

Simplicity and Sustainability

**Social Science 300, Section A, TR 10:30-11:45am
BTB 103**

Instructor: Professor Russell Arben Fox

Office and Office Hours: Davis 313; MTRF 3:00pm-4:30pm and by appointment

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The Topic:

The notion of achieving “simplicity” in one’s life and livelihood is a very old and very admirable one. It makes one think of numerous related concepts—“wholeness,” “integrity,” and so forth. And it carries with it a host of purported psychological and/or spiritual benefits—the appeal of quiet, peace, confidence, security, and more. “Sustainability” is not as old a notion, though some of the principles and practices associated with it are: think of old phrases or mottos, like “waste not, want not,” or “fix it up, wear it out, make it do, or do without.” The idea is to be able to sustain oneself or one’s loved ones or one’s community with what one has on hand, to avoid dependency upon resources or decisions that are outside of one’s control, and thus to achieve some sort of (again, purportedly) “natural” equilibrium: you can take care of yourself. In that sense, sustainability and simplicity are entwined concepts.

This course will explore that entwining, through reading the works of those who have pondered and (to a lesser or greater degree) lived these concepts, and well as attempting to see them put into practice. The course topics will range from moral and religious reflections, to a study of local, national, and international questions of political economy and sociology. We will study both the evidence associated with these notions (what effect does living “simply”—or not—really have on one’s mental health? what are the economic costs involved in pursuing sustainable technologies?), as well as reflect philosophically upon the ideas behind them. This course is imagined as a companion to POLS 250, Christianity and Social Justice, and like that class will aim to balance social science with theoretical considerations.

There will be a great deal of reading involved in this course, but I hope the reading to only provide a platform, a common knowledge base, upon which our conversations and arguments may be able to build convictions and practices that will shape our lives. Even if this class doesn’t convince you that there is a way of constructing a simple and sustainable life, much less convince you to personally pursue such, I hope that it will at least convince you of the richness and importance of the argument about it all.

The Instructor:

That’s me. My name, office phone number and office e-mail are included at the top of this sheet. Please make use of my office hours if you have a question or concern, or send me an e-mail message.

The Reading:

There are four required books for this course; they are:

Herman E. Daly and John B. Cobb, *For the Common Good: Redirecting the Economy Toward Community, the Environment, and a Sustainable Future*, 2nd ed. (1994) [CG]

Juliet Schor, *Do Americans Shop Too Much?* (2000) [Shop]

E. F. Schumacher, *Small is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered* (1973) [SB]

Barry Schwartz *The Paradox of Choice: Why More is Less* (2004) [PC]

There will also be occasional handouts throughout the course, as well as several videos that we will watch and discuss together.

The Schedule:

Follow this schedule closely. Every class period has some sort of reading assignment which you should complete before coming to class.

Tuesday, August 23—first day of class; course introduction

Thursday, August 25—handouts; simplicity and the religious question

Tuesday, August 30—handouts; simplicity and the economic question

Thursday, September 1—professor attending a professional conference; no class

Tuesday, September 6—*PC*, 1-44; navigating the world of choice

Thursday, September 8—*PC*, 47-96; deciding and maximizing

Tuesday, September 13—*PC*, 99-146; abundance and opportunity costs

Thursday, September 15—*PC*, 147-200; adaption and disappointment

Tuesday, September 20—*PC*, 201-236; responding to the burden of abundant choices

Thursday, September 22—handouts; paternalism, limits, and fishbowls

Tuesday, September 27—*CG*, 25-61; rethinking the economics of market choice

Thursday, September 29—*CG*, 85-117; non-marketable resources and choices

Tuesday, October 4—*SB*, xi-41; alternative thinking about economic growth

Thursday, October 6—*SB*, 42-80; the real economics of size

Tuesday, October 11—midterm examination

Thursday, October 13—fall break; no class

Tuesday, October 18—*CG*, 138-175; the household, welfare, and community

Thursday, October 20—*CG*, 209-251; trade and population from the perspective of community

Tuesday, October 25—*CG*, 252-282; land, food, and agriculture from the perspective of community

Thursday, October 27—*CG*, 283-314; business, industry, and labor from the perspective of community

