

## PSCI 4992, OIL AND GRAND STRATEGY, SPRING 2023



Professor Robert Vitalis

Office Hours: by appointment, UBB or Franklin's Table or Starbucks (email me)

[rvitalis@sas.upenn.edu](mailto:rvitalis@sas.upenn.edu)

**Objectives** I last taught this class in 2017 while working on a new book on the way conservative, liberal, and progressive intellectuals understand the role of oil in post-1945 US foreign policy. The seminar participants assisted in my developing an alternate account because I argue that the conventional wisdom is wrong. Six years later we will reconsider the argument in relation to important new works. The main objective is to enhance your understanding of the state of the art in, as well as some blinders and prejudices that impact, scholarship on this key issue in international relations and domestic affairs.

**As in all my classes,** the analytical form we will work with is the book review, including the comparative review or essay, as found in the *New York Review of Books* and in other general publications devoted to politics and the arts. This kind of essay is also ubiquitous in newspapers, journals of opinion and international affairs, and in the professional publications of various fields, such as the *American Historical Review*, the *American Political Science Review*, *World Politics*, *American Studies Quarterly*, in law journals, and the like. The point is to familiarize you with this form and to let you practice this art yourselves. Why practice it? Writing reviews will make you better readers of them. The skills involved are also ones that you will use often in the future. Whether or not you go on to Ph.D. programs or professional schools or take positions in private and non-profit organizations, you will have to read and synthesize complex arguments and information for yourselves and others.

**Grades** Your grades will be based on the three writing assignments. Percentages indicate the weight of each component in the determination of your final grade. Reviews 1 (25%) and 2 (25%) are short, 1000-or-so-word assignments that may be incorporated in part in the final 3000-word essay-review 3 (50%).

**Books** Hannah Appel, *The Licit Life of Capitalism* (Duke UP, 2019), Emma Ashford, *Oil, The State, and War* (Georgetown UP, 2022), Neta Crawford, *The Pentagon, Climate Change, and War* (MIT Press 2022), Emily Meireding, *The Oil Wars Myth* (Cornell UP, 2020), Helen Thompson, *Disorder* (Oxford UP, 2022), and Robert Vitalis, *Oilcraft* (Stanford UP, 2020).

## 1.11 Organizational and Conceptual Issues

Consider three key problems that lead to bad history and theory: 1. Lack of knowledge about how oil is bought and sold (how oil markets work and have evolved over time), 2. Conflation of companies (or firms) and states (or countries), and 3. Empirical and especially causal claims that are more usually asserted rather than rigorously demonstrated -- oil exceptionalism

### I J'ACCUSE

**Read:** Vitalis *Oilcraft*.

## 1.16 No Class (thanks Martin)

You need to finish *Oilcraft* and collect as many reviews of it as you can find. **Send these to me by Thursday 1/19.** I will compile a master list and circulate to all the next day. I buy lunch for the person who collects the largest number.

## 1.23 Everything Vitalis Wrote is Wrong (or Is It?)

Come to class ready to assess the state of play of *Oilcraft* to date. Everything is game but we care most about the effort to assess the argument and offer a rationally persuasive case for why it is wrong.

**Assignment:** Write a 1000-word review of *Oilcraft* that summarizes the arguments in the book and offers readers a meta analysis of the existing critiques, along with your assessment.. Compose a title that captures the essence of your own argument and critique (of the book and/or of the critics). Include a "hook" that leads to a summary of your main point. **Due to Vitalis via attachment on or before 1.29**

### II SMART NEW KIDS ON THE BLOCK

## 1.30, 2.6 Wrestling with the Conventional Wisdom While on the Tenure Ladder

**Read:** Emily Meireding, *The Oil Wars Myth*.

## 2.13, 2.20 Does Oil Fuel Conflict?

**Read:** Emma Ashford, *Oil, The State, and War..*

**\* \* \* Comparative Review Due Sunday, February 26.**

You should use the review to advance an argument that develops from the pairing of the two books. You still need to review both, succinctly, and let the reader know what is most important about each, but you should draw out the significance or value added when the two are read side-by-side.

## 2.27 Sleep In 'Cause You Are Not Gonna Do the Reading

## 3.6 Spring Break

### III THE ACADEMIC LEFT'S BEST SHOT

## 3.13, 3.20 Correlation is Not Causation

**Read:** Helen Thompson, *Disorder*

### IV ASKING DIFFERENT QUESTIONS

## 3.27, 4.3 The Pentagon as Consumer

**Read:** Neta Crawford, *The Pentagon, Climate Change, and War*

## 4.10, 4.17 Where It All Begins

**Read:** Hannah Appel, *The Licit Life of Capitalism*

## 4.24 Last Class Final Essay Review Due Date TBA