

FYSP 176
Utopian Thought
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General information

“Utopia” is a word coined by Sir Thomas More. It means literally “Nowhere.”

In this first-year seminar we shall read and discuss and write about a number of books of utopian literature---that is, books about “nowhere.” We will emphasize utopian *thought* rather than the history or structure of utopian communities. We will reflect on the meaning and purposes of utopian theory and consider the future of utopian thinking in the face of contemporary challenges.

The seminar is designed as an interdisciplinary course, according to the criteria of the First Year Seminar Program. The texts we discuss bring up subjects that are often studied in isolation from each other: political science, philosophy, literature (fiction), sociology, psychology, religion, history, women’s studies, environmental studies, architecture, and more. One of the great benefits of interdisciplinary study is the opportunity to think about how ideas ‘belonging’ to many different disciplines actually connect with each other.

Many works of utopian literature are intended not only, or mainly, as blueprints of a future society, but also as social criticism of the present---which means that you must not only try to understand the text but also to try to get some historical sense of the author’s present, to see what is being referred to. Today, though there is no lack of political criticism, some people think that utopian thinking is ‘exhausted’ in the face of 20th century totalitarian states, world wars, mass cruelty, globalized capitalism, and terrorism. Should you agree with this judgment? The course should enable you, not only to generalize about utopian thinking as a *genre* but to develop some judgments of your own about the justifications and limitations of utopian thinking. This is worth doing insofar as political imagination is worth cultivating.

Texts can be evaluated according to a number of criteria: style, insight, diagnostic power, imagination, practicability, and (less happily) conformity to your preconceived notions of ‘reality’. Try to begin developing your own criteria for evaluation and judgment of texts. In the meantime, read not for ‘information’ but for meaning, and after you work out the content of the text, don’t hesitate to make judgments!

This seminar is designed for first-year students only. It is intended to be an interdisciplinary introduction to the liberal arts, though it can be used to count as introductory-level credits towards a major in Politics. The course aims not only to read specific texts with care, but to help students develop both their writing skills and oral (discussion) skills. To this end, there will be frequent writing assignments and discussion exercises that are designed to encourage development of judgmental abilities and critical evaluation of ideas. This course fulfills Oberlin College requirements for Writing Proficiency. See below for more information on writing assignments.

The class meets Tuesdays and Thursdays from 3.00 to 4.15 pm in Room 204 in the Lewis Environmental Center. Regular attendance is essential. If you cannot come to class, please inform the instructor in advance. Please also make sure you come on time, as announcements and other important information are often shared at the beginning of class meetings. Meetings will be conducted mostly by discussion, so it is very important that each class member do the reading in advance!

The instructor's office hours will be Mondays 2.30 to 5.30 and Thursdays 10 to 12. Signups are not usually necessary except at certain times during the semester. You *must* visit the instructor during office hours during the first three weeks of the semester, to discuss your goals and concerns about the course and anything else you want to talk about. You are encouraged to contact the instructor by e-mail as well (see reading-responses below).

Although the course is about classic texts in utopian thought rather than actual utopian communities, interest in the latter is bound to be high, and a field trip to a 19th-century utopian community (Zoar, Ohio) *may* be arranged.

Reading assignments

All of the main texts for the course have been ordered for purchase at the Oberlin bookstore. It will be greatly to your advantage to have your own copies. Reading assignments can be long but are almost never difficult. The list is as follows:

Plato. The Republic (c. 380 BCE), trans. C.M.A. Grube and C.M.C. Reeve. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishers, 1992.

More, Thomas, Utopia (1516). London: Penguin Books, 1965.

Bacon, Francis. "New Atlantis (1627)," in Selected Philosophical Works, ed. M. Sargent. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishers, 1999.

Morris, William. News from Nowhere and Other Writings (1890). London: Penguin Books, 1993.

Bellamy, Edward. Looking Backward (1888). New York: Modern Library, 1982.

Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. Herland and Selected Stories. (1915) New York: Signet Books, 1992.

Skinner, B.F. Walden Two (1948). New York: Macmillan, 1948, 1976.

Huxley, Aldous. Brave New World (1932). New York: Harper-Collins, 1998.

LeGuin, Ursula. The Dispossessed. New York: Avon Books, 1974.

