The Politics of the Future, 1880-2080

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**Outline of the Course**

**Brief Description**

At least since Plato, thinkers in the western tradition have sought to imagine better worlds. The most famous texts in this genre include Plato’s *Republic* and Thomas More’s *Utopia*, the latter of which gave this style of thinking a name. This course explores the modern utopian tradition, which originates in the late nineteenth century, as the implications of Darwinian science were put into dialogue with emerging models of capitalism and radical new transport and communications technologies. The conjunction of events, processes, and new imaginative possibilities, spawned a revolution in thinking about the future. “The Politics of the Future” examines accounts of the future – both utopian and dystopian – produced in Britain and North America from the 1880s to the present. It focuses in particular on the impact that new technologies had on shaping the human imagination, ranging from visions of future war through to the transformation of traditional conceptions of gender. It finishes with discussion of post-human worlds. The course combines speculative literature, political theory and intellectual history.

**Aims and Objectives**

- To provide a broad overview of debates about utopia and dystopia from the late nineteenth century to the present
- To encourage critical reflection on the relationship between speculative literature and political thinking
- To elucidate the complex connections between historical context and the production of political thought and fiction
- To offer intellectual resources for thinking about a wide range of topics in contemporary politics

By the end of the course, students should have a good understanding of both the theory and the recent history of utopian political thinking.

**Structure of the Paper**

The course proceeds in a broadly chronological fashion. It is divided into 3 historical periods: 1890-1925; 1925-1975; 1975-the present. The readings and lectures for each period focus (though not exhaustively) on a general theme. Section I traces the intellectual and imaginative
impact of Darwinism on visions of future societies. Section II focuses on attempts to make sense of totalitarianism. Finally, Section II explores how new developments in computing and biotechnology have shaped writing about the future.

Teaching & Examination

The course will be taught by a combination of lectures and seminars. There will be 16 lectures, running through Michaelmas and Lent terms. They will set the context for the development of utopian thinking during the long twentieth century, and introduce some of the key themes and primary texts.

Students will also take 4 seminars during the course, two in Michaelmas, and two in Lent. These will allow for conversation about the texts. The first one will focus on the meaning of utopia; the other three will correspond to the three historical periods under discussion.

The course will be examined by two 5,000 word essays, one due in early Lent, the other in Easter. The first essay will cover material from Section I. The second essay will allow students to choose a topic from either Section II or Section III. During the course students will have 4 supervisions, two each in Michaelmas and Lent. For the first supervision in each term, students will write a 2000 essay selected from a menu of options. For the second supervision each term, students will prepare an outline of their long essay for discussion/feedback.

Lecture List

Introductory Lecture: Thinking the Future

1880-1925

2. Dreamworlds: The Age of Utopia
3. Human Natures: Darwinism and its Legacies
4. Socialist Futures: Bellamy contra Morris
5. Social Science Fiction: Mr H. G. Wells Discovers the Future
6. Boundaries of Utopia: Empire, Race, Gender

1925-1975

7. Mapping Totalitarianism: Huxley and Orwell
8. The Strange Death of Utopia?
9. The Space Race and Nuclear Annihilation
10. The Social Sciences of the Future
11. Earth is the Only Alien Planet: Towards Inner Space

1975-Future(s)

12. Ecocide and the Population Bomb
13. Feminist Utopianisms
14. Welcome to the Machine: Cyberpunk and Beyond
15. Dissolving Capitalist Realism/Reclaiming the Future
16. Machines of Loving Grace: Artificial Intelligence and the End(s) of Humanity
Seminar List

The Meanings of Utopia
Darwinism & Socialism
Totalitarianism & Consumer Society
The Posthuman Condition

Questions

Supervision Questions

1. Where and when is utopia?
2. What explains the burst of utopian writing at the end of the nineteenth century?
3. Is conservatism antithetical to utopianism?
4. What explains the burst of transhumanist writing in the 1920s?
5. How did the space race shape the political imagination between 1950-72?
6. Is totalitarianism a useful analytical category?
7. How does Afrofuturism engage with the legacy of colonialism and slavery?
8. Does utopia have a gender?
9. Is cyberpunk orientalist?
10. Should robots have rights?