Tuesday, November 1—*CG*, 407-442; money and debt from the perspective of community

Thursday, November 3—*CG*, 361-406; resuscitating the community perspective

(book report rough drafts due)

Tuesday, November 8—*SB*, 83-124; sustainable thoughts on education and land

Thursday, November 10—*SB*, 125-169; sustainable thoughts on industrialization and technology

Tuesday, November 15—*SB*, 173-217; the meaning of sustainable development

Thursday, November 17—*SB*, 271-312; a sustainable future for ownership

Tuesday, November 22—*Shop*, vii-33; the practical choices before us

Thursday, November 24—Thanksgiving Day holiday; no class

Tuesday, November 29–*Shop*, 37-68; debating the realities of a ethos of limits
Thursday, December 1–*Shop*, 69-98; responding to challenges to our lives
(book reports due)

Tuesday, December 6–book presentations
Thursday, December 8–last day of class; book presentations
(sustainability report due)

Wednesday, December 14, 10:00am–final examination

The Grades:

Grading in this course will follow a strict 100-point scale:

91 - 100	= A
81 - 90	= B
71 - 80	= C
60 - 70	= D
59 and below	= let's not talk about that, shall we?

In calculating the grades, however, I throw in a 10-point margin for error, as the following scale shows:

Book report	15 points
Book presentation	10 points
Midterm exam	25 points
Sustainability outing	10 points
Sustainability report	10 points
Final exam	40 points

Total: 110 points

So, while grades will be distributed according to the 100-point scale listed above, there is actually 110 points possible in this class. Therefore, it is technically possible to, for example, blow off the book report and presentation entirely and still earn a solid B. I wouldn't recommend that though! This margin exists to provide cover for those inevitable bad days and mistakes that plague us all. Don't abuse it.

Your *book report* will be the only significant writing requirement you will have in this class. You will each choose a book that deals, in one way or another, with important themes connected to the notions of or practices regarding simplicity and sustainability (I will present several candidates to the class), read it thoroughly, think about it, then prepare an 8 to 10 page (typed, double-spaced) report that closely exams, (and criticizes if you think necessary) what the book has taught you about these ideas and ways of living. This report will be worth up to 15 points. These need not be research papers, though if you choose to develop your report along those lines it would be accepted (please use footnotes and a works cited page); however, purely analytical response papers would be acceptable as well. The primary point of the report is to show me that you have read the book in question, thought about it, taken seriously what it has tried to say, and formulated an informed reaction to it. Please be aware that I have read **ALL** the books in question, and thus **will know if you just make something up**. In order to make certain give yourself time to follow through on this assignment, I am requiring you to turn in a rough draft (at least 5 pages in

length) of your book report on Thursday, November 3; the final report will be due a month later on Thursday, December 1 (though it can be turned in long before that if you choose to do so). Anyone who fails to turn in an adequate rough draft (which I will read, comment on, and return to you) will lose **HALF** of the full points which the final report may earn. Please note that **late reports (rough draft or final) are UNACCEPTABLE, the SOLE exception being for hospital stays or other emergencies that you can provide SIGNED DOCUMENTATION for.** Use every writing resource available to you in working on these papers, as **spelling, grammar, format, and internal structure will all most DEFINITELY count.**

Your *book presentation* will be a 10-minute lecture on the book you have read that you will prepare to deliver to the class sometime during the final couple of class meetings. This can be a straightforward presentation, but the more innovative you get (using handouts, demonstrations, video, etc.) the more impressive your presentation will be, and thus possibly the more points you will earn (the presentation will be worth up to 10 points). My main criteria as a listener and grader will be whether you introduce and summarize one or more of the book's observations and arguments well, and whether you are persuasive in making your case for or against or even just in commentary upon those elements of the book which you focus upon. Don't be frightened by this assignment; look upon it as a fun end-of-the-course summing up! (I'll probably provide something to encourage the celebratory atmosphere.)

