

# Utopia, Transformation, and Critique

<b>POLI 617</b> <b>Fall 2022</b>  <b>819 Leacock</b> <b>W 11:35-14:25</b>	<b>Professor Yves Winter</b> email: <a href="mailto:yves.winter@mcgill.ca">yves.winter@mcgill.ca</a>  <b>Office:</b> 418 Ferrier <b>Office hours:</b> By <a href="#">appointment</a>
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## Description

In modern politics and political theory, utopia gets a bad rap. Consider Machiavelli's claim to pursue the "effectual truth" of politics rather than its imagination (Prince, ch. 15) or Hobbes's concern that his work not be grouped with Plato's Republic, More's Utopia, or Francis Bacon's New Atlantis nor with "similar amusements of the mind." (Leviathan, ch. 31, Latin version)." Indeed most modern political theorists are keen to insist to their readers that to the extent they put forward a vision for a better society, it is not to be considered a utopia. Not only have utopianism and utopians been criticized as escapist, speculative, and impractical; they have also been attacked as reactionary, as inhibiting rather than encouraging emancipatory social and political change.

And yet, there is scarcely a form of writing that has been as important in modern politics as utopianism. As a literary genre, utopian fiction emerged in the sixteenth century, with the eponymous text by Thomas More. Yet as a religious and philosophical category, in the Western tradition, utopias can be traced back to Plato, the Hebrew bible, and Greek and Roman mythology. Frequently articulating visions of equality, freedom, and justice, and an end to human suffering, utopias have been an important part of the Western tradition of political thinking. They have played a significant, albeit controversial, role in radical and emancipatory movements, beginning with the Renaissance and Reformation (Müntzer, Campanella), seventeenth-century republicanism (Harrington), the democratic and socialist movements of nineteenth century Europe (Babeuf, Blanqui, Saint-Simon, Fourier, Owen, Proudhon) as well as twentieth-century feminist, queer, and anti-racist movements. Indeed, utopias remain key touchpoints for contemporary visions of a post-work society, automation, post-scarcity, and climate justice. Yet utopias have not always been on the side of expanding freedom and equality. They have also animated projects of social and political domination, including colonialism and especially settler colonialism.

For better or for worse, utopias have been constant features of the modern era. They have expressed both confidence in the powers of science, technology, solidarity, and the state to usher in human progress and freedom as well as anxieties about how the powers of technology, bureaucracy, and mass society can be turned into mechanisms of unfreedom and domination.

Thomas More's brilliant satire bequeathed us not only the term but also an ambivalent concept of utopia. Is it eu-topia, that is to say, the "good place," i.e. a description of a good society, or ou-topia, that is, the "non-place," a depiction of a non-existent, imaginary, and perhaps impossible world? And do these two notions necessarily coincide? Rather than decide this question one way or another, in this seminar, we will ask what critical purchase such an ambivalent concept of utopia may have. If utopia stands for a desirable yet imaginary or fictional place, then what are its political and philosophical valences? From the early modern era onwards, utopias have served a critical function: by charting out an imaginary society, utopias may provide a benchmark for a good society. Whether such benchmarks are desirable and progressive or instances of nostalgia, conservatism, or reaction has been subject of heated controversies. Yet beyond this specification of normative criteria, utopia may also point to unrealized possibilities of human sociality: it may provide an index for unactualized historical potential. In this course, we will investigate the concept of utopia from a political theory perspective and address the political and philosophical questions it raises.

## Texts

The following texts have been ordered and are available at [Paragraph Books/ Librairie Paragraphe](#). These editions and translations have been selected, because I consider them superior to the alternatives.

Thomas More, Utopia, ed. Logan/Adams. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2016

Marge Piercy, Woman on the Edge of Time (any edition)

Robin Kelley, Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination. Boston: Beacon Press, 2003

Erik Olin Wright, Envisioning Real Utopias. London and New York: Verso, 2010

Eva von Redecker, Praxis and Revolution: A Theory of Social Transformation. New York: Columbia UP, 2021

S. Chrostowska and James Ingram (eds.) Political Uses of Utopia: New Marxist, Anarchist, and Radical Democratic Perspectives. New York: Columbia UP, 2017

All other texts are available on MyCourses.

## Requirements

This is a seminar and **attendance** and **participation** are required.

Assignments for this class consist of

- (1) a paper proposal (15%)
- (2) a research paper (70%)
- (3) an oral presentation (15%)

Note that students must receive passing grades (B-) in each of these three components to pass the course.

Paper proposals are **due at 12pm on December 2 in hard copy**. They should be 2 pages long (single-spaced) and include a research question/thesis, several arguments, discussion of possible objections to the thesis, and a brief bibliography. All students must meet with me to discuss their proposals.

**Research papers** are due **at 12pm on December 21 in hard copy**. This includes the two week extension for TAs, from which everyone benefits. Late papers will receive a K and will not be graded until June 30, 2023. If this interferes with your plans for your comprehensive exams, graduation, or if it otherwise delays your progress in your degree, then plan to turn your paper in on time. Research papers should be 7,000 to 9,000 words in length.

