The study of utopia, or the ideal (yet non-existent) place, is a staple of Western 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 the worst 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 (e.g. how do More’s ideas connect to Gilman’s?). Finally you will draw on these principles to design your own utopian community.

Required Books:

*Oryx and Crake*, Margaret Atwood  
*Utopia*, Thomas More  
*Erewhon*, Samuel Butler,  
*Looking Backward*, Edward Bellamy  
*Parable of the Talents*, Octavia Butler  
*The Dispossessed*, Ursula Le Guin  
*Utopianism*, Lyman Tower Sargeant  
*Utopia, Method, Vision, (UMV)* Tom Moylan (Ed)
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 spring break ) 20%
Group utopia project 20%

Course scale:

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<th>Grade</th>
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<td>A</td>
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Schedule of Readings:

1/9: Introduction

1/14: “The ones who walk away from Omelas” (on class blog)
1/16: Sargeant, *Utopianism*, Intro and Ch. 1
1/21: No Class MLK Day
1/23: Ruth Levitas “The Imaginary Reconstitution of Society: Utopia as Method” in *UMV* Groups for project
1/28: Atwood, “Writing Utopia” (OAKS) and *Oryx and Crake*, chs. 1-2
1/30: *Oryx and Crake*, chs. 3-6

Rules for utopia project group

2/4: *Oryx and Crake*, chs. 7-11
2/6: *Oryx and Crake*, chs. 12-15
2/13: Thomas More, *Utopia*, letter More to Giles and Book 1

Group project progress report one

2/25: Samuel Butler, *Erewhon*, Chs. 6-16
3/4: Spring Break
3/6: Spring Break
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/) 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.

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.

Papers

There is one longer (12-15 pages) paper on a work or community of your own choosing. This paper will be handed in twice. First due date is April 3 and the second due date is anytime up to the date of the final exam, April 29. The paper is a 12-15 page analysis of one feature of a utopian or dystopian work that we have not read in class (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). Your paper will outline the key ideas in the work and focus on one particular area of utopian or dystopian thinking. For example, 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.

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

**Group utopia project**

You will be divided into 6 groups that will each create a utopia. You will be asked to set out your group’s mission, guidelines for living together (this can be in the form of a constitution or something less formal), key principles and the conditions under which the people live. You should be clear to work out the details of some of the key areas, education, government, housing, employment, transportation, recreation, inter-personal relations. You may decide to focus your attention as a group in one particular area, or you may want to split the work among you into the different areas. Feel free to draw from the works that we read for inspiration (noting where you are inspired and how). Your final utopia will need to be presented orally and visually at the time of the final exam (4/29). See the group project handout for more details.