Essay 1 (Michaelmas)

1. Does dystopianism lead invariably to political fatalism?
2. How did Malthusian anxieties shape socialist utopias before the First World War?
3. Was H. G. Wells an authoritarian political thinker?
4. Was the utopianism of Charlotte Gilmore Perkins fatally undermined by her commitment to eugenics?
5. What role did race play in pre-First World War utopian writing?
6. Is Huxley’s *Brave New World* a utopian text?
Essay 2 (Lent)

1. What did Hannah Arendt mean when she called the space race “a rebellion against human existence”?

2. Did feminist writers of the 1970s succeed in rethinking the utopian tradition?

3. Is J. G. Ballard best characterised as a dystopian writer?

4. Was Frederic Jameson right to argue that it is “easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism”?

5. Is transhumanism best seen as a form of religion?

6. Should we welcome or fear the full automation of labour?

Reading List

The reading list for the course is broken into several sections. It opens with a selection of texts that are relevant for the whole course. This material, which is divided into set texts and further reading, will be useful for making sense of debates over the meaning of utopia and its political entailments, as well as providing useful background information about the development of theories of utopianism and the literary genre.

There are separate reading lists for each of the three historical periods. This material is broken down into four types of reading:

Set primary texts. These are all works of fiction. You should aim to read all of them by the end of the course.

Contextual primary texts. This is non-fictional material written during the period that will help to contextualise debates over the politics of the future. You are not expected to read all of this material, though some it is will be very useful for the essays.

Set secondary texts. This is material that you should aim to read by the end of the course.

Further reading. I have provided a fairly extensive list of books and articles that will allow you to explore particular topics in depth. Again, some of this material will be very useful for researching the essays.

Thinking the Future

Set Reading


- Dystopia: A Natural History (2016)


Urry, John, What is the Future? (2016)


Further Reading

General


Bauman, Zygmunt, Retrotopia (2017)


Geoghegan, Vincent, Utopianism and Marxism (1987)


Kumar, Krishan, Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modern Times (1987)


Manuel, Frank and Fritzie Manuel, Utopian Thought in the Western World (1979) [a comprehensive historical overview]


Parrinder, Patrick, Utopian Literature and Science: From the Scientific Revolution to Brave New World and Beyond (2015)


Rosenberg, Daniel and Susan Harding (eds.), Histories of the Future (2005)


Science Fiction Futures

Abbott, Carl, Imagining Urban Futures: Cities in Science Fiction and What we might Learn From Them (2016)

Jameson, Frederic, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (2005), esp. ch. 1

**Social Science Meets Speculative Literature**

Hassler, Donald and Clyde Wilcox (eds.), *Political Science Fiction* (1997)

Matarese, Susan, *American Foreign Policy and the Utopian Imagination* (2010)

**Section I: 1880-1925**

**Set primary texts**

Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward* (1888)
William Morris, *News From Nowhere* (1890)
H. G. Wells, *The War of the Worlds* (1897)
Sutton E. Griggs, *Imperium in Imperio* (1899)
Charlotte Gilmore Perkins, *Herland* (1915)
W. E. B. DuBois “The Comet” (1920)

**Contextual primary texts**

Friedrich Engels, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* (1880)
Edward Bellamy, “Why I Wrote ‘Looking Backward’” (1890)
D. G. Ritchie, *Darwinism and Politics* (1889)
T. H. Huxley, “Evolution and Ethics” (1893)
H. G. Wells, *The Time Machine* (1895)
William Morris, “How I Became a Socialist” (1896)
-- & Ernest Belfort Bax *Socialism: Its Growth and Prospects* (1896), esp. chs 14-21
H. G. Wells, *Anticipations* (1901)
-- “The Discovery of the Future” (1903)
Francis Galton, “Eugenics: Its Definition, Scope, and Aims” (1904)
G. K. Chesterton, *The Napoleon of Notting Hill* (1904)
H. G. Wells, *A Modern Utopia* (1905)
Vernon Lee, “On Modern Utopias” (1906)
H. G. Wells, “The So-Called Science of Sociology” (1907), repr. in *An Englishman Looks at the World* (1914)
William James, “The Moral Equivalent of War” (1910)
J. B. S. Haldane, Daedalus; or, Science and the Future (1923)

