ISS 1885: Utopias and Dystopias

Quest 1: Justice and Power

I. General Information

Class Meetings

- Fall 2025
- Attendance: 100% In-Person, No GTAs, 35 Residential
- T Period 7 (1:55 PM – 2:45 PM), R Period 7 – 8 (1:55 PM – 3:50 PM)
- CSE 0457
- 3 Credits

Instructor

- Dr Eloise Davies
- CSE 568
- Tel: 352-294-7779
- Office Hours: Weds 9:00am-12:00pm; Thurs 9:30-10:30am
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Course Description

What would the ideal society look like? The act of imagining a perfect world has been a source of both literary and political inspiration, from Plato's *Republic* to the present day. Utopias allow their authors to create alternate worlds, free of constraints of scarcity, gender, customs, science or even human nature. Ever since Thomas More coined the term 'utopia', based on the Greek for 'no place', utopian writing has entailed ambiguities. Are these truly 'no places', impossible to implement in reality, or 'good places', which we might aim to bring into being? Utopian writing also poses dangers: there is a fine line between utopia and dystopia, and the quest for perfection can also lead to violence and coercion. But for better or for worse, the history of utopia and dystopia is a fascinating story of human experiment and creativity.

Quest and General Education Credit

- Quest 1
- Humanities
- Writing Requirement (WR) 2000 words

This course accomplishes the Quest and General Education objectives of the subject areas listed above. A minimum grade of C is required for Quest and General Education credit. Courses intended to satisfy Quest and General Education requirements cannot be taken S–U.

The Writing Requirement (WR) ensures students both maintain their fluency in writing and use writing as a tool to facilitate learning.

Course grades have two components. To receive writing requirement credit, a student must receive a grade of C or higher and a satisfactory completion of the writing component of the course.

Required Readings and Works

1. Required readings for the course will be available on Canvas as PDF or links to online texts. You can also find some of the relevant texts on the UF library electronic course reserve or in the library in physical copies.
2. The writing manual for this course is: *The Economist Style Guide*, 11th edn. (2015). ISBN: 9781610395755.
3. Materials and Supplies Fees: n/a.

Course Objectives

1. Identify, describe, and explain the methodologies used across humanities disciplines to examine essential ideas about utopias and dystopias.
2. Identify, describe, and explain key ideas and questions about utopias and dystopias.
3. Analyse how people have conceived of utopias and dystopias from antiquity to the present.
4. Analyse and evaluate specific accounts of human reaction to concepts that challenge our own notions of utopias and dystopias, using close reading, critical analysis, class discussion, and personal reflection.
5. Develop and present clear and effective written and oral work that demonstrates critical engagement with course texts, and experiential learning activities.
6. Communicate well–supported ideas and arguments effectively within class discussion and debates, with clear oral presentation and written work articulating students' personal experiences and reflections on utopias and dystopias.
7. Connect course content with students' intellectual, personal, and professional lives at UF and beyond.
8. Reflect on students' own and others' experience with utopias and dystopias, in class discussion and written work.

II. Graded Work

Description of Graded Work

1. **Active Participation and Attendance: 20%**
    a. **Participation: 10%**
        i. An exemplar participant shows evidence of having done the assigned reading before each class, consistently offers thoughtful points and questions for discussion, and listens considerately to other discussants. See participation rubric below.

    b. **Class Attendance: 10%**
        i. On–time class attendance is required for this component of the course grade. You may have two unexcused absences without any penalty, but starting with the third class missed your grade will be affected. Starting with the third unexcused absence, each unexcused absence reduces your attendance grade by 2/3: an A– becomes a B, and so on.
        ii. Except for absence because of religious holiday observance, documentation is required for excused absences, per university policy. Excessive unexcused absences (10 or more) will result in failure of the course. If you miss 10 or more classes (excused or not), you will miss material essential for successful completion of the course.