Callenbach, Ernest. Ecotopia. New York: Bantam New Age Books, 1977.

Alternate editions of these books, including on-line editions, are acceptable if you already have them or find it more convenient to obtain them. All texts for this course, as well as a few secondary sources, are also on print reserve in the Reserve Room in the basement of Mudd Library. There is, however, no electronic reserve for the course, because all the required reading is contained in texts ordered for purchase. If you use alternate editions, including Reserve books, make sure to translate any page assignments from the edition ordered for the course to the edition you are using.

Writing assignments

Studying utopian political thought requires active reading, listening, thinking, and conversation.

To this end, please write informal e-mail reading responses to the instructor once each week. These should be literally “responsive”----unstructured, exploratory, etc. Formality is unnecessary. An electronic bulletin board *may* be available for this purpose; if so, procedures will be announced in class. Write a paragraph or two on your reactions to the readings and/or questions that arise from the readings or class meetings. These communications are due each week by Tuesday at 8.00 a.m. (That means late Monday night for many folks.) HW will review them, use them in preparing lectures and discussions, and respond to your questions to the extent possible. If you have questions or issues that you would like to see the class discuss, communicate them in your reading response and HW will make every effort to see that the topic is brought up in class. You are strongly encouraged to keep an ongoing record of your reading responses in the form of a journal or other format through the semester.

Writing assignments also include three short (4-6 pp.), more formal, papers due at various times during the semester, and a somewhat longer paper (6-8pp.) at the end (see below). There is no final examination unless the class unanimously agrees to take one.☺ Due dates are on the schedule below. More information about assignments will be given in class.

The primary purposes of the short papers are (1) to help you clarify your ideas about the texts; (2) to give you an opportunity to express yourself in the form of an argument about interpretation or the merits of the texts; and (3) to help you improve in formal writing skills, including argumentation. You may, of course, develop ideas in your reading responses for purposes of your papers. At any rate, you may find that the type of paper you write in this course to be different from previous papers you have written. Good writing is a way of learning, and it is a complicated process! You should expect to improve your ability to write essays during the semester.

Towards the end of the course you will have the opportunity to sketch out your own utopian society (or, if you prefer, dystopian or anti-utopian nightmare society), using whatever literary means you find helpful in expressing your ideas.

Papers are due:

- 1) Friday, Sept. 26
- 2) Friday, Oct. 31
- 3) Wednesday, Nov. 26
- 4) Monday, Dec. 15.

Late papers will be penalized if submitted without prior written notice and consent of instructor.

The instructor will read drafts of papers, within reason. Often it suffices to bring a draft to the office for consultation; you may wish to arrange a time for this. Rewriting of papers is encouraged with the consultation of the instructor. Rewritten papers will be re-graded. All rewritten papers are due at the last class meeting, Thursday Dec. 11.

Grading in the course will be based on approximately the following formula: three papers @ 20%, final paper 25%, reading responses, attendance and participation together 15%.

The Oberlin honor code is extremely important. Its guidelines about such matters as citation and plagiarism will be discussed thoroughly early in the course, when the first assignment is given out.

This syllabus might be thought of as a contract between teacher and students. By taking this course, you are agreeing to come to class [on time!], do the reading, explore unfamiliar ideas (as well as familiar ones), contribute to class discussions and to your fellow students' learning to the extent you can, and write the papers with good effort. You also agree to consult with HW during office hours when called upon. For my part, I (HW) will make every effort to teach the class with dedication, fairness, accessibility, respect, and helpfulness, prepare well for class meetings, and give thorough, helpful, and attentive feedback on assignments. Note that this 'contract' does not require brilliance or infallibility of anyone---only a willingness to learn and teach actively.

Schedule of meetings and topics

[RR = reading responses]

Tue, Sept 5	Introductory	
Thurs, Sept 7	Plato, <u>The Republic</u> , pp. 1-59 (Books I, II)	
Tue, Sept 9	Plato, pp. 91-193 (Book IV part, Books V-VI, Book VII part)	RR
Thurs, Sept 14	Plato, pp. 213-263 (Books VIII and IX)	
Tue, Sept 16	More, <u>Utopia</u> , Part I "Dialogue on Counsel"	RR
Thurs, Sept 18	More, Part II	
Tue, Sept 23	Bacon, "The Great Instauration," pp. 67-85; "New Atlantis," pp. 241-268	RR
Thurs, Sept 25	General discussion	First paper due
Tue, Sept 30	Morris, <u>News from Nowhere</u> , chs. 1-10	RR
Thurs, Oct 2	Morris, chs. 11-18	
Tue, Oct 7	Bellamy, <u>Looking Backward</u> , Preface, chs. 1-15	RR

