

12. **(Dec. 7)** A NEW HOPE (LIBERATION).

Readings:

- (a) Bookchin, M. (1986b). *Post-Scarcity Anarchism*. Black Rose Books, Montreal, Quebec. Second edition, with a new introduction. Available online at <https://libcom.org/files/Post-Scarcity%20Anarchism%20-%20Murray%20Bookchin.pdf>.
- (b) Kom’boa Ervin, L. (1979/1993). *Anarchism and the Black Revolution. Pages from Prison No. 4*. Monkeywrench Press, Philadelphia, PA. Second edition. Available online at <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/lorenzo-kom-boa-ervin-anarchism-and-the-bl>

Optional:

- (a) Le Guin, U. K. (1974b). *The Dispossessed*. Harper & Row, New York, NY.

13. (Dec. 14) GENERAL DISCUSSION.

Readings:

- (a) Le Guin, U. K. (1973). The ones who walk away from Omelas. In R. Silverberg, editor, *New Dimensions 3*, pages 1–8. Nelson Doubleday. Available online at <http://sites.asiasociety.org/asia21summit/wp-content/uploads/2011/02/3.-Le-Guin-Ursula-.pdf>.
 - (b) Le Guin, U. K. (1974a). The day before the revolution. *Galaxy Science Fiction Magazine*, 35(8), 17–30.
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- Forget, E. L. (2011). The town with no poverty: the health effects of a Canadian Guaranteed Annual Income field experiment. *Canadian Public Policy – Analyse de politiques*, xxxvii(3), 283–305.
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- Le Guin, U. K. (1974a). The day before the revolution. *Galaxy Science Fiction Magazine*, 35(8), 17–30.
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- Peters, M. A. (2017). Ecopolitical philosophy, education and grassroots democracy: the “return” of Murray Bookchin (and John Dewey?). *Geopolitics, History, and International Relations*, 9(2), 7–14.
- Peters, M. A. and Jandrić, P. (2017). Dewey’s democracy and education in the age of digital reason: the global, ecological and digital turns. *Open Review of Educational Research*, 4, 205–218.
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- Pugno, M. (2019b). Happiness, human development, and economic (de)growth. *Annals of the Fondazione Luigi Einaudi*, LIII, 151–172.

- Royce, E. C. (2009). Poverty as a social problem. In *Poverty and power: a structural perspective on American inequality*, chapter 1, pages 1–26. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., Lanham, MD.
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