What the course is about
Oil, coal, and natural gas allow modern economies to function and provide us with remarkable prosperity. The US, UK, and Germany all rose to prosperity in the 19th and 20th centuries thanks to their abundant coal reserves. Many of the largest and most successful private companies in the world are oil and gas companies.

But these carbon resources are also the source of two paradoxes. The countries that produce abundant oil and gas are often beset with an ailment known as “the resource curse,” leading to sudden wealth but also political repression, conflict, and often poorly-functioning governments. And fossil fuels produce about two-thirds of the world’s greenhouse gas emissions and hence are the most important drivers of catastrophic climate change.

The scholarship on these issues is vast and impossible to cover with any thoroughness in a single quarter. This course will hence focus on a handful of fundamental problems and debates: how global politics is shaped by the distribution of, and trade in, fossil fuels; the strange, upside-down world of the resource curse; why petroleum wealth and coal wealth tend to have different effects on politics; and what can be done to address these issues. Although we will discuss the implications of these issues for climate change, this is not primarily a course about climate change – for example, we’re not going to focus on alternative energy paths or other contributors to greenhouse gas emissions, like land use or agriculture. Instead, our goal is to understand the political dimensions of the world’s carbon wealth, incorporating as much depth and complexity as ten weeks will allow.

Teaching objectives
This course is designed to both impart substantive knowledge about fossil fuels and politics, and to help you become more skillful listeners, thinkers, writers, and speakers.

On completing the course, you should be significantly more knowledgeable about the role of fossil fuels in global politics, and hence able to speak and write intelligently about topics like: the history of the fossil fuel industry; how carbon wealth influences the economics and politics of resource-rich countries; how it tends to affect workers, the private sector, and governments; how and when it can have an impact on international politics; why the price of oil fluctuates, and why this matters; the role of fossil fuels in global climate change; why some governments tax the consumption of fossil fuels, while
others subsidize it; how governments vary in their support for fossil fuel consumers and producers; and how at least some of these problems might be addressed by alternative policies. When there are academic debates about these issues, you should gain a basic understanding of the competing arguments, and in some cases, become familiar with the evidence mobilized by each side.

You should also grow more skilled in your ability to evaluate evidence, and to distinguish between scientifically-based reasoning and conjecture, popular beliefs, and magical thinking. Since almost everything we know about this issue is based on observational data, you should understand why our knowledge is limited, and how hard it is to distinguish correlation from causation.

This is a capstone course for most of you, meaning it is an opportunity to consolidate the learning skills you’ve accumulated over the past three and a half years. We will discuss these skills both at the beginning and end of the course, and pool our knowledge about the most effective ways we can learn new material and acquire new skills.

Format
This class will combine lectures with discussions. Attendance is mandatory and everyone is expected to participate in the discussions.

Readings
Everyone must complete all of the day’s readings before coming to class. Most readings will be available on the course web site. One book should be purchased or borrowed for the course:


The book is available at ASUCLA, Amazon, and at the undergraduate library course reserves. Please note that I don’t profit from assigning my book to the class: I donate all of the royalties I get from the books for this course to Oil Change International, a non-profit organization that campaigns against subsidies for the petroleum industry.

Grades
Grading will be based on your performance in four areas:

- Participation in class discussions: 15%
- Three homework assignments: 15%
- Midterm exam: 30%
- Take-home final exam: 40%

The midterm exam will be held in class on February 12, and combines multiple-choice questions with IDs and short answers. For the final exam, you will answer a single question with a short essay.
There will also be three short homework assignments (handed out on January 10, January 24, and February 21) and due the following Tuesday. Each is worth 5% of your grade.

Grades will be calculated as follows:

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<th>Grade</th>
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<tr>
<td>A+</td>
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<td>A</td>
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**No Laptops Policy**
The class will be a laptop-free zone. Studies show that using laptops (or other devices, also banned) tends to reduce the pace of learning in college courses. By taking notes with paper and pen you will get more out of the course.

**Absences**
Class attendance is mandatory. So is participation in class discussions and exercises. Still, there will be times when students cannot attend – due to illness or unavoidable conflicts – and I will accommodate any reasonable absences. You will nonetheless be responsible for making up for missed classes, and learning all the material covered in your absence.

**Intellectual property notice**
All of the course materials that I have prepared, including my lectures, slides and exams, are my property alone and protected by state common law and federal copyright law. Video and audio recordings are prohibited without my consent. Students shall not sell or distribute notes, or receive remuneration for taking notes, without my express written consent.

**Online resources**
There are many excellent online resources on the politics of fossil fuels. Here are some favorites. I often provide links to interesting stories on my twitter feed (@MichaelRoss7).

- International Energy Agency
- Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative
- US Energy Information Administration
- GOXI
- Global Witness
- Natural Resources Governance Institute
- Publish What you Pay
Course schedule

January 8: Introduction to the course

January 10: What do fossil fuels have to do with politics?
Assignment 1 handed out


January 15: The political economy of fossil fuels: a brief history (1)
Assignment 1 due

Yergin (2011), *The Quest*, pp. 231-265

Jaffe (2018), "Above the surface and below, LA is still an oil town," *Los Angeles Magazine*.

January 17: The political economy of fossil fuels: a brief history (2)


January 22: The future of fossil fuels (guest speaker: Ambassador Craig Kelly)


January 24: How does fossil fuel wealth affect governments?
Assignment 2 handed out

Michael Ross (2012), *The Oil Curse*. Chapters 1 and 2.


January 29: The debate over oil and democracy
Assignment 2 due

Ross 2012, chapter 3

January 31: Oil Appropriation Day (Mexican holiday)


February 5: Gender rights and fossil fuels
Study guide for midterm available

Ross, chapter 4.


February 7: Natural resources and civil conflict


Ross, chapter 5.

February 12: Midterm

February 14: The geopolitics of fossil fuels (1)


February 19: Mexico’s oil politics (guest speaker: Cesar Martinez Alvarez)
February 21: The geopolitics of fossil fuels (2)
Assignment 3 handed out


Meierding (2016), “Dismantling the Oil Wars Myth,” *Security Studies*

February 26: Fossil fuels and climate change (1)
Assignment 3 due

Covert, Greenstone, and Knittel, "Will we ever stop using fossil fuels?" *Journal of Economic Perspectives*

February 28: Fossil fuels and climate change (2)

Kartha, Caney, Dubash, and Muttitt (2018), "Whose carbon is burnable? Equity considerations in the allocation of a 'right to extract'," *Climate Change*

March 5: Taxing and subsidizing fossil fuels (1)
Study guide for final exam

Bast et al. (2015), *Under the Rug: how governments and international institutions are hiding billions in support to the coal industry*, Oil Change, WWF and NRDC.

Roberts (2018), “Friendly policies keep US oil and coal afloat,” *Vox*

March 7: Taxing and subsidizing fossil fuels (2)

Ross, Hazlett and Mahdavi (2017), "Global progress and backsliding on gasoline taxes," *Nature Energy*


March 12: The search for solutions

Ross, Chapter 7

**March 14: Putting it all together**

*Final exam handed out, due 5 pm March 16*