

Time for U/Dystopia? Reflecting on Power, Politics, and Global Crisis

Questions of Utopia and Dystopia return forcefully in the context of the current world crisis. Will the Covid 19 pandemic expose, at last, the failures of the hegemonic global system, and lead to new modes of organization that transcend individualism and defy capitalism and colonialism? Or will it lead to the solidification of the old world order, now armed with new and renovated techniques of surveillance, fear-mongering, and mass control?

In this course we will use our current moment to reflect on a number of literary texts that defined the genre(s) of Utopia/Dystopia, and use them to reflect back on our present and on the various Utopian and Dystopian scenarios the future may be hiding for us.

The course will start off by quickly examining Thomas Moore's *Utopia* before moving to William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, a text which playfully subverts the nascent utopian genre and brilliantly exposes its authoritarian and colonialist underpinnings. The course will then move to various utopic and dystopic texts, ending with the graphic novel and film versions of *V for Vendetta*, which predict the dystopic potentials of global natural-political crises like the one we live in. Finally, the course will shift to discussing a number of journalistic and theoretical commentaries that sought to expose the utopic and dystopic potentials of our present moment.

The discussions will be punctuated and interrupted with excerpts from contemporary news flashes and headlines, in order to prompt the reflection on our present from the standpoint of the studied text.

The literary, theoretical, and journalistic texts will not provide any answers, but will offer us some questions, some insight, and a lot of interesting discussions.

Course aims:

- Introducing the literary genres of Utopia and Dystopia
- Using literature to reflect on our present and future
- Exploring and discussing the themes of power, surveillance, and biopolitics; our intention, however, is to allow the theoretical discussion to spring from our discussion of the literary texts—texts by Foucault, Agamben, or others may be suggested as the flow of our discussion dictates.
- Providing a theoretical and literary framework for discussing the possibilities of the future of our world.

This course is open for everyone. No background in theory or literature is required. The instructor will work on providing any necessary background material and the course will be structured in a manner that allows participants to bring in their various backgrounds and enrich each others'.

Clarifications:

- This is not a literature course and the instructor is not specialized in English or comparative literature. Students who come from a literature background are therefore encouraged to provide their own input and add their own expertise. The course, however, is more about exploring political and social phenomena through literary texts, and less about pure literature.
- While the concept of Utopia has been creatively deployed in queer theory, and while interested participants are welcome to creatively reflect on the texts from any standpoint they wish, this will not be the focus of our course.

Tentative Flow:

- I- Introducing Utopia
(no assigned readings, excerpts from Thomas More's *Utopia* and from Karl Marx's critique of Utopian socialism will be introduced in session)
- II- Utopia and the Subversion Thereof
Readings: William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*.

Suggested Readings: Thomas More, *Utopia*, Michel de Montaigne, "Of the Cannibals."
- III- Is One Man's Utopia the Other Man's (or Woman's) Dystopia?
Readings: Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*