

SIII199Y1-Y-LEC0352: Society & Its Institutions

UTOPIAS AND DYSTOPIAS

Instructor:

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Office Hours:

Mondays 4:10-5:00

Tuesdays 4:10-5:00

or by appointment

How should we live? This course is intended to help you think about that question by reading and reflecting upon several novels that imagine quite different ways of organizing the social world. Take any area of human life that seems important to you. Sex, for example. Or work. Or education. Or eating and drinking and dressing and finding a place to live. Or taking care of small children or people who are sick or elderly. Or having fun and connecting with people. Or categorizing others and seeing them as similar to or different from you. Or organizing power and coercion. It's easy to multiply the topics once you start to think about them. And in every area of life, there are norms, institutions, and practices – sometimes formal and sometimes informal – that shape what we do and even what we want to do. They encourage some things and discourage others, sometimes directly and sometimes indirectly.

This course asks you to think about whether or not the way the current social order does all this is desirable, by comparing our social arrangements with a range of imaginary but possible alternatives, some of them consciously intended by their authors to be negative ideals (dystopias). We will read seven novels together. The purpose of reading the novels is to enable you to encounter the attractions and repulsions of various alternative social orders in a vivid and concrete manner. The intellectual challenge for you is to understand and reflect upon what the texts reveal.

Here are some of the questions that we will address. What would be the best (and worst) social order and why? What sorts of lives would a good (or bad) social order make possible? Would the same life possibilities be available to everyone in a good social order or would that be a sign of a bad social order? Or should life possibilities be the same for all in some respects and different in others, and if so, in what respects the same and in what respects different?

In addition to providing you with the opportunity to think about some important substantive issues, the course is intended to provide or enhance certain intellectual skills: the ability to read a text carefully, to reason thoughtfully and precisely, to engage in constructive conversations even with works and individuals with whom you disagree, to write in an organized and clear manner, and to present your ideas orally to others.

Course Requirements

This is a seminar, not a lecture course, and so the bulk of our time will be devoted to discussion among the students. My task will primarily be to guide that discussion and ask questions to help you think more deeply. It is crucial that everyone attend class regularly and come prepared.

During the first semester and the first half of the second semester, we will read seven novels. You are expected to have read the entire novel before the first class in which it is discussed. You will be asked to pay attention to what the novels communicate about a range of topics. I provide a list of these topics on a separate sheet, and you are free to suggest additions to the list. Before we begin the discussion of each novel, each student is expected to submit (via email to me) a brief note indicating what topics are deliberately addressed in the novel, what topics are mentioned or presupposed but not given explicit attention, and what topics are left out altogether. You are also asked to pick 2 of the topics that are deliberately addressed and to list all of the pages on which they are addressed. You are free to collaborate with others in constructing these brief notes, but you are personally responsible for the claims about what the notes say. In the class discussion, we will consider (1) what the text says about some of the key topics, (2) what the author intends to communicate about this topic if anything (e.g., praise or condemnation of some social practice), and (3) what your own view of the topic is.

In addition to these 7 brief notes, there are 4 written assignments: a 1,000 word essay on *Brave New World*, 2 essays of 2,000 words, each comparing 2 of the novels, and a final 3,000 word essay either on a novel of your own choosing or on your own vision of what the best social order would be and why. You will also be expected to make an oral presentation in class in connection with the final written assignment. Details of each of these assignments will be provided separately and posted on Blackboard.

Evaluation and Due Dates

1. Class attendance, participation, and brief notes before the discussion of each book.

Value: 20% of course grade

Due: Attendance and participation expectations are ongoing throughout the course. Unexcused absences from class will affect your grade negatively. The brief note on each book is due by 6 pm on the day before each book is discussed for the first time. **Late submission of these brief notes will not be accepted.**

2. A 1,000 word essay on *Brave New World*.

Value: 10% of course grade

Due: **October 2 at 6:00 pm.** To be submitted electronically via email as an attachment in Word format. **Late submissions penalized 1% per day late including weekend dates.**

3. A 2,000 word essay comparing two of the following: *The Dispossessed*, *Looking Backward, 1984*.

Value: 20% of course grade

Due: **December 6 at 6:00 pm.** To be submitted electronically via email as an attachment in Word format. **Late submissions penalized 1% per day late including weekend dates.**

4. A 2,000 word essay comparing two of the books assigned in the first half of the second semester. Titles to be determined.

Value: 20% of course grade

Due: **February 16 at 6:00 pm.** To be submitted electronically via email as an attachment in Word format. **Late submissions penalized 1% per day late including weekend dates.**

5. A 3,000 word essay either on your own vision of (some aspects of) utopia or a discussion of a novel not previously discussed in class. In either case there will be a class presentation on your paper during the second half of the second semester.

Value: 30% of course grade (including class presentation)

Due: **April 2 at 6:00 pm.** To be submitted electronically via email as an attachment in Word format. **Late submissions penalized 1% per day late including weekend dates.** The dates and times for the oral presentations will be determined by lot.

Academic Integrity

Learning, especially in a seminar, involves collaboration and engagement with your peers. You learn from and get ideas from one another. At the same time, it is important not to present the work of other people as your own. I take academic integrity seriously, and it is important you are aware that there are significant consequences if you are caught cheating or engaging in academic misconduct. All academic work in this course must adhere to the [Code of Behaviour on Academic Matters](#). If you have any questions about what is or is not permitted in this course, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Turnitin.com

Since we do not live in utopia (and perhaps this would be true even there), students are sometimes tempted to cheat. One way to reduce that temptation is to increase the likelihood that cheating will be discovered. One tool for that is Turnitin.com.

Normally, students will be required to submit their course essays to Turnitin.com for a review of textual similarity and detection of possible plagiarism. In doing so, students will allow their essays to be included as source documents in the Turnitin.com reference database, where they will be used solely for the purpose of detecting plagiarism. The terms that apply to the University's use of the Turnitin.com service are described on the Turnitin.com web site.

Some people have principled objections to using Turnitin.com, and the university rightly requires instructors to devise other mechanisms for making sure that students' work is their own for those who object to using Turnitin. If you are one of those students, please let me know and we will work out an alternative.

Fall Schedule of Class Meetings

- September 11:** Introduction
- September 18:** *Brave New World* (Brief note due Sept. 17 at 6 pm)
- September 25:** *Brave New World*
- October 2:** No Class. (Paper on *Brave New World* due at 6 pm)
- October 9:** Thanksgiving. No class.
- October 16:** *The Dispossessed* (Brief note due Oct. 15 at 6 pm)
- October 23:** *The Dispossessed*
- October 30:** *The Dispossessed*
- November 6:** Fall Break. No class.
- November 13:** *Looking Backward* (Brief note due Nov. 12 at 6 pm)
- November 20:** *Looking Backward*
- November 27:** *1984* (Brief note due Nov. 26 at 6 pm)
- December 4:** *1984*

BOOKS TO PURCHASE FOR FALL SEMESTER:

Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World*

Ursula LeGuin, *The Dispossessed*

Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward*

George Orwell, *1984*

You should be able to find copies of these books relatively easily through online booksellers. They are also on reserve at the library, but it is important for you to get your own copy and mark relevant passages. They are all also available online as in free pdf versions.