Science & Global Politics in the Modern Era: Cross-Cultural Perspectives

Understanding the historical roots and contemporary challenges of issues where science and politics intersect — matters such as climate change, public health, biotechnology, bioprospecting, digital privacy, and more — have ramifications not only for individual societies, but internationally. Governments are under constant pressure to decide what to fund or favor in scientific and technological policy decisions, and individual citizens live with the ramifications of these decisions for generations. The food we eat, the air we breathe, the water we drink, the machines we work with, the systems within which we are enmeshed, how we are born, have sex, live, and die: all of these individual and collective actions are part of a larger web in which science, technology, and politics play a role. And in an increasingly interconnected world, the decisions of one nation have implications across the family of nations.

These global dynamics are further impacted by the often conflicting needs and goals of non-Western nations as compared to those of the West in matters of science and technology. This course approaches questions about the global politics of science and technology from within a comparative framework, encouraging students to develop an international perspective on this topic, for both western and non-western nations. In addition to this comparative framework, this course is interdisciplinary in nature, placing historical study of these issues directly into dialogue with sociology, political science, anthropology, and philosophy in the very nature of the subject matter of the course itself, by taking up issues of value, culture, politics, ethics, and social norms.

The course readings will use case studies from different national contexts in order to facilitate this comparative and interdisciplinary framework, lectures will provide important connective and background material, internet assignments will provide contemporary focus on a wide range of western and non-western cultures, and discussions will allow students to build analytical perspectives by bringing together their own diverse interpretations. The final project, in the form of an 8-10 page research and analysis paper, offers students the opportunity to pursue a topic of their own choosing, and to compare it from both a western and a non-western framework.