

## SII 199Y1-Y-LEC0352: Society & Its Institutions

### UTOPIAS AND DYSTOPIAS

**Instructor:**

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**Office Hours:**

**Tuesdays 4:10-6:00**

**or by appointment**

How should we live? 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. Or developing connections with others. 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. Do you like the way in which our social world arranges these matters? If so, why? If not, what sorts of social arrangements do you think would be preferable? Why would these alternatives be preferable?

This course asks you to think about these questions by comparing our existing social arrangements with a range of imaginary but possible alternatives. Some of these alternatives are consciously intended by their authors to be negative ideals (dystopias), though you may find elements in them that are attractive. Our main focus, however, will be on utopias – visions of alternative social orders that their proponents regard as better in various ways than the ones we inhabit and that they present as possible, in the sense that these social orders do not require personal or technological capacities beyond those that human beings today possess or at least could possess in the relatively near future. We read the novels in order to enable you to encounter these alternative social orders in a vivid and concrete manner. The intellectual challenge for you is to understand and reflect upon what the texts reveal and then to assess the merits and demerits of the alternatives they present. We will draw upon other sources as well, especially in the second semester.

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. To facilitate discussion, after the first class, if there are enough students and if a majority agree to the proposal, I will try to divide the class into two sections, the first one meeting from 2:10 to 3:30, and the second one from 3:40 to 5:00. (That is why the course is listed as having a tutorial.) Since the class as a whole has a maximum of 24 students, this means that each section will have 12 students at most. This ensures that everyone

will be able to participate and that you will be expected to do so. If we decide instead to keep the original class together, we will normally meet for 2 hours.

During the first semester, we will read four 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 will construct a questionnaire about these topics, and before we begin the discussion of each novel, you will be expected to post your responses to this questionnaire on the class website, as a way of indicating your preliminary views on key topics in the novels. The goal of this exercise is to enhance the quality of class discussion by focusing your attention on certain topics as you are read and by giving you a preliminary sense of what your fellow students think about these topics so that you come to class prepared to engage in a thoughtful way. So, filling out the questionnaires is an important and required component of class participation. 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.

There are 4 writing assignments in addition to the questionnaires. I have established three of them already: (1) a 1,000 word essay on *Brave New World*; (2) an essay of 2,000 words comparing two of the three other novels that we are reading in the first semester; (3) a final 3,000 word essay 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 the class website. I am deliberately leaving open the precise nature of the fourth writing assignment. It will deal with the materials that we cover in the first six weeks of the second term. I am also leaving open the precise content of those materials because I want to leave space for input from you as to what materials we should use in those six weeks and what form the writing assignment should take. One possibility is that we will simply read 3 additional novels and have a second comparative essay, but I want to leave open the possibility of doing something different.

#### *Evaluation and Due Dates*

1. Class attendance, participation, and responses to questionnaires 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 questionnaire on each book is due by 6 pm on the day before each book is discussed for the first time. **Late submission of these questionnaires will not be accepted.**

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

Value: 10% of course grade

Due: **October 5 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 *The Dispossessed* with either *Looking Backward* or *Ecotopia*.

Value: 20% of course grade

Due: **December 5 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 writing assignment dealing with the materials used in the first half of the second semester. Precise details of the materials and of the assignment itself to be determined.

Value: 20% of course grade

Due: **February 15 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 outlining your own vision of (some aspects of) utopia. There will also 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 5 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 10:** Introduction

**September 17:** *Brave New World* (Questionnaire due Sept. 23 at 6 pm)

**September 24:** *Brave New World*

**October 1:** *Brave New World*

**October 5:** Paper on *Brave New World* due at 6 pm.

**October 8:** Thanksgiving. No class.

**October 15:** *The Dispossessed* (Questionnaire due Oct. 14 at 6 pm)

**October 22:** *The Dispossessed*

**October 29:** *The Dispossessed*

**November 5:** Fall Break. No class.

**November 12:** *Looking Backward* (Questionnaire due Nov. 11 at 6 pm)

**November 19:** *Looking Backward*

**November 26:** *Ecotopia* (Questionnaire due Nov. 25 at 6 pm)

**December 4:** *Ecotopia*

**December 5:** Second paper due at 6:00 pm.

### **BOOKS TO PURCHASE FOR FALL SEMESTER:**

Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World*

Ursula LeGuin, *The Dispossessed*

Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward*

George Orwell, *Ecotopia*

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 in free pdf versions.