

[interdisciplinary class, could be suited for any level, any size]

Utopia | Dystopia

A fact about us humans is that we have fears and hopes. Another is that we are social. If we bring these facts together, we have the beginnings of an explanation for why our collective imagination is thoroughly pervaded by visions of good and bad human society – by visions of utopia and dystopia.

Utopias and dystopias are visions of what the perfect and the horrible social situations might be. These visions give us a perspective on what we hope and fear as individuals and as collectives. And they thus provide a mirror for reflecting on what sorts of societies we actually would like to inhabit – a mirror by which we might also reflect critically on the society we live in, here and now.

Utopias and dystopias are always distant in one way or another from the here and now. They can be distant in space, as Thomas More's Utopia is. Or distant in time, as the distant past of a golden age, or the future society ruled by evil machines that are so popular in science fiction, or as *1984* was when it was published in 1949. Or it can be distance in terms of degrees of reality as we see it in Plato's realm of ideas or Buddhist views of earthly life, or in the Matrix trilogy, where dystopia is the underlying reality of the here and now. Or the distance might be in terms of a before and an after of some singular event that changed everything: the pre-sin existence of the Garden of Eden, Thomas Hobbes's state of nature, Michelle Houllebecq's *The Possibility of an Island*, or Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*. And these various distances can, of course, be combined: Avatar's tribal utopia at Pandora is far away in time and space (and even kind of being); Hesse's *The Glass Bead Game* plays with distance in both time, degree of reality, and the all-changing event.

In this class we will study the historical, philosophical, literary, and political aspects of our utopian and dystopian imaginations. We will encounter utopian and dystopian visions from Plato to Houllebecq. We discuss what these visions share and how they differ. We will get a better of understanding of the important roles these visions have played and continue to play in our collective imagination.

The term 'utopian' has, of course, become a derogatory. A political proposal that is called utopian is charged with hopeless idealism – with lack of understanding of the relation between our hopes and the realities of the here and now. One of the issues that we will discuss in this class is what role of utopian and dystopian models can play in our attempt to identify the ideals and dangers that we, here and now, should aspire to achieve and avoid.

Sections and planned readings:

Ancient visions: Selections from Plato *The Republic*, *Phaedo*, *Statesman*, and *The Laws*; Aristotle *Politics*; Ovid *Metamorphoses*; Lucretius *The Nature of Things*.

Christian hopes: Selections the Bible and Augustine's *City of God*,

Early Modern Utopias and dystopias: Thomas More *Utopia*, Francis Bacon *New Atlantis*, selections from Thomas Hobbes *Leviathan*.

Modern Optimism and Romanticism: James Harrington *Oceana*, selections from John Locke *Two Treatises*, Jean-Jacques Rousseau *Discourse on Inequality* and *Julie, ou la Nouvelle Heloise*, Kant *Theory and Practice* and *Idea for a Universal History with Cosmopolitan Intent*.

19th Century Progressivism: Edward Bellamy *Looking Backward*; selections from Karl Marx and Engels *The Communist Manifesto*, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*; J.S. Mill, *The Subjection of Women*.

Early 20th Century Fears and Hopes: Aldous Huxley *Brave New World*, H.G. Wells *A Modern Utopia*, *The Time Machine*, Hesse *The Glass Bead Game*.

Contemporary Utopias and Dystopias: Cormac McCarthy *The Road*, Michelle Houellebecq *The Possibility of an Island*, G.A. Cohen *Why Not Socialism?*,

Criticisms and defenses of Utopian Thinking: selections from Karl Popper *The Open Society and its Enemies*; Robert Nozick *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*; Isaiah Berlin "The Decline of Utopian Ideas in the West," David Estlund *Utopophobia*; Rawls, *The Law of Nations*; Simmons "Ideal and Non-Ideal Theory," Thomas Nagel: "What makes a Political Theory Utopian?"

Secondary readings might include: Krishan Kumar *Utopianism* (Open University Press, 1991); J.C. Davis *Utopia and the Ideal of Society: A Study of English Utopian Writing, 1516-1700* (Cambridge University Press, 1983); J.M. Morris & A.L. Kross *The A-Z of Utopianism* (The Scarecrow Press, 2009); essays from B. Goodwin *The Philosophy of Utopia* (Taylor & Francis, 2001).

Movies and other Media: Hopes and fears with a societal content are everywhere in the human imagination, so it would be a shame to just read our way to understanding. Accordingly, we will also encounter utopias and dystopias in film (*Metropolis*, *The Matrix*, *Avatar*), architecture, theatre (depending on what's going on at nearby scenes), photography, and art (for example, the works of Qiu Anxiong). I intend to use the search for how utopias and dystopias are present in various forms of art as individual and group projects that can serve as starting point for individual and group in-class presentations.