Please drop paper proposal and research papers off at my office (418 Ferrier). You may slip them under the door, if I'm not around.

Students will sign up for **presentations** in the first seminar. Presentations should focus on a single text or on multiple texts by a single author. They should not try to summarize the material but instead raise analytical questions about utopia that arise from the text and orient class discussion. Please prepare a 1-2 page analytical handout. Presentations should be no longer than 10-15 minutes. In weeks when we discuss multiple texts, there may be more than one presentation. Please coordinate among yourselves to ensure that, collectively, presentations are no longer than 30 minutes total.

## Other Policies

**COVID** Notice: If you have a fever, a cough, and/or respiratory symptoms, please stay at home and do not attend classes.

As the instructor of this course I endeavor to provide an inclusive learning environment. This involves maintaining teaching spaces that are respectful and inclusive for all involved. To this end, offensive, violent, or harmful language on discussion boards, in chat rooms, but also in user names or visual backgrounds may be cause for disciplinary action.

If you experience barriers to learning in this course, do not hesitate to discuss them with me and the [Student Accessibility & Achievement](#) (formerly OSD).

Accommodations are possible for students who experience barriers (including disabilities and medical conditions as well as other obstacles). **Students who need accommodations should contact me at the beginning of the semester or as soon as possible after the barrier arises.**

Please let me and your fellow students know your preferred pronoun. Your preferred name should appear on the class list if you have entered it in [Minerva](#).

McGill University values **academic integrity**. Therefore, all students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offences under the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures (see [www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/honest/](http://www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/honest/) for more information). Please note that I take plagiarism and other forms of academic dishonesty seriously, and your work will be reviewed for potential plagiarism issues.

Conformément à la Charte des droits de l'étudiant de l'Université McGill, chaque étudiant-e a le droit de soumettre **en français ou en anglais** tout travail écrit devant être noté.

In the event of **extraordinary circumstances** beyond the instructor's or the university's control, the content, mode of delivery and/or evaluation scheme in this course is subject to change.

## Utopian Fiction

In addition to the course texts below, I strongly recommend that you read at least two or three of the following utopian novels:

Edward Bellamy, Looking Backward: 2000–1887 (1888)

William Morris, News From Nowhere (1890)

H.G. Wells, A Modern Utopia (1905)

Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Herland (1915)

Aldous Huxley, Brave New World (1931)

George Orwell, Nineteen Eighty-Four (1949)

Ursula LeGuin, The Dispossessed (1971)

P.M. bolo'bolo (1983)

Margaret Atwood, The Handmaid's Tale (1985)

Octavia Butler, Dawn (1987)

Kim Stanley Robinson, The Ministry for the Future (2020)

## Class Schedule

### August 31      **Introduction**

Selections on The Golden Age from Hesiod, Work and Days and Ovid, Metamorphoses in The Utopia Reader, pp.18-19

Plutarch, Lives, selections on Lycurgus, from The Utopia Reader, pp. 28-39

Plato, The Republic, 449b-466d, 471c-487a, 514a-521b

Genesis 1-3

Isaiah 11: 1-9

Revelation 17-22

### September 7      **Conceptualizing Utopia**

Karl Mannheim, Ideology and Utopia, Part IV ("The Utopian Mentality") , pp. 173-236

Ruth Levitas, The Concept of Utopia, Introduction, Chapters 1 & 4, pp. 1-40, 97-122

Paul Ricoeur, Lectures on Ideology and Utopia, pp. 1-20, 159-180, 269-284

Northrop Frye, "Varieties of Literary Utopias." Daedalus 94, no. 2 (1965): 323-47

Jose Esteban Muñoz, Cruising Utopia, Intro & ch. 1, pp. 1-32

### September 14      **Early Modern Utopias (I)**

Thomas More, Utopia (1516)

### September 21      **Early Modern Utopias (II)**

Tommaso Campanella, The City of the Sun (1623)

Francis Bacon, New Atlantis (1626)

### September 28      **Utopian Socialism**

Robert Owen, A New View of Society and Other Writings (ed. Claeys):

A New View of Society (1816), pp. 4-7; 10-40

"A Further Development of the Plan for the Relief of the Manufacturing and Labouring Poor (1817)", pp. 136-158

"Report to the Country of Lanark (1820)", pp. 250-308

"On the Natural and Rational Classification of Society" (from "Six Lectures Delivered at Manchester (1839)", pp. 344-357

Henri de Saint-Simon, The Political Thought of Saint-Simon, ed. Ghita Ionescu:

"Letter from an inhabitant of Geneva (1803)," pp. 65-81

"On the Reorganization of European Society (1814)," pp. 83-98

"Industry (1817)," pp. 99-109; "On the Industrial System (1821)," pp. 153-163

"The Catechism of the Industrialists (1823)," pp. 182-190

"On the Social Organization -- Third Fragment (1824)," pp. 227-238

Charles Fourier, "Selections Describing the Phalanstery (1822)" in The Utopia Reader, pp. 220-227

