Course Information:
Summer 2016
Tuesdays & Thursdays 6:00 – 7:30
Meetings in New_Row
upenn.instructure.com/courses/1204XXX

Instructor Information:
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Office: College Hall 308E
Office Hours: W 12:00-1:00

Course Introduction
Our society—indeed, your everyday life—is fundamentally shaped by risk. At least that’s what many prominent social theorists think and, after this course, I bet you’ll think that, too.

Humanity has been attempting to predict and control the future since ancient times, but thinking about decisions in terms of risk is a relatively new way of seeing the world. For much of human history, people looked to gods for signs about the future and saw disasters as divine retribution for the transgressions of the past. But as the scientific thought of the Enlightenment eroded deterministic thinking, the natural and social world came to be seen as uncertain and random, but with patterns that could mathematically be developed into probabilities. Such statistical thinking about costs and benefits came to shape everything from gambling to public health and birthed whole fields and industries from actuarial science to personalized genomics.

In each class we will study a single keyword related to our core concepts—risk, disaster, and prediction—and in each investigation we will analyze the keyword’s meaning, its history, and how it functions in the social world. This course will offer you a conceptual and historical understanding of the industries of risk and disaster and will give you the tools to critically assess technologies of prediction.

The key terms we will study this semester are:

- Risk
- Probability
- Race
- Insurance
- Algorithms
- Antifragility
- Disaster
- Statistics
- Frequentism
- Discrimination
- Sustainability
- Systemic Risk
- Prediction
- Uncertainty
- Bayesianism
- Health
- Resilience
- Climate Change
- Sociology
- Actuarial Science
- Hazard
- Black Swans

Course Materials
I have placed all texts on e-reserve and linked them in the Canvas site. So long as you are comfortable reading an electronic copy or printing it off, you will not have to purchase any texts.

Course Delivery
This is a fully online course. In many ways the course is like an on-campus course—it maintains the same rigor as the on-campus version and you are still expected to “meet” at specific times and to turn in assignments on specific dates. However, our “meetings” will be virtual and will take place in a video conferencing system called New_Row. Before each class you are expected to watch short pre-recorded videos that introduce that class’s keyword, present a case history, and set up the overarching questions for the live session. Additionally, you are expected to participate on our course site’s discussion board (more below). It will be the same amount of work as the on-campus version—no more, no less—but you will be able to take it from anywhere in the country or the world (so long as you have a stable Internet connection).
Assignments
Class Participation
This class is a seminar and that means it only succeeds with active participation. If you show up to the virtual sessions regularly, and engage thoughtfully, you will learn from your peers as much as you learn from me. I believe that class time is best spent working actively and collaboratively. We will use much of our time in our virtual classroom to practice the craft of social scientific research and to work through assignments—going into virtual archives, analyzing passages, working through case studies, etc.—together. In order to use our time effectively, it is absolutely crucial that you carefully complete all readings ahead of time. Our readings act as a set of foundational knowledge and your participation grade will correlate with your preparedness. Active participation in each virtual session is worth one percentage point of your final grade (20% total).

Required Discussions
Before each class, you need to discuss the readings and videos in our online discussion board. To receive full credit for the post, you must use at least one quotation from the reading to make your argument. There is no length requirement for the post. Succinct writing is often better than its alternative, so if you can craft some thoughtful insights about all of the week’s readings in just a paragraph or two, do so. After you post your response, read over your classmate’s responses and comment on at least two of your peers’ posts. Each discussion contribution is worth one percentage point of your final grade (20% total).

Project 1: The Keyword Entry
In each class we will focus on a different keyword that’s relevant to our core concepts of risk, disaster, and prediction. And for the first project of the semester, you will choose a keyword from our list of terms and craft an “entry” for it. In this entry you will need to detail the meaning of the keyword, the history of the keyword, the function of the keyword in society, and the relationship of the keyword to our other terms.

Your contribution to this collection of key terms will happen in four stages:

- **Stage 1**: Read “Introduction” and “Society” from Raymond William’s Keywords; model your entry after his approach.
- **Stage 2**: Look up your term in the Oxford English dictionary; read all material in the entry.
- **Stage 3**: Connect (in person or via email) with our class librarian (Nick Okrent) and research sources that speak to the history and usage of the word.
- **Stage 4**: Write an entry for the term that addresses its meaning, history, social functions, and connections with other terms; post the entry to our Canvas glossary at least 3 days before the class in which the term is featured.