2. **Reading Reflections (3 all term): 15%**
    a. Every few weeks you will turn in to Canvas a short paragraph responding to that week's set text. Submissions should be c. 100-200 words. Please post your reflection by the end of the day on Tuesday. See Canvas for details.

3. **Experiential Learning Component: 10%**
    Students will participate in two experiential learning activities:
    a. Students will participate in a visit to the Harn Gallery of Art for a session on 'Art and the Utopian Imagination'. Students will complete a short written task related to the visit. (5%)
    b. Students will also attend a talk by a local young adult dytopian fiction author. Students will have the chance to discuss the process of writing and explore the popularity of dystopian fiction today. Students will complete a short written task related to the talk. (5%)

4. **Your Own Description of Utopia (400 words) with Analysis (600 words) OR Analysis of a modern utopia/dystopia of your choice (600 words): 25%**
    a. Option 1: After reading a range of utopian and dystopian writing, and taking inspiration from Margaret Cavendish's quest 'not only to be Empress, but Authoress of a whole world' (week 8), you will submit **your own** description of a utopian society. Your description of utopia should be c. 400 words, and you must include aspects of utopian writing as seen in our course readings up to the point of submission (week 9). In addition to your description of utopia, you will write an analysis of what ancient and early modern 'utopian' elements you have included and why this society can be considered utopian. This analytical section will be at least 600 words (c. 1000 words total). See Canvas for more details.

b. Option 2: You will write an analysis of a modern (post 1700) utopia or dystopia **of your choice** (min. 600 words), explaining how it draws on or departs from the traditions of the earlier utopian literature we have read. Which ancient and early modern 'utopian' elements feature in this utopia/dystopia? In what ways does this society differ from the ancient and early modern utopias we have read? In what ways can this society be considered utopian or dystopian? See Canvas for more details.
c. The instructor will evaluate and provide feedback on all of the student's written assignments with respect to grammar, punctuation, clarity, coherence, and organization.
d. See Writing Assessment Rubric on syllabus.
e. Due week 9

5. **Final Analytical Paper (1400 words): 30%**
    a. After the final class, you will submit a min. 1,400 word analytical essay addressing a prompt provided to you by Week 6. You will develop an analytic argument based on your own thesis responding to the prompt, incorporating at least four course readings. The paper must be submitted by 6pm on Wednesday 3 December. See Canvas for more details.
    b. The instructor will evaluate and provide feedback on all of the student's written assignments with respect to grammar, punctuation, clarity, coherence, and organization You may want to access the university's Writing Studio.
    c. An additional writing guide website can be found at OWL.
    d. See Writing Assessment Rubric on syllabus.

Late submission policy: Work submitted late will be subject to a late penalty of 2/3 of a grade: an A– becomes a B, and so on. After the initial late penalty, a further late penalty of 1/3 of a grade will be applied for every 24 hours the work is delayed. If you wish to request an extension, please get in contact ahead of the deadline.

III. Annotated Weekly Schedule

WEEK 1: INTRODUCING UTOPIA

21 Aug: This class will introduce the concept of utopia. We will read some short introductory reflections on utopia and discuss what we might expect utopia to look like.

Readings:

1. Short extracts provided in class.

WEEK 2: GREEK MODELS

26, 28 Aug: We will start our exploration of utopian writing with Plato's description of 'kallipolis', his perfectly just city. We will compare it to Plutarch's account of ancient Sparta, another important model for later utopian writers.

Readings (55 pages):

2. Plato, *Republic*, in *Plato: Complete Works* (Hakett, 1997), ed. John M. Cooper, pp. 1077–1100 [Book 5] [34 pages].
3. Plutarch, 'Lycurgus', in *Lives* Vol. 1 (Cambridge, MA, 1914), pp. 227–267 [dual language; 21 pages]

WEEK 3: DEFINING A GENRE

2, 4 Sept: What would a Christian utopia look like? Should literary utopias function as ideals for society or, alternately, as critiques of regimes or institutions? Did More intend his utopia to be a 'no place' or a 'good place'? We will discuss how More revived Greek models for a Christian Europe, establishing utopian writing as a distinctive genre in the process.