Thurs, Oct 9	Bellamy, chs. 16-28, Postscript	
Tue, Oct 14	Gilman, <u>Herland</u> , chs. 1-6	RR
Thurs, Oct 16	Gilman, chs. 7-12	
FALL BREAK		
Tue, Oct 28	Skinner, <u>Walden Two</u> , chs. 1-20	RR
Thurs, Oct 30	Skinner, chs. 21-35	
Tue, Nov 4	General discussion	Second paper due
Thurs, Nov 6	Huxley, <u>Brave New World</u> , chs. 1-8	—
Tue, Nov 11	Huxley, chs. 9-18	RR
Thurs, Nov 13	LeGuin, <u>The Dispossessed</u> , chs. 1-6	
Tue, Nov 18	LeGuin, chs. 7-13	RR
Thurs, Nov 20	Callenbach, <u>Ecotopia</u> , page assignment TBA	
Tue, Nov 25	Callenbach, page assignment TBA	RR
Thurs, Nov 27	THANKSGIVING	
Tue, Dec 2	General discussion	Third paper due
Thurs, Dec 4	Reports on student utopias	
Tue, Dec 9	Reports on student utopias	
Thurs, Dec 11	Conclusions	All rewrites due
Mon, Dec 15	[end of reading period]	Final paper due

Sources on or about Utopian Thought

Here is a brief list of sources on utopian thought. Those on print reserve are marked with an *.

Additional examples of utopian or dystopian literature:

- Atwood, Margaret. The Handmaid's Tale. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1986.
Butler, Samuel. Erewhon (1872), ed. P. Mudford. New York: Penguin, 1985.
Campanella, Tommaso. The City of the Sun (Civitas Soli, c. 1620), trans. D. Donno. Berkeley, University of California Press, 1981.
Fourier, Charles. The Utopian Vision of Charles Fourier: Selected Texts (1808-1836), trans. J. Becker and R. Bienvenu. Boston: Beacon Press, 1971.
Goodman, Paul and Percival. Communitas. New York: Vintage, 1960.
Harrington, James. The Commonwealth of Oceana (1656). Westport, CT: Hyperion, 1979.
Nozick, Robert. Anarchy, State and Utopia. New York: Basic Books, 1974.
Piercy, Marge. Woman on the Edge of Time (1976). New York: Fawcett Crest, 1983.
Wells, H.G. A Modern Utopia (1905). New York: Scribners Sons, 1905.
Zamiatin, Evgenii. We (1920), ed. A. Barratt. London: Bristol Classical Press, 1994.

Commentaries

This course stresses primary over secondary sources. Here, however, are a very few secondary sources. The best of them are argumentative and controversial, so don't take them as authoritative!

- Bartkowski, Frances. Feminist Utopias. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989.
Buber, Paths in Utopia, trans. R.F.C. Hull. Boston: Beacon Press, 1958. *
DeGeus, Marius. Ecological Utopias: Envisioning the Sustainable Society. Utrecht: International Books, 1999. (originally published in Dutch)
Kateb, George. Utopia and its Enemies. New York: Free Press, 1963. *
Kumar, Krishan. Utopianism. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991. *
Manuel, Frank. Utopias and Utopian Thought. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1966. *
Mumford, Lewis. The Story of Utopias. New York: Boni and Liveright, 1922. *
Nordhoff, The Communistic Societies of the United States (1875). New York: Schocken, 1965.
Sieber, ed., Heterotopia: Postmodern Utopia and the Body Politic. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, c. 1994.
Shklar, Judith. After Utopia. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press: 1957

Bibliographic References

- Negley, G. Utopian Literature: A Bibliography with a Supplementary Listing of Works Influential in Utopian Thought (1978).
Sargent, Lyman Tower. British and American Utopian Literature, 1516-1985: An Annotated, Chronological Bibliography (1987)
Trahaid, R.C.S. Utopias and Utopians: An Historical Dictionary. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999.