Project 2: The Risk & Society Timeline
I’ve taught multiple courses on risk here at Penn, and each time I’ve had my students contribute to a collaborative tool from Northwestern University called Timeline JS. You can see what previous semesters have built [here](#). It’s pretty, right? Don’t let that intimidate you—all you have to do is enter some text into a Google Doc and magically it will turn into that sleek, interactive tool. You can learn a lot from what’s there already and my hope is that you will also be able to add to it to help teach future cohorts of these seminars. As you can see, the timeline logs the progression and proliferation of the concept of risk in thought (e.g., Pascal and Fermat’s work on the Problem of Points), things (e.g., bills of mortality from plague years), and everyday life (e.g., decision making practices). What intellectuals and events to include, what objects and artifacts to foreground, what practices to highlight—well, those decisions are up to you; it’s OK if there are as many contradictions as continuities. Your contribution to this digital document will happen in three stages:

- **Stage 1**: Read the existing timeline.
- **Stage 2**: Take a ten-question quiz on the existing timeline.
- **Stage 3**: Add five timeline entries of your own. Theses entries must include a date, a headline, a one paragraph explanation of your entry, a media object (e.g., an image, a video, an audio clip, etc.), a
Project 3: The Archive Visit and Document Annotation
While you can learn quite a bit from reading what others say about a document, there is rarely a substitute for analyzing it first hand. In this assignment you will need to either go to a physical archive in your local area or visit one of the many publically accessible fully digital archives online. In this archive, you will need to find a document (or object or artifact) relating to risk (e.g., an insurance policy from Lloyd’s of London), disaster (e.g., military reports assessing the Three Mile Island accident), or prediction (e.g. Florence Nightingale David’s wartime notes on bomb-impact modeling). Whatever document you chose, you will need to photograph or scan it and add at least five substantive annotations to it. You will upload the photograph to and create your annotations in MIT’s Annotation Studio. At minimum you must craft annotations that address:

- **Introduction:** Introduce the reader to the basics of the document—who wrote it, when it was written, why it has significance, etc.
- **Context in History:** Give the reader a sense of the document’s historical context, how does it fit into the context in which it was created
- **Connection with Risk, Disaster, and/or Prediction:** Why does it have relevance to what we’re studying and how does it relate to scholarship on risk, disaster, and/or prediction
- **Context in the Archive:** How does it fit into the collection(s) of the archive in which you found it in—place it in conversation with the other documents adjacent to it
- **Close Reading:** Analyze one or more passages or portions of the document at a granular level, thinking about its choice of words, its phrasing, its secondary and tertiary meanings and its relationship to the text as a whole.

Project 4: Envisioning the Future
For the last project of the course, you are tasked with selecting a cultural object that speculates on the future and analyzing that object in the context in which it was produced. Whether you choose a speculative fiction novel, a sci-fi film, a disaster preparedness program, or an art installation, you will need to think through how its vision of the future was shaped by the subjective positions of its authors, the political climate of its production, the economic constraints of its medium, and/or the cultural norms of its society. The product of this analysis will be twofold:

- **Essay:** A 1,000-to-1,500-word analysis
- **Presentation:** A distillation of that analysis into a 5-minute presentation.

**Grading**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assignment</th>
<th>Submission method</th>
<th>% Grade</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Active In-Class Participation</td>
<td>Participate actively in New_Row</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online Discussion Board Contribution</td>
<td>Submit via assignments tool</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project 1</td>
<td>Submit via the assignments tool</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project 2</td>
<td>Submit via the TimelineJS Google Doc template</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project 3</td>
<td>Submit via the Annotation Studio course page</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project 4</td>
<td>Submit via the assignments tool</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
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<td><strong>100 %</strong></td>
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The grading policy in this course conforms to Penn Arts & Sciences guidelines.
A grade of incomplete ("I") is given only in a genuine emergency, and for no more than the work due during the last two weeks of the course. You must make arrangements with me before the last day of class in order to receive an incomplete.

All grades and feedback will be distributed through Canvas. You will receive an email when new feedback is available.

**Course Policies**

**Late assignments**: Not accepted

**Extra credit**: None

**Students with disabilities**: The University of Pennsylvania, provides reasonable accommodations to students with disabilities who have self-identified and been approved by the office of [Student Disabilities Services](https://studentservices.upenn.edu/services/student-disabilities) (SDS). Please make an appointment to meet with me as soon as possible in order to discuss your accommodations and your needs. If you have not yet contacted SDS, and would like to request accommodations, you can make an appointment by calling SDS 215.573.9235. All services are confidential.

**Student Conduct**: The University of Pennsylvania’s [Code of Student Conduct](https://studentconduct.upenn.edu/policy-overview) governs all activities in the University, including this course.

**Scholastic Dishonesty**: Cheating is unacceptable. You know this. But just so you are clear about what exactly constitutes cheating, please read and abide by the University of Pennsylvania’s [Code of Academic Integrity](https://academicintegrity.upenn.edu/).

**Course Schedule**

**May 24th**: Introduction

**May 26th**: Risk

**May 31st**: Disaster

**June 2nd**: Prediction

**June 7th**: Climate Change

June 9th: Probability

June 14th: Statistics

June 16th: Uncertainty

June 21st: Sociology

June 23rd: Race

June 28th: Frequentism

June 30th: Bayesianism

July 5th: Actuarial Science

July 7th: Insurance

July 12th: Discrimination
July 14th: Health

July 19th: Hazard

July 21st: Sustainability

July 26th: Resilience

July 28th: Black Swans

August 2nd: Antifragility

August 4th: Systemic Risk