Readings (64 pages):

1. Thomas More, *Utopia*, trans. Paul Turner (2003), pp. 50–113 [Book II].

Assignment: Reading Reflection #1. Deadline: end of the day, Tuesday 2 September.

WEEK 4: RHETORIC AND UTOPIA

9, 11 Sept: We will consider political utopian writing this week. Leonardo Bruni's panegyric praises an idealised vision of Renaissance Florence. What is the line between panegyric and utopia? How far is rhetoric inherently utopian?

Readings (44 pages):

1. Leonardo Bruni, 'Panegyric to the City of Florence', in *The Earthly Republic: Italian humanists on government and society*, ed. Benjamin G. Kohl and Ronald G. Witt (Philadelphia, 1991), pp. 135–143, 149–175.
2. Pier Paolo Vergerio, 'The Republic of Venice', in *Cambridge Translations of Renaissance Philosophical Texts* Vol 2 (Cambridge, 2010), ed. Jill Kraye, pp. 118–125.

WEEK 5: GENDER AND UTOPIA: I

16, 18 Sept: To what extent would a female–authored utopian vision entail different considerations from one written by a man? Christine de Pizan's *The Book of the City of Ladies* (1405) is probably the most famous medieval book written by a woman. We will discuss what utopian writing has to offer women, in both medieval and more modern settings.

Readings (49 pages):

1. Christine de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, trans. Rosalind Brown–Grant (1999), pp. 5–30, 57–66, 107–110, 195–97, 201–202, 235–240.

Assignment: Reading Reflection #2. Deadline: end of the day, Tuesday 16 September.

WEEK 6: TRAVEL, SCIENCE AND UTOPIA: I

23, 25 Sept: The 'discovery' of America, and other unknown places and peoples, inspired writers to present their utopias as travel narratives, while the 'Scientific Revolution' reshaped seventeenth–century understandings of nature, opening up tantalizing possibilities for human mastery over nature. We will explore the influence of a new age of travel, imperial expansion and scientific discovery on early modern utopias, focusing on writings of the Italian philosopher Tommaso Campanella, and the English statesman and pioneer of modern science, Francis Bacon.

Readings (44 pages):

1. Tommaso Campanella, *The City of the Sun*, trans. Daniel J. Donno (Los Angeles, 1981), pp. 27–69, 121–127 [dual language; 26 pages].
2. Francis Bacon, 'New Atlantis', in *Three Early Modern Utopias* (Oxford, 1999). pp. 161–168,176–185.

WEEK 7: TRAVEL, SCIENCE AND UTOPIA: II

30 Sept, 2 Oct: Our investigation of science, travel and utopia continues with Margaret Cavendish's *The Blazing World* (1666). This unusual work – which might be categorized as science fiction – also raises questions about the relationship between philosophy and fiction.

Readings (44 pages):

1. Margaret Cavendish, 'The Blazing World', in Political Writings (Cambridge, 2003), pp. 5–18, 26–41, 67–79, 109.

WEEK 8: TRAVEL, SCIENCE AND UTOPIA: III

7 Oct: We conclude our exploration of the relationship between new scientific thinking, travel and utopia with the writings of the French philosopher Michel de Montaigne, and an exploration of European prints based on life in early modern Florida. Why were utopian writers so interested in the indigenous people of the Americas?

9 Oct: This class, on the theme of 'Art and the Utopian Imagination', will be held at the Harn Museum of Art. We will view art and objects related to Native American life, as well as a range of other works reflecting visions of utopia or dystopia. The class will take place from 2:15-3:30pm (to allow for travel time). See canvas for more details.

Readings (14 pages + image task)

1. Michel de Montaigne, 'On the Cannibals', in *Essays*, trans. M.A. Screech (Penguin, 1993), pp. 79–92.
2. Explore early modern engravings of life in Florida, based on drawings by Jacques le Moyne. Details on Canvas.

