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 (All to be given by Dr Bell)

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 Death of Utopia?
9. The Space Race and Nuclear Annihilation
10. The Social Sciences of the Future
11. Boundaries of Utopia: Empire, Race, Gender

1975-now

12. Ecocide and the Population Bomb
13. Feminist Utopianism
14. Welcome to the Machine: Cyberpunk and Beyond
15. Accelerate!
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. How did Malthusian anxieties shape socialist utopias before the First World War?

5. Did any of the dystopian writers of the mid-twentieth century present a credible picture of totalitarianism?

6. Should AI’s be granted citizenship?

7. Is the modern utopian tradition racist?

Essay 1 (Michaelmas)

1. Is the concept of “ustopia” (Margaret Atwood) useful?

2. Was H. G. Wells a utopian or dystopian writer?

3. Was empire a significant feature of utopian writing between 1880 and 1914?

4. Why was imagining future war so popular between 1870 and 1914?

5. What role does architecture play in the work of Edward Bellamy, William Morris, and H. G. Wells?

6. What explains the burst of transhumanist writing in the 1920s?

Essay 2 (Lent)

1. Does Judith Shklar deserve her reputation as an anti-utopian “Cold War liberal”?

2. In what ways did the space race shape the political imagination between 1950 and 1972?
3. Does the field of futurology tell us more about the Cold War than it does about the future?

4. How does Afrofuturism engage with the legacy of colonialism and slavery?

5. Is the cyborg still a useful category for feminist theorising?

6. Is Silicon Valley the most important site of contemporary utopian thinking?

**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 of it 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.

**On Utopia/Dystopia**

*Set Reading*


Thaler, Matthias, “Hope Abjuring Hope: On the Place of Utopia in Realist Political Theory,”
  *Political Theory* (2017)
Vieira, Fátima, “The Concept of Utopia” in Gregory Claeys (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to
  Utopian Literature* (2010)

Further Reading

Abbott, Carl, *Imagining Urban Futures: Cities in Science Fiction and What we might Learn From Them*
  (2016)
Fitting, Peter, “Utopias Beyond our Ideals: The Dilemma of the Right-wing Utopia,” *Utopian
  Studies* (1991)
Hassler, Donald and Clyde Wilcox (eds.), *Political Science Fiction* (1997)
Jameson, Frederic, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*
  (2005), esp. ch. 1
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]
Matarese, Susan, *American Foreign Policy and the Utopian Imagination* (2010)
Moylan, Tom & Raffaela Baccolini (eds.). *Utopia/Method/Vision: The Use Value of Social Dreaming*
  (2007)
  Images of International Relations,” *International Studies Quarterly* (2017)
Parrinder, Patrick, *Utopian Literature and Science: From the Scientific Revolution to Brave New World and
  Beyond* (2015)
Sargent, Lyman Tower, “Ideology and Utopia” in Michael Freedon, Marc Stears, Lyman Tower

Section I: 1880-1925

Set primary texts
Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward* (1888)
William Morris, *News From Nowhere* (1890)
H. G. Wells, *The Time Machine* (1895)
H. G. Wells, *The War of the Worlds* (1897)
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)
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
Further reading


Clarke, I.P., *Voices Prophecying War: Future Wars, 1763-3749*, 2nd ed. (1992) [the most comprehensive study]


Deane, Bradley, *Masculinity and the New Imperialism: Rewriting Manhood in British Popular Literature, 1870-1914*, esp. ch. 7 [on Wells]


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


Kerslake, Patricia, *Science Fiction and Empire* (2010)


Rieder, John, *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction* (2008)


Smith, David C., *H. G. Wells: Desperately Mortal* (1986) [a detailed definitive biography]


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)
Ursula K. Le Guin, “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas” (1973)
- *The Dispossessed* (1974)

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 Turing, “Computing Machinery and Intelligence” (1950)
Isaac Asimov, “Social Science Fiction” (1953)
B. F. Skinner, “Freedom and the Control of Man” (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)
Club of Rome, *The Limits to Growth* (1972)

**Further Reading**
Andersson, Jenny & Egle Rindzeviciute (ed.), *The Struggle for the Long-Term in Transnational Science and Politics* (2015), esp. chs. 1, 2 & 4
Bell, Duncan, “What is Liberalism?” *Political Theory* (2014)
Munster, Rens van & Casper Sylvest, *Nuclear Realism: Global Political Thought during the Thermonuclear Revolution* (2016)
Newman, Bobby, Discriminating Utopian from Dystopian Literature: Why is *Walden Two* Considered a Dystopia? *The Behavior Analyst*, 16 (1993)
Seed, David, *American Science Fiction and the Cold War Literature and Film* (1999)

**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 Usotopia,” Guardian (2011)
Various, “Transhumanist Declaration” (2012)
Alex Williams & Nick Srnicek “Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics” (2013)
Yuval Noah Harari, Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow (2016)

Set Secondary Texts

Bostrum, Nick, “A History of Transhumanist Thought”
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
https://aeon.co/essays/true-ai-is-both-logically-possible-and-utterly-implausible
Lepore, Jill, “A Golden Age for Dystopian Literature,” The New Yorker (June 2017)
Milburn, Colin, “Posthumanism” in Rob Latham (ed.), The Oxford Handbook of Science Fiction (2014)


Further Reading

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)


Frase, Peter, *Four Futures: Life After Capitalism* (2016)