Set secondary texts

Claeys, Gregory, Dystopia: A Natural History (2017), ch. 5
Robertson, Michael, The Last Utopians: Four Late Nineteenth Century Visionaries and their Legacy (2018)
Shepard, W. Andrew, “Afrofuturism in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries” in Gerry Canavan and Erik Carl Link (ed.), The Cambridge History of Science Fiction (2018)

Further reading

General Accounts

Roemer, Kenneth, The Obsolete Necessity: America in Utopian Writings, 1888-1900 (1976)
Saler, Michael, As If: Modern Enchantment and the Literary Pre-History of Virtual Reality (2012)

Studies of Individual Thinkers


**Gender, Race, Empire**

Bell, Duncan, *Reordering the World* (2016), chs. 2, 4
Hayden, Wendy, “Feminist Thought” in Claeys (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Nineteenth Century Thought*
Kerslake, Patricia, *Science Fiction and Empire* (2010)
Makdisi, Saree, “Race and Empire in the Nineteenth Century” in Claeys (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Nineteenth Century Thought*
Rieder, John, *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction* (2008)
Yaszek, Lisa and Patricia Sharp (eds.), *Sisters of Tomorrow: The First Women of Science Fiction* (2016)

**Science and Technology**

Crook, Paul, *Darwinism, War and History: The Debate over the Biology of War from the “Origins of Species” to the First World War* (1994)
**Future Wars**

Franklin, H. Bruce, *War Stars: The Superweapon and the American Imagination* (2008), ch. 1

**Section II: 1925-1975**

**Set primary texts**

Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World* (1932)
George Orwell, *1984* (1949)
Philip K. Dick, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968)

**Contextual primary texts**

J. D. Bernal, *The World, the Flesh and the Devil* (1929)
Aldous Huxley, “Boundaries of Utopia” (1931)
H. G. Wells, “Utopias” (1939)
E. H. Carr, *The Twenty Years’ Crisis, 1919-1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations* (1939)
George Orwell, “Wells, Hitler and the World State” (1941)
  - “The Lion and the Unicorn: Socialism and the English Genius” (1941)
Albert Einstein, “Towards a World Government” (1946)
Hans Morgenthau, *Scientific Man and Power Politics* (1946)
Northrop Frye, “Varieties of Literary Utopia” (1965)
David Riesman, “Some Observations on Community Plans and Utopia” (1947)
Karl Popper, “Utopia and Violence” (1948)
Alan Turning, “Computing Machinery and Intelligence” (1950)
Isaac Asimov, “Social Science Fiction” (1953)
B. F. Skinner, “Freedom and the Control of Man” (1955)
David Woodbury, “Here is the Utopian Promise of the Peacetime Atom,” *Look*, (1955)
Judith Shklar, *After Utopia* (1957)
Margaret Mead, “Towards More Vivid Utopias” (1957)
Julian Huxley, “Transhumanism” (1957)
Michael Young, *The Rise of the Meritocracy* (1958)
J. L. Talmon, “Utopianism and Politics” (1959)
Julian Huxley, “The Future of Man” (1959)
Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (1961)
Lewis Mumford, “Utopia, the City and the Machine” (1965)
Judith Shklar, “The Political Theory of Utopia: From Melancholy to Nostalgia” (1965)
Susan Sontag, “The Imagination of Disaster” (1965)
Adam Ulam, “Socialism and Utopia” (1965)
Daniel Bell, “The Study of the Future” (1966)
Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces” (1967)
Alvin Toffler, Future Shock (1970)
Club of Rome, The Limits to Growth (1972)
Ursula K. Le Guin, “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas” (1973)

Set Secondary texts

- Dystopia: A Natural History (2016), 3-7
Lazier, Benjamin, “Earthrise, or the Globalization of the World Picture,” American Historical Review (2011)

Further Reading

General Accounts

Bashford, Alison, Global Population: History, Geopolitics, and Life on Earth (2014)
Bell, Duncan, & Joel Isaac (eds.), Uncertain Empire: American History and the Idea of the Cold War (2012)
Boyer, Paul, By the Bomb’s Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age (1994)
Canavan and Link (eds.), The Cambridge History of Science Fiction, Part II [on the “New Wave”]
Cunningham, Valentine, British Writers of the Thirties (1988)
Gleason, Abbott, Totalitarianism: The Inner History of the Cold War (1997)
Scheuerman, William, The Realist Case for Global Reform (2011)
Seed, David, American Science Fiction and the Cold War Literature and Film (1999)