Assignment: Experiential learning exercise #1. Deadline: end of the day, Tuesday 14 October.

WEEK 9: SATIRE AND UTOPIA

14, 16 Oct: Utopias have offered biting criticisms of social ills throughout time. How have writers deployed utopian writing to satirise their own societies? Can satire be utopian, or is it innately anti–utopian?

Readings (55 pages):

1. Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, eds. P. Dixon and J. Chalker (Penguin, 1984), pp. 198–217, 305–339 [Part III Chs 1–3; Part IV Chs 7–11]

Assignment: Description/Analysis of Utopia, due 6pm on Monday 20 October

WEEK 10: POLITICAL ECONOMY AND UTOPIA

21, 23 Oct: This week we will examine the economic basis of utopia. We will trace how James Harrington's *Oceana* (1656), which he wrote while living in England's lone experiment with republican government, sought to balance 'ancient prudence' with the economic demands of the seventeenth century. We will then turn to a favorite of Thomas Jefferson's, Archbishop Fénelon's bestselling *Adventures of Telemachus* (1699), a rebuke of the absolutist regime of Louis XIV of France. Fénelon's imagined ancient world set the terms of economic debate throughout the eighteenth century.

Readings (37 pages):

1. James Harrington, *The Commonwealth of Oceana*, ed. J.G.A. Pocock (Cambridge, 1992) pp. 3–7, 33–38, 69–71
2. François Fénelon, *The Adventures of Telemachus*, ed. Patrick Riley (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 150–172

WEEK 11: HUMAN NATURE AND UTOPIA

28, 30 Oct: This week we will turn to broad considerations of how the organization of societies impinge on the liberties and rights of ordinary citizens. Does human nature set fundamental limits on utopian possibility? Or might it be possible for human nature to be changed and reshaped?

Readings (37 pages):

1. David Hume, 'The Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth', in *Essays, Moral Political and Literary*, ed. Eugene Miller (Indianapolis, 1985), pp. 512–529. [ESSAY XVI]
2. Marquis de Condorcet, 'Sketch of the Progress of the Human Mind' (abridged), in *The Utopia Reader*, eds. Claeys & Tower Sargent (New York, 2017: 2nd edn), pp. 202-206
3. Judith Shklar, 'The Political Theory of Utopia: From Melancholy to Nostalgia', *Daedalus* 94 (1965), pp. 367–380

Assignment: Reading Reflection #3. Deadline: end of the day, Tuesday 28 October.

On Thursday some class time will be spent introducing the final Analytical Paper.

WEEK 12: SOCIALISM, REVOLUTION AND UTOPIA

4 Nov: How did utopian writing shape and develop theories of socialism? Does true socialism place impossible demands on human nature? Or does socialism offer a vision of utopia that is realizable? We will read from William Morris's *News from Nowhere*, a European socialist classic which combines socialism with soft science fiction.

6 Nov: The second session of the week will involve a talk by local Young Adult fiction author Rosaria Munda. *Fireborne* explores the fallout of a violent revolution, which has established a society reminiscent of Plato's *Republic.*

Readings (65 pages):

1. William Morris, 'News from Nowhere', in *The Utopia Reader*, eds. Claeys & Tower Sargent (New York, 2017: 2nd edn), pp. 320–38
2. Rosaria Munda, *Fireborne* (New York, 2019), pp. 1–46

Assignment: Experiential learning exercise #2. Deadline: before class, Thursday 6 November.

WEEK 13: GENDER AND UTOPIA: II

13 Nov (11th is a holiday): Why has utopia proven such an attractive genre for feminist writers? Should a feminist utopia involve a reversal of gender roles, separation by sex, or a total abolition of gender distinctions? We read from two modern feminist utopias, while also comparing their concerns to those of female writers encountered earlier in the semester.

