ANTH 4370/SOCI 3341

Capitalism, Ecology, and the Politics of Speed

University of Texas at El Paso
Department of Sociology and Anthropology
Fall 2022: Mondays & Wednesdays, 10:30-11:50AM

Instructor
Professor Dean Chahim (dmchahim@utep.edu)
Office Hours: Mondays, 12:30-1:30pm and Wednesdays 2:30-3:30pm
Office Hour Location: Old Main 313 or by Zoom (advance notice required)

Course Description
From Amazon’s nearly instantaneous deliveries to the endless exponential growth of our economies, infinitely growing speeds and modes of consumption have become a common-sense organizing principle and objective of modern societies, with tremendous social and environmental costs. This seminar examines how this came to be through historical and ethnographic readings that take up the notion of acceleration – and its corollary, ever-increasing speeds – across domains, from abstract notions of the growth of “the economy” to the material and environmental politics of logistics systems. We will examine acceleration through readings that examine themes as diverse as the experience of capitalist modernity, the formalization of economics in the 20th century, and the politics of transportation planning and logistics. At the same time, we will examine how this unending economic acceleration has reshaped not only the way we think, but the environment in a time of another form acceleration: global heating and the climate crisis. To conclude the course, we will examine alternative paradigms, including degrowth, mobility justice, and other radical reconfigurations of our collective relationship to infinite acceleration.

Accessibility
I want to make this class work for everyone. Having dealt with disabilities in my own life, I take these accommodations seriously. If you have a disability or chronic medical condition, please meet with me as soon as possible during office hours to discuss your particular learning needs and also contact the Center for Accomodations and Support Services (CASS@utep.edu) to arrange an appointment to discuss your needs. Since accommodations require early planning, please contact the Center and I as soon as possible.

Format
Given our small class size, we will run the class as a seminar. I will open and conclude each session with some framing remarks for our discussion, but the rest of the time will generally be devoted to in-depth discussion of the readings, either as a whole class or in small groups/pairs. For this reason, it is essential that you come to class prepared – not to be tested, but to contribute your thoughts and ideas. The grading structure is designed to encourage this open participation as much as possible.

Grading
Participation (50%)

Rev. 8/22/22
This course is fundamentally based on learning from each another. By not attending and participating in class, you both deny yourself the opportunity to learn from other students and the chance for other students to learn from you. To receive full credit, you must therefore complete short weekly reading response assignments, attend and participate actively (in the ways that are most comfortable to you) and respectfully in all classes.

**Reading Responses**

Reading responses will be short, 1-2 paragraph writing exercises that demonstrate your comprehension and reflection on the readings and help seed our discussions. I will provide more details in class, but the point of this exercise is to help you think across the texts we are reading each week and link them with what you have already read, while also giving you a chance to provide your own critical take and questions, which will help guide our discussions in class.

**Reading responses are due at 5PM on Sundays,** to give me time to read them before class on Monday. The only exception is the first week, when the reading response is due at 11:59PM on Tuesday.

Of course, I do understand that things happen. For this reason, every student is granted one “no questions asked” absence and you may omit one reading response (these do not need to be the same day). If you need to miss another day and/or reading response beyond this, you will lose a proportional part of your participation grade unless you have a compelling reason (such as a documented medical emergency or athletic obligation).

**Reading Response Rubric**

The responses are graded complete/incomplete, but they are an important part of your grade. There are no "right" answers, but there is a complete and incomplete way to do these responses. **Here are the three core things you have to do to get credit:**

1. **Identify a theme across texts.** A complete response will first identify and briefly (!) summarize at least one central theme, issue, or problem that the texts for the week bring up. This doesn't mean a summary of the articles/chapters, but rather a boiling down: what do these readings tell us? It's OK to focus more on one reading than others in doing this and you don't have to address all the themes that come up. You don't have to necessarily 'cover' all the readings, but we do want to see you engage with more than one of the texts assigned each week. Bring them into conversation (i.e. "A and B both point to the fact that speed is...").

2. **Connect to other texts and/or your own life experience and knowledge:** In addition to this, your response should also generally make at least some mention of how the week's readings connect with others you have read in the class. This doesn't have to be a rigorous analysis - think more a brainstorming of relationships. Alternatively, you can also write about how the readings connect to your own experiences or prior knowledge. I encourage you to do both.

3. **Questions and/or critiques:** Finally, offer a question the readings raise for you, or a critique you might make of them. What doesn’t quite make sense, or what seems unaddressed or simply wrong? We'll use all of these in class to discuss.

**Final Paper (or Project) (50%)**

To build on and synthesize what you have learned, you will write a 12 to 15-page (double spaced) research paper (or do a creative project*) that addresses some theme from the class related to the politics of acceleration. The goal of this paper is to integrate theory and empirical cases. You do not have
to do original, primary research (but are of course welcome and encouraged to do so). However, the paper must draw connections between and seriously engage at least five of the readings from our syllabus and at least five more academic sources (peer-reviewed journal articles or books, primarily). Some adjustments to these minimums may be allowed if you are doing your own original research – talk to me about this.

A more detailed prompt will be distributed in class along with a grading rubric, but for now know that the 50% weight of the grade for this paper will be distributed between an initial topic idea (5%, credit/no credit) paper proposal (15%, graded), and the paper itself (30%, graded).

*If you would like to propose a website, video, map, or other format, please get in touch with me. In such cases, a much shorter report may be acceptable.
Course Schedule
Note: these readings are subject to change; please check the course website for the most up-to-date list.

UNIT I. MODERNITY, TIME, AND PROGRESS

Week 1: Modernity as Life Under Acceleration
8/22 & 8/24


Week 2: Speed, Desire, and Progress
8/29 & 8/31


Recommended:

Week 3: Time, Technology, and Colonization
9/7 (holiday on 9/5)


Recommended:

Week 4: Entangled Speeds and Mobilities
9/12 & 9/14


Due 9/16: Submit Initial Idea for Final Paper (one paragraph)
UNIT II. LABOR, SPACE, AND CAPITAL

Week 5: The Critique of Capital I: The Value of Labor
9/19 & 9/21


Week 6: The Critique of Capital II: Cogs in the Machine
9/26 & 9/28


Week 7: Speeding Up Labor
10/3 & 10/5


Recommended:

Week 8: Speed, Power, and the Annihilation of Space
10/10 & 10/12


Recommended:

**Week 9: Speeding Up Commodities**
10/17 & 10/19


**Due 10/21:** Final Paper Proposal (1-2 pages)

**UNIT III. A LIMITLESS ENVIRONMENT**

**Week 10: The Nature of Capital and the Capitalization of Nature**
10/24 & 10/26


**Week 11: Fueling Acceleration: Space, Time, and Energy**
10/31 & 11/2


**Week 12: Maintaining Fluidity**
11/7 & 11/9


UNIT IV. TOWARDS DECELERATION

Week 13: Rethinking Disabling Environments
11/14 & 11/16

Week 14: Slow Violence and Temporal Resistance
11/21 & 11/23

Week 15: Towards a Different Speed
11/28 & 11/30

Final Paper Due December 5th, 2022