

Midwest Faculty Seminar

Climate Change Across the Disciplines

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THIN PIECE

In the years since climate change first emerged as a problem, most of the relevant research has focused on how it will affect the material conditions of life on this planet. Indeed, vast amounts of work have been done by way of charting its causes and foretelling its likely effects on our collective future. But as the problem has intensified along with our difficulties in dealing with climate change, scholars working across the disciplines have begun to realize that climate change, though first noticed by atmospheric researchers, is not solely an object of scientific concern. An example of what Timothy Morton has termed a “hyperobject,” it is in fact a problem that troubles the foundations of all our intellectual spheres.

Accordingly, this seminar explores the effects of climate change on inquiry in the physical sciences, social sciences and humanities, with particular attention to the ways in which scholars in these disciplines are adapting to climate change as a problem in their work. Perspectives from climate scientists will, of course, be included in our conversation as a way of grounding the discussion in a scientific account of the phenomena. But the goal of the seminar is to take stock of how climate change has excited a fundamental rethinking of core concepts across disciplines. What, for instance, does climate change mean for those working on the anthropology of science? And, more particularly, for those working on history of the national security state? How, moreover, have legal scholars responded to the ethical and legal questions posed by climate change? Are our existing understandings of justice and responsibility adequate to understanding the problem of climate justice? Or is justice a category that, in the context of climate change, needs to be rethought?

Beyond the fields of law and social science, the seminar also explores the impact of climate change on fields less commonly associated with climate change as a problem, namely history, theology, and literary studies. The earth’s climate has had an undoubtedly important impact on the history of human civilization, but thinking through the relationship between climate and history remains difficult, to say the least. How should we begin to understand the relationship between historical time and geologic time? And between geologic processes and human agency in the world? Religion is frequently described as contributing to inaction on climate issues. But is this the only way in which the major religious traditions can be construed? Are there religious environmentalisms too? And while literary studies has in recent years begun to occupy itself with environmental questions, literary eco-criticism still remains by and large out-scaled by the magnitude of a warming planet. What does eco-criticism look like in the era of climate change? Can literature help us imagine our species-being differently? Or is the literary imagination overwhelmed by a problem of this scale?

If climate change is a serious problem for the future of the global environment, it is also a serious problem for human thought. In such a context, none of the projects suggested here can represent anything more than a brief experiment in thinking through the challenges that climate change poses for the categories through which we understand our world. But as the pace of climate change intensifies and the consequences of inaction become more and more severe, the project of re-calibrating our concepts in ways appropriate to the problem is not one that can be easily left aside. Our goal for the seminar, in the end, is therefore to begin charting the ways in which we might think about climate change and its effects on our intellectual and cultural life.

Presenters include Dipesh Chakrabarty (History), Eric Slauter (English), Liz Moyer (Geophysical Sciences), Eric Posner (Law), Joe Masco (Anthropology) and William Schweiker (Divinity).