Readings (30 pages):

1. Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, 'Sultana's Dream', in *The Essential Rokeya* (Leiden, 2013), pp. 159–168
2. Marge Piercy, *Woman on the Edge of Time* (New York, 2016), pp. 62–81

WEEK 14: TECHNOLOGY AND DYSTOPIA

18, 20 Nov: The technological possibilities of the twentieth century opened up new possibilities for human control over nature, but also for human control over each other. How did utopian – or dystopian – writers address the new challenges of the age of totalitarianism? We will read from the works of George Orwell and Aldous Huxley.

Readings (31 pages):

1. Aldous Huxley, 'Brave New World', in *The Utopia Reader*, pp. 422–437.
2. George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (London, 2021), pp. 3–8.
3. George Orwell, 'Imaginary Interview: George Orwell and Jonathan Swift', in *Essays* (New York, 2002), pp. 451–459.

WEEK 15: UTOPIA AND DYSTOPIA: WHERE NEXT?

2 Dec: In this final session, we will return to some of the broader questions about the meaning and purpose of utopian writing addressed throughout the semester.

Readings (14 pages):

1. Gregory Claeys, 'Paradise Lost?', in *Searching for Utopia: The History of an Idea* (New York, 2011), pp. 201–213.

Assignment: Analytical Paper Due (1400 words), due 6pm on Wednesday 3 December

IV. Grading Scale and Rubrics

Grading Scale

For information on UF's grading policies for assigning grade points, see here.

A	94 – 100%		C	74 – 76%
A–	90 – 93%		C–	70 – 73%
B+	87 – 89%		D+	67 – 69%
B	84 – 86%		D	64 – 66%
B–	80 – 83%		D–	60 – 63%
C+	77 – 79%		E	<60

Grading Rubrics

Participation Rubric

A (90–100%)	Typically comes to class with pre–prepared questions about the readings. Engages others about ideas, respects the opinions of others and consistently elevates the level of discussion.
B (80–89%)	Does not always come to class with pre–prepared questions about the reading. Waits passively for others to raise interesting issues. Some in this category, while courteous and articulate, do not adequately listen to other participants or relate their comments to the direction of the conversation.
C (70–79%)	Attends regularly but typically is an infrequent or unwilling participant in discussion. Is only adequately prepared for discussion.
D (60–69%)	Fails to attend class regularly and is inadequately prepared for discussion. Is an unwilling participant in discussion.
E (<60%)	Attends class infrequently and is wholly unprepared for discussion. Refuses to participate in discussion.

Writing Rubric

	Thesis and Argumentation	Use of Sources	Organization	Grammar, mechanics and style
A (90–100%)	Thesis is clear, specific, and presents a thoughtful, critical, engaging, and creative interpretation. Argument fully supports the thesis both logically and thoroughly.	Primary (and secondary texts, if required) are well incorporated, utilized, and contextualized throughout.	Clear organization. Introduction provides adequate background information and ends with a thesis. Details are in logical order. Conclusion is strong and states the point of the paper.	No errors.
B (80–89%)	Thesis is clear and specific, but not as critical or original. Shows insight and attention to the text under consideration. May have gaps in argument's logic.	Primary (and secondary texts, if required) are incorporated but not contextualized significantly.	Clear organization. Introduction clearly states thesis, but does not provide as much background information. Details are in logical order, but may be more difficult to follow. Conclusion is recognizable and ties up almost all loose ends.	A few errors.
C (70–79%)	Thesis is present but not clear or specific, demonstrating a lack of critical engagement to the text. Argument is weak, missing important details or making logical leaps with little support.	Primary (and secondary texts, if required) are mostly incorporated but are not properly contextualized.	Significant lapses in organization. Introduction states thesis but does not adequately provide background information. Some details not in logical or expected order that results in a distracting read. Conclusion is recognizable but does not tie up all loose ends.	Some errors.
D (60–69%)	Thesis is vague and/or confused. Demonstrates a failure to understand the text. Argument lacks any logical flow and does not utilize any source material.	Primary and/or secondary texts are almost wholly absent.	Poor, hard–to–follow organization. There is no clear introduction of the main topic or thesis. There is no clear conclusion, and the paper just ends. Little or no employment of logical body paragraphs.	Many errors.
E (<60%)	There is neither a thesis nor any argument.	Primary and/or secondary texts are wholly absent.	The paper is wholly disorganized, lacking an introduction, conclusion or any logical coherence.	Scores of errors.

V. Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs)

At the end of this course, students will be expected to have achieved the Quest the General Education student learning outcomes for Humanities (H).

Humanities (H) Humanities courses must afford students the ability to think critically through the mastering of subjects concerned with human culture, especially literature, history, art, music, and philosophy, and must include selections from the Western canon.

Humanities courses provide instruction in the history, key themes, principles, terminology, and theory or methodologies used within a humanities discipline or the humanities in general. Students will learn to identify and to analyze the key elements, biases and influences that shape thought. These courses emphasize clear and effective analysis and approach issues and problems from multiple perspectives.

Content: *Students demonstrate competence in the terminology, concepts, theories and methodologies used within the discipline(s).*

- Identify, describe, and explain the methodologies used across humanities disciplines to examine essential ideas about utopias and dystopias (Quest 1, H). **Assessment**: analytical essay, reading reflections, description and analysis of utopia.
- Identify, describe, and explain key ideas and questions about utopias and dystopias (Quest 1, H). **Assessment**: experiential learning component, analytical essay, reading reflections, description and analysis of utopia.

Critical Thinking: *Students carefully and logically analyse information from multiple perspectives and develop reasoned solutions to problems within the discipline(s).*

- Analyse how people have conceived of utopias and dystopias from antiquity to the present (Quest 1, H). **Assessment**: experiential learning component, analytical essay, reading reflections, description and analysis of utopia.
- Analyse and evaluate specific accounts of human reaction to concepts that challenge our own notions of utopias and dystopias, using close reading, critical analysis, class discussion, and personal reflection. (Quest 1, H). **Assignments**: experiential learning component, analytical essay, reading reflections, description and analysis of utopia.

Communication: *Students communicate knowledge, ideas and reasoning clearly and effectively in written and oral forms appropriate to the discipline(s).*

- Develop and present clear and effective written and oral work that demonstrates critical engagement with course texts, and experiential learning activities (Quest 1, H). **Assessments:** experiential learning component, reading reflections, analytical essay, description and analysis of utopia.
- Communicate well-supported ideas and arguments effectively within class discussion and debates, with clear oral presentation and written work articulating students' personal experiences and reflections on utopias and dystopias (Quest 1, H). **Assessments:** active class participation, reading reflections.

Connection: *Students connect course content with meaningful critical reflection on their intellectual, personal, and professional development at UF and beyond.*

- Connect course content with students' intellectual, personal, and professional lives at UF and beyond. (Quest 1). **Assessments:** experiential learning component, analytical paper, reading reflection, description and analysis of utopia.
- Reflect on students' own and others' experience with utopias and dystopias, in class discussion and written work (Quest 1). **Assessments:** experiential learning component, analytical paper, reading reflection, description and analysis of utopia.

VI. Quest Learning Experiences

1. Details of Experiential Learning Component

1. See above in grading section for a description of the two experiential learning experiences in which students will participate: a visit to the Harn Museum of Art and attending a talk by a local young adult dystopian fiction author.

2. Details of Self–Reflection Component

Self–reflection is built into many of the assignments, primarily through the reading reflections that students submit, the analytic essay assignment, and the description and analysis of utopia assignment. In these opportunities for self–reflection offered by specific activities throughout the course, students will reflect on the broader implications of the themes of the course, considering the impact to themselves and/or to a wider community.

VII. Required Policies

See https://go.ufl.edu/syllabuspolicies for the most up-to-date online compendium of academic policies relating to this course.