Your *sustainability outing* and *sustainability report* will involve your involvement in one or more "outings" that will be organized during the semester. On two or three occasions, I will be taking trips and arranging tours, involving visits with individuals and organizations that are committed to one or another version of local, sustainable, simple economics and living, and I will seek to schedule these outings so that as many students as possible can come along. You **WILL** be expected to attend at least one of them, and your presence on such an outing will qualify you for the points offered (in other words, just showing up on a scheduled day will be the easiest 10 points you earn all semester). You will want to record or take notes on this outing, because you will also be expected to write a report upon what you see and hear. The report will be a relatively short (4 to 5 pages, typed, double-spaced) summary of and commentary on what you learned during the sustainability outing; I definitely do not require or expect this to be a research paper of any sort, though if you feel some additional sources might help you better understand or respond to the information you gained from the trip, that would be acceptable. The report will be due no later than Thursday, December 8, and again, **late reports are UNACCEPTABLE, the SOLE exception being for emergencies that you can provide SIGNED DOCUMENTATION for.**

The *midterm examination* will include a multiple choice section (fifteen questions of which you will choose to answer ten, worth 1 point each, for a total of 10 possible points), a short answer section (ten questions of which you choose to answer five, worth 2 points each, for a total of 10 possible points), and a short essay question (worth a possible 5 points, for an overall total of 25 points for the exam). The exam will only address material that we will have covered in the first half of the course. The multiple choice questions will deal with the relatively few specific names, places, and terms which I will have emphasized as significant during the semester. The short answer questions will be fairly specific, only requiring a sentence or two to answer. The essay question will likely require two or three paragraphs to adequately answer the question. The *final examination* will differ only in that, 1) there will be more multiple choice questions (twenty, of which you will choose to answer fifteen), and 2) in addition to a short, five-point essay question, there will be a longer, 10-point question, which will be *comprehensive*. Remember that **exams CANNOT be made up, the SOLE exception being for hospital stays or other emergencies which you can provide SIGNED DOCUMENTATION for, or scheduling conflicts which you work out with me MORE THAN A WEEK in advance.**

Four Declarations:

In accordance with the Americans with Disabilities Act, accommodations may be made for any student who notifies me of their needs. **It is imperative that you take the initiative to bring such needs to my attention**, as I am not allowed to ask about such matters. Students who may require special assistance in emergency evacuations should talk to me in order to work out the most appropriate procedures to follow in such an emergency.

I am sympathetic to those who suffer any sort of family emergency and/or tragedy during this semester, and I am frequently open to working out alternative ways of completing assignments when responsibilities prevent you from attending class and so forth. That being said, it must be understood that **life goes on**, and so does this course. Funerals or prolonged hospital stays for loved ones, while clearly and properly demanding of one's time and energy, are **NOT** an acceptable excuse for ignoring class expectations, policies, or grading; if it appears you must make a choice between family obligations and class assignments, **please inform me as soon as possible**, rather than simply assuming that I will be understanding and let things slide out of sympathy after the fact, because I probably won't.

The instructor (again, that's me) reserves the right, for the sake of maintaining class discipline and making certain an environment conducive to hearing and participating in the lectures and discussion, to either take away for the duration of the class any cell phones, Ipods, Blackberries, pagers, or any other kind of electronic communications or text-messaging device. I **REALLY** don't want to have to enforce this, because doing so is embarrassing and a hassle, but I will if I have to, for the sake of those students who are trying to follow along and get something out of class. Let's make it easy: simply turn off your cell phones, or turn them to silent, while in the classroom, and if you have an important call you somehow can't wait a half-hour or before returning, just politely excuse yourself.

It should go without saying that **ANY** sort of academic dishonesty is detrimental to both your own education and my ability to fairly and sympathetically administer and grade this class. Hence, **any cheating, plagiarism, fabrication or falsification of data or communications, or other general malfeasance that I verify will potentially result in an automatic ZERO ("0") for the assignment or test in question, depending on the gravity of the offense**. In order to enforce this policy, I reserve the right to take whatever steps I deem appropriate, including banning cell phones and other electronic implements during test-taking, changing the wording or deadlines of assignments (with due notice), and so forth. You're grown-ups by now, so you consider the odds, and the consequences. If you feel you need more guidance or specifications on this policy, see the attached **HONOR CODE** sheet.