Recommended: Victor Considérant, Manifesto of Democracy (1847), "Part I: The State of Society: Of the Interests and Needs of Society," pp. 47-61  
(also available [online](#))

Jacques Rancière, Proletarian Nights: The Workers' Dream in Nineteenth-Century France, Preface & Chapter 1, pp. vii-xii, 3-24

Aaron Bastani, Fully Automated Luxury Communism

October 5      **No class (Yom Kippur)**

October 12     **No class (Fall break)**

October 19     **Anti-utopian socialism**

Karl Marx, "For a ruthless criticism of everything existing" (Letter to Ruge), in Robert C. Tucker (ed.) The Marx-Engels Reader, pp. 12-15

Theses on Feuerbach, pp. 143-145

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, Manifesto of the Communist Party, pp. 469-500

Karl Marx, Critique of the Gotha Program, pp. 525-541

Friedrich Engels, Socialism: Utopian and Scientific, pp. 683-717

All texts also available [online](#).

October 26     **Utopia and Hope**

Ernst Bloch, On Karl Marx, "Upright Carriage, Concrete Utopia," pp. 159-173

Ernst Bloch, The Principle of Hope, chs 1-6, 9-10, 15, (pp. 114-119; 128-147), 17 (pp. 195-205), 23-25, 33, 36 (read as much of the chapter as you can, but be sure to read pp. 471-481, 578-583, 619-625), 42 (pp. 893-897). For those interested in Marx's "Theses on Feuerbach," I also recommend ch. 19.

November 2    **Feminist Utopias**

Marge Piercy, Woman on the Edge of Time

Sophie Lewis, Full Surrogacy Now, Introduction pp. 1-29

Recommended: Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century"

November 9 **Utopia & Critical Theory**

Max Horkheimer, "Beginnings of the Bourgeois Philosophy of History," in Between Philosophy and Social Science, G. Frederic Hunter, Matthew S. Kramer, and John Torpey (trans.), pp. 363-375

Theodor Adorno & Ernst Bloch "Something's Missing: A Discussion between Ernst Bloch and Theodor W. Adorno on the Contradictions of Utopian Longing," in Bloch, The Utopian Function of Art and Literature, Jack Zipes and Frank Mecklenburg eds., pp. 1-17

Herbert Marcuse, "The End of Utopia," in Five Lectures, pp. 62-82

Herbert Marcuse, One Dimensional Man, Conclusion, pp. 251-261

Fredric Jameson, "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture" in The Jameson Reader Michael Hardt and Kathi Weeks (eds.), pp. 123-148

Fredric Jameson, "The Politics of Utopia," New Left Review 25 (2004): pp. 35-54

November 16 **Utopia & Afrofuturism**

W.E.B. DuBois, "The Comet" (1920)

Robin Kelley, Freedom Dreams

Recommended: Octavia Butler, Dawn

November 23 **Utopia, Praxis, and Transformation (I)**

Erik Olin Wright, Envisioning Real Utopias, chs. 1, 2, 4-7, Conclusion (pp. 1-32, 89-272, 366-374)

Fredric Jameson, "An American Utopia: Dual Power and the Universal Army"

Recommended: [Friends of the Classless Society, Contours of the World Commune](#)

November 30 **Utopia, Praxis, and Transformation (II)**

Eva von Redecker, Praxis and Revolution: A Theory of Social Transformation

Recommended: Erik Olin Wright, Envisioning Real Utopias, chs. 8-11 (pp. 273-365)

December 7 **Utopia and contemporary critical theory**

S. Chrostowska and James Ingram (eds.) Political Uses of Utopia: New Marxist, Anarchist, and Radical Democratic Perspectives

## Further Reading

Miguel Abensour, Utopia

Seyla Benhabib, Critique, Norm, and Utopia: A Study of the Foundations of Critical Theory

Lauren Berlant, Cruel Optimism

Ernst Bloch, The Spirit of Utopia

Susan Buck-Morss, Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West

S.D. Chrostowska, Utopia in the Age of Survival: Between Myth and Politics

Gregory Claeys and Lyman Tower Sargent (eds.) The Utopia Reader. Second Edition

Lee Edelman, No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive

Vincent Geoghegan, Ernst Bloch

Patricia Hill Collins, Black Feminist Thought

Fredric Jameson, Archeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions

George Kateb Utopia and Its Enemies

Ruth Levitas, Utopia as Method: The Imaginary Reconstruction of Society

Seyla Benhabib, Critique, Norm, and Utopia: A Study of the Foundations of Critical Theory

Samuel Moyn, The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History

Alondra Nelson, Body and Soul: The Black Panther Party and the Fight against Medical Discrimination

Robert Nozick, Anarchy, State, and Utopia

Kathi Weeks, The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries

Huey P. Newton, Revolutionary Suicide

Kristin Ross, Communal Luxury

Judith N. Shklar, After Utopia: the Decline of Political Faith