

Stanford



Daniel Zimmer

COLLEGE Lecturer

Stanford Introductory Studies - Civic, Liberal, and Global Education

 Curriculum Vitae available Online

Bio

BIO

Dan Zimmer is a Lecturer for Civic, Liberal, and Global Education (COLLEGE). He received a PhD in political science from Cornell University in 2022 and served for two years as a postdoctoral scholar with a joint appointment at Stanford University's Center for International Security and Cooperation and the Stanford Existential Risks Initiative.

Dan's scholarship combines Western political theory, the history of political thought, and science and technology studies to examine how the advent of planet-scale human power impacts contemporary politics, taking nuclear weapons, global heating, and artificial intelligence as its cases. At its broadest, his research explores the new kinds of political universalism that take shape when the welfare of all life on Earth begins to depend on the outcome of human decision making.

Since coming to Stanford, Dan has had the opportunity to teach interdisciplinary courses such as The Science and Politics of the Apocalypse and Earth, Space, Bits: Contesting the Nature and Future of Humanity. His first book project traces the evolving history of political universalism from Aristotle to the atom bomb to the Anthropocene.

ACADEMIC APPOINTMENTS

- Lecturer, Stanford Introductory Studies - Civic, Liberal, and Global Education

PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION

- PhD, Cornell University , Political Thought (2022)
- MA, The University of Chicago , Social Science (2014)
- BA, The New School , Historical Studies (2011)

Research & Scholarship

CURRENT RESEARCH AND SCHOLARLY INTERESTS

I use my training as a political theorist to study the history of anthropogenic existential risks (X-risks) and the challenges they carry for contemporary Western political thought. My research explores what may have changed when the advent of X-risk transformed earthly human existence from a necessary prerequisite for politics into a contingent outcome of politics. My research asks: Which traditional political theories and ideals prove compatible with the growing ability for human beings to destroy all earthly human life and which may have been rendered functionally obsolete or even actively self-defeating? The resulting triage takes the form of a comparative approach that uses thermonuclear weapons, cascading ecological collapse, and artificial intelligence as its cases. My doctoral dissertation, *The Immanent Apocalypse*, addressed some of the central difficulties that the arrival of massed thermonuclear arsenals posed for Western political thought during the 1950s and tracked how these

challenges transformed over the next three decades, coming to be recast in explicitly ecological terms following the discovery of nuclear winter, ozone depletion, and global warming by the 1980s. In the course of doing so, the dissertation also traced how a range of political thinkers—among them Bertrand Russell, Karl Jaspers, Hannah Arendt, Michel Foucault, and Jonathan Schell—worked to reconsider basic political categories such as ‘humanity’ and ‘freedom’ in light of the unprecedented challenges posed by what Foucault aptly termed ‘the power to kill life itself.’

As a postdoctoral scholar at the Stanford Existential Risk Initiative, I am working to carry my comparative historical study of X-risks up to the contemporary present. One prominent aspect of this research involves parsing the multiple legacies of the cybernetics, systems, and information theoretic breakthroughs of the mid-20th century, which taken together both exponentially increased the human capacity to cause planetwide harms while at the same time revolutionizing human knowledge surrounding how life sustains itself from cellular to planetary scales. Here, I pay particular attention to probing the political implications of a conspicuous difference in emphasis that has arisen among the inheritors of cybernetics: one area of focus turning its attention outwards to consider previously intractably complex clusters of biogeochemical connections linking living beings, giving rise to systems ecology, Earth System science, and the ways of understanding planetary precarity that inform discussions of the ‘Anthropocene;’ another area of focus turning its emphasis inward, using similar tools to study the mind and ask what the human might be (and could become) when recast as an information process, giving rise to the inter-discipline of cognitive science, artificial intelligence (AI) research, and growing expectations of an onrushing ‘intelligence explosion’ that will see human beings superseded as the planet’s ‘apex cogitator.’ Since the early 2000s, it has been this second, AI-oriented wing that has largely set the terms in which X-risks have become a burgeoning field of academic study and policy focus. I am currently investigating some of the implicit normative commitments that undergird prevailing AI-oriented approaches to the study of X-risk, particularly when it comes to what qualifies as an ‘existential risk’ to humanity, what exactly is the ‘humanity’ in question, and where political commitments to universal equality and democratic participation fit into this picture. At the same time, my work seeks to help compensate for some of the political and ethical oversights of current mainstream X-risk research by drawing it into closer dialogue with Earth System science and ecological political theory.

Teaching

COURSES

2024-25

- Why College? Your Education and the Good Life: COLLEGE 101 (Aut)

2023-24

- Earth, Space, Bits: Debating the Nature and Future of Humanity: STS 132 (Win)
- The Science and Politics of Apocalypse: HISTORY 241F, POLISCI 232, STS 158 (Win)

2022-23

- The Science and Politics of Apocalypse: HISTORY 241F, POLISCI 232, STS 158 (Spr)