Individual Thinkers
Newman, Bobby, Discriminating Utopian from Dystopian Literature: Why is *Walden Two* Considered a Dystopia? *The Behavior Analyst*, 16 (1993)

*(Social) Sciences of the Future*

Andersson, Jenny & Egle Rindzeviciute (ed.), *The Struggle for the Long-Term in Transnational Science and Politics* (2015), esp. chs. 1, 2 & 4

*Space Race/Atom Bomb*

Bellamy, Brent Ryan, “...Or Bust: Science Fiction and the Bomb, 1945-60” in Canavan and Link (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Science Fiction*
Munster, Rens van & Casper Sylvest, *Nuclear Realism: Global Political Thought during the Thermonuclear Revolution* (2016)
Tribbe, Matthew, *No Requiem for the Space Age: The Apollo Moon Landings and American Culture* (2014)

*Gender & Race*
Ahmad, Dohra, *Landscapes of Hope: Anti-Colonial Utopianism in America* (2009), Pts II-III

**Section III: 1975-**

*Set primary texts*

Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1986)

*Contextual primary texts*

Raymond Williams, “Utopia and Science Fiction’ (1978)
Frederic Jameson, “Progress versus Utopia; or, Can we Imagine the Future?’ (1982)
Donna Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century” (1985)
Ed Regis, *Great Mambo Chicken and the Transhuman Condition* (1990)
Joanna Russ, *To Write Like a Woman: Essays ion Feminism and Science Fiction* (1995)
Samuel Delany, “Racism and Science Fiction” (2000)
Ray Kurzweil, *The Singularity is Near* (2005)
- “Why I Want to be a Posthuman When I Grow Up” (2008)
Margaret Atwood, “The Road to Utopopia,” *Guardian* (2011)
Various, “Transhumanist Declaration” (2012)
Alex Williams & Nick Srnicek “Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics” (2013)

Set Secondary Texts

Carpenter, Charli, “Rethinking the Political/Science/Fiction Nexus: Global Policy-Making and the Campaign to Stop Killer Robots,” Perspectives on Politics (2016)
Claeys, Gregory, Dystopia: A Natural History (2016), ch. 8 & Conclusion
Fiskio, Janet, “Apocalypse and Ecotopia: Narratives in Global Climate Change Discourse,” Race, Gender & Class, 19 (2012)
https://aeon.co/essays/true-ai-is-both-logically-possible-and-utterly-implausible
Kelly, Duncan, Politics and the Anthropocene (2019)
Lepore, Jill, “A Golden Age for Dystopian Literature,” The New Yorker (June 2017)
Pepper, David, “Utopianism and Environmentalism,” Environmental Politics (2005)

Further Reading

General Accounts

Barbrook, Richard, Imaginary Futures: From Thinking Machines to the Global Village (2007)
Bukatman, Scott, Terminal Identity: The Virtual Subject in Postmodern Science Fiction (1993)

*Individual Thinkers*

Atwood, Margaret, *In Other Worlds: SF and the Human Imagination* (2011)
Bell, Duncan, “Scripting the City: J. G. Ballard among the Architects” [unpublished]
Canavan, Gerry, *Octavia E. Butler* (2016)

*Radical Futures*

Frase, Peter, *Four Futures: Life After Capitalism* (2016)
Fraser, Nancy, *Fortunes of Feminism: From State-Managed Crisis to Neoliberal Crisis* (2013)
Johnson, Gaye Theresa, and Alex Lubin (eds.), *Futures of Black Radicalism* (2017)
Environmental Futures

Gabrielson, Teena, Cheryl Hall, John M. Meyer, and David Schlosberg (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Environmental Political Theory* (2016)

Gender & Race

Hollinger, Veronica, “Strangers to Ourselves: Gender and Sexuality in Recent Science Fiction” in Canavan and Link (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Science Fiction*
- “Contemporary Science Fiction and Afrofuturism” in Canavan and Link (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Science Fiction*
Yaszek, Lisa, “Feminism” in Rob Latham (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Science Fiction*

Transhumanism/Artificial Intelligence

Bostrum, Nick, “A History of Transhumanist Thought”
Milburn, Colin, “Posthumanism” in Rob Latham (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Science Fiction*