DESCRIPTION

This research seminar examines the impacts of economic globalization on attempts to address key social, political, and environmental problems, focusing on the roles played by multinational firms. Topics covered include: international institutions and agreements and how these affect regulatory standards for business set by governments; the potential (and limits) of voluntary corporate responsibility and sustainability initiatives; the effectiveness of activist campaigns, including consumer boycotts; the impacts of voluntary certification and labelling schemes, such as Fair Trade, led by non-profit organizations and; the prospects for mission-driven social enterprise and purposeful business. We will examine recent attempts to address the Covid pandemic, climate change, systemic discrimination, and political extremism and threats to democracy.

We will discuss concerns that economic globalization contributes to a “race to the bottom” in social and environmental standards among countries competing to attract investment and that governments are unwilling or unable to address key problems by reaching agreements and implementing policy solutions. But the core focus of the course is the evolution and impact of a variety of private-sector initiatives, standards and certification schemes explicitly aimed at tackling critical social and environmental problems associated with global businesses. Together, these efforts represent a new form of private governance initiated and implemented by companies and non-profit activist groups. We will examine the ways in which leading companies have been responding to new and growing pressures from consumers, employees, and investors to do good (by addressing critical social and environmental issues) at the same time as they do well (by increasing shareholder value), addressing issues such as climate change, human rights, discrimination, poverty, and community health and education, in ways not legally required by existing regulations.

For example, the social media giant Facebook has created a content moderation process, with an independent oversight board, to address the propagation of hate speech, extremism, terrorism, and misinformation on the platform, and the many negative social and health impacts (e.g., violence directed toward minority groups, organized political violence, suppression of votes, teenage depression, exposure to Covid). As another example, the popular apparel company, Patagonia, recently converted a majority of its basic clothing lines to be Fair Trade certified for the American market by FairTrade USA, ensuring that their suppliers comply with improved standards covering human rights, fair working conditions, and responsible environmental management.
There is an ongoing debate about whether these types of initiatives represent real progress or mere symbolism. Advocates promote them as important necessary tools to address major social, political, and environmental problem, especially in nations that lack robust enforcement of regulatory standards and in a global context in which coordinated policy solutions have not been implemented by governments. Detractors worry that these initiatives are not the result of democratic processes, are not reliably enforced or monitored, cannot be scaled up to achieve real change, and may even dampen or divert pressures for enforceable government regulations for which they are poor substitutes. We will examine all these arguments, and the available evidence, in this course.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

The class is intended to develop research, writing, and discussion skills, and to help prepare students for writing an honors thesis in their senior year. Students are expected to do the readings, prepare carefully for each meeting, and participate actively in class discussions. Each meeting is structured around a set of key questions on which students are expected to take clear and reasoned positions. Regular participation will account for 20% of the course grade. Students will be required to write a short paper (3-5 pages) which summarizes and critiques one (or more) of the assigned readings for one of the meetings. Students will give a short presentation based on that paper during the meeting. Most importantly, all students will write an independent research paper on a topic of their own choice. A paper proposal defining the topic, method, and sources to be used is due by meeting 7 (October 24); students will make a presentation describing their research to the class in the last meeting (November 28). The final grade will be calculated by:

- Participation 20%
- Short paper & presentation 20%
- Research proposal & presentation 20%
- Research Paper 40%

POLICY ON COLLABORATION

Students are encouraged to collaborate with fellow classmates on joint class presentations and joint research papers, but to do so in each case students must request explicit approval from Professor Hiscox.

COURSE WEBSITE

All course materials, including the syllabus, readings, discussion questions for each meeting, presentations, resources for research on specific topics, and any other course-related information will be posted on the course website: https://canvas.harvard.edu/courses/106716
In addition to the assigned readings, we will also discuss (throughout the semester), content from the following books:


**COURSE OUTLINE**

1. **August 31: Core Debates**


2. **September 12: Globalization, International Institutions, and Regulation**


3. **September 19: Activist Groups and Campaigns**


4. **September 26: Consumers**


5. **October 3: Employees**


6. October 17: Owners, Investors, and Social Entrepreneurs


7. October 24: Alleviating Poverty and Improving Working Conditions


8. October 31: Protecting the Environment, Habitats, and Species


Owens, M. 2008. Sustainable Seafood Labeling: An Analysis of the Marine Stewardship Council. UCSD Graduate School of International relations and Pacific Studies


9. November 7: Mitigating Climate Change


10. November 14: Defending Democracy


11. November 21: Limits and Potential Problems for Private Governance


12. November 28: Presentations of Student Research

Research Papers due December 18