

Political Science 391

Utopia/Dystopia

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The study of utopia, or the ideal (yet non-existent) place, is a staple of political thought. Utopias provide a way to both criticize one's own world while simultaneously setting out a framework for a better future. Dystopias, which emerged most forcefully in the twentieth century, sharpened the criticism present in every utopia by presenting a vision of a radically worse place. This class will use utopias and dystopias to think through first, how authors have criticized their own cultures; second, what ideal forms of government, family life, education, gender norms, architecture, etc. authors have presented and finally how you yourself think about what it means to imagine an ideal world. Can utopias be understood as practical or practicable? What role have actual utopian communities played in the United States? How can thinking about utopia help us to awaken our imagination for bringing about a better world?

Course Objectives

This is a course about the idea of utopia – what it means, how it has been used, why it matters. More generally students will focus on how the idea of utopia has been translated into practice: what does it mean to bring an idea – a dream – into practice (even if practice means a novel)? Students will **identify** key themes in utopian and dystopian texts, **evaluate** utopian criticism and presentation, **analyze** utopian and dystopian texts, and **design** utopias. You will identify how novelists, scholars of utopia, and intentional communities set out principles for living together and structures for bringing those principles to practice. You will evaluate both those principles and the structures through applying one person's principles to another setting. Finally you will draw on these principles to design an aspect of a radically better (utopian?) Charleston.

Required Books:

Oryx and Crake, Margaret Atwood

We, Yevgeny Zamyatin

Utopia, Thomas More

Everyday Utopias, Davina Cooper

Looking Backward, Edward Bellamy

Brave New Worlds, (BNW) Ed. John Joseph Adams

The Dispossessed, Ursula Le Guin

Utopianism, Lyman Tower Sargeant

Course Requirements (all described below)

Class Participation	10%
Midterm exam	10%
Long paper	20%
Class blog (2 posts)	10% each
Class blog (6 comments -- 3 by fall break)	20%
Group utopia project	20%

Course scale:

A (93-100)	A- (90-92)	B+ (87-89)	B (84-86)	B- (80-83)	C+ (77-79)
C (74-76)	C- (70-73)	D+ (67-69)	D (64-66)	D- (60-63)	F (0-59)

Schedule of Readings:

- 8/26: Introduction
8/28: Le Guin, "The ones who walk away from Omelas" (in BNW, pp. 33-38)
- 8/31: Sargeant, *Utopianism*, Intro and Ch. 1
9/2: Silverberg, "Caught in the Organ Draft" (in BNW, pp. 375-384) and Sample, "Can We Reverse the Ageing Process...?" (titled: Longevity and young blood on OAKS)
9/4: Ruth Levitas "The Imaginary Reconstitution of Society: Utopia as Method" (OAKS)
- Groups for project**
- 9/7: Atwood, "Writing Utopia" (OAKS) and *Oryx and Crake*, chs. 1-3
9/9: *Oryx and Crake*, chs. 4-6
9/11: *Oryx and Crake*, chs 7-9
- 9/14: No Class (Rosh Hashanah); Meet with your group, bring issue area to next class
9/16: *Oryx and Crake*, chs. 10-11
Group project report one: issue identification
9/18: *Oryx and Crake*, chs. 12
- 9/21: *Oryx and Crake* , chs 13-15
9/23: No Class (Yom Kippur)
9/25: Lyman Tower Sargeant "Choosing Utopia" (301-317, *UMV*)
Group project progress report two: Evidence and criteria for issue as a problem
- 9/28: Plato, *Republic*, Bks II, III and V (OAKS)
9/30: Thomas More, *Utopia*, letter More to Giles and Book 1
10/2: Thomas More, *Utopia*, Book 2

10/5 Thomas More, *Utopia*, Book 2
Group project progress report three: Problem/issue trending to dystopia

10/7: Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward*, Chs I-XII

10/9: Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward*, Chs XIII-XXII

10/12: Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward*, Chs CHXXXII-XXVIII and postscript

10/14: Hoda Zaki “New Spaces for Utopian Politics” (OAKS)

10/16: Film discussion

Paper topic due

10/19: Fall Break

10/21: Intentional Communities

10/23: Intentional Communities

Group project progress report four: Ideal world imaging and framework for project

10/26: *Everyday Utopias*, Introduction

10/28: *Everyday Utopias*, Chs. 1 and 5

10/30: *Everyday Utopias*, Chs 7-9

11/2: Zamiatin, *We*, First Entry-Fourteenth Entry (1-78)

11/4: Zamiatin, *We*, Fifteenth Entry-Twenty-Seventh Entry (79-159)

11/6: No Class, Society for Utopian Studies Meeting

11/9: Zamiatin, *We*, Twenty Eighth Entry-Fortieth Entry (160-232)

11/11: “Billenium,” JG Ballard and “Pop Squad,” Paolo Bacigalupi in *BNW*

11/13: “Dead Space for the Unexpected,” Geoff Ryman and “Independence Day, Sarah Langan in *BNW*

Papers Due

11/16: Rafaella Baccolini “Finding Utopia in Dystopia” (OAKS)

11/18: Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*

11/20: Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*

11/23: Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*, pp. 1-90

11/25: Thanksgiving Break

12/1: Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*, pp. 91-191

12/3: Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*, pp. 192-270

12/5: Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*, pp. 271-387 and “The Day before the Revolution” (OAKS)

12/7: Last Day

Group project presentations done during exam slot: Dec 16, 8-11.

Class Participation

While counting for only 10% of your final grade, this is a class that wholly depends on your prepared participation. I will not be lecturing on the material that we read. Instead we will be building discussions around key themes and motifs that you recognize in the novels and essays that we read. This is a class that requires your attention – utopian and dystopian works are didactic, these authors are trying to persuade you that they are right. That persuasion may or may not work (although you will never know if you do not read). How you react to the utopian and dystopian novels, films and scholarship will help you determine what it might mean to live in a radically better (or radically worse) world.

Class Blog

We will be collectively maintaining a class blog this semester (<http://blogs.cofc.edu/utopia-dystopia/>) Each student will be required to post twice on the blog (a schedule will be distributed) and in addition to your two posts (discussed below) each of you will write 6 comments on other people's posts. At least three of these comments have to be added before spring break. Students will only receive credit for three comments if no comments are added by spring break and comments beyond the three are added after spring break. The purpose of the blog is twofold. First it is a place for students to share ideas about issues raised in the class outside of the limits of class time. Second it will give all students access to the information gathered and insights shared by their fellow students. The following are two types of blog posts you will write – but you do not have to write the first kind first and the second kind second. You may write more than two blog posts.

Blog post 1: This blog post will be based on the reading that we are completing the week that you are assigned. Your blog post will be 300-500 words and will include a discussion of at least one secondary article/book (one good place to start is with the journal *Utopian Studies*) on the piece on which you are writing (e.g. if your week is while we are reading *Looking Backward* your post will include a discussion of one secondary article on *Looking Backward*). You may choose whatever topic you wish to write about – you can relate your post to class discussion or to a specific passage or compare your work to another work we have read (or to an issue in the world). The style of blog posts is less formal than a paper but think of yourself as informing your classmates about how you read the work in question: what makes it interesting, frustrating, eye opening, problematic, compelling? How is the secondary article understanding the author – what ideas does s/he address? Why? What did this author think was so important about the text you are addressing?

Blog post 2: This blog post can be on a topic of your choosing: an issue in the world that relates to utopia/dystopia; a utopian or dystopian film you have seen (or we have watched for class); a topic that has emerged in class that you are interested to explore further (education, healthcare, policy-making, etc.). This blog post should be 250-400 words.

Comments on blog: Comments should be substantive (“I agree!” is not a comment). Try and engage either the post or the other commenters in a discussion on the issues addressed in the post. There is no set word length but a comment that is less than 4-5 sentences is likely not to be substantive.

Group project:

Utopia group project – Utopian Charleston?

Being named the #1 travel destination by Conde Nast’s *Travel and Leisure* magazine does not necessarily mean that Charleston is a utopia. Celebrated for its beauty, natural and architectural sights and its food, Charleston is a tourist destination. But it is also a city, growing in population, which may be attractive for a variety of reasons, and is also far from ideal for many of its inhabitants.

In this group project you will choose some aspect of life in Charleston: e.g. housing, education, government, food, law and order, etc. and provide a radically better vision for the future. In creating this vision you will work with others interested in the same area of life to first diagnose what is wrong, to imagine a dystopian trajectory for that condition and then to imagine something radically better.

- 1) Choose an issue: what do you understand to be a problematic area of life in Charleston? (Progress report one)
- 2) Diagnose the problem: why is this problem a problem? There are two aspects here: what is the evidence that the problem is a problem and what are your criteria/values by which you are labelling that evidence as evidence of a problem. (progress report two)
- 3) Tracing the trajectory of a problem – can you imagine a dystopian version of this problem in Charleston? What would that look like? What would we learn about the problem in this exercise? (progress report three)
- 4) Imagining something better – this is where you are imagining a radically better version of your issue area. You still want to be rooted in reality, but show what this area could look like if things were radically better. (Progress report four)

See the due dates in the syllabus for these progress reports.

Paper

There is one longer (12-15 pages) paper due in this class. This paper can either a) focus on a short story (from the *Brave New Worlds* collection or found elsewhere) and analyzes that story in light of the particular issue it raises. This form of paper is interested in the ways in which dystopian stories can work effectively (or not) to change attitudes or awaken the public about certain issues (think about our discussion on organ donation and the “young blood” infusions from the Silverberg “Organ Draft” story). b) a second kind of paper will look to a utopian or dystopian account and will choose **one feature** of that work (this can include novels, films, theoretical analyses or actual communities). This is not a book report about the entirety of the work; instead it should be a close analysis of one feature of the world you are analyzing. You should draw on secondary works to think about how others have analyzed this work

((*Utopian Studies* is a good source). If the work is a utopia you might focus on the outlines for education or governmental structure or family life. If your work is a dystopia you might analyze the author's method of dread creation or what possible options the author provides for avoiding this dystopia. You should have an active voice in this paper analyzing and evaluating the ideas presented. Think about these works as intentionally trying to engage the reader (or audience or non-participant) in an evaluation of the world in which we live. **This paper is due November 13.**

Paper Guidelines

- 1) All papers must be typed, double-spaced and stapled
- 2) All papers must be handed in hard copy; no papers sent via e-mail will be accepted
- 3) All citations must be in accordance with the departmental referencing guide:
<http://www.polisci.cofc.edu/PDF/POLSCitationGuide5-16-6.pdf>
- 4) Extensions must be approved 24 hours before the paper is due
- 5) Students must retain a copy of the paper, either on disk or in hard copy
- 6) Plagiarism will be prosecuted by the honor board and **students who plagiarize will fail this class**

Papers that do not meet these guidelines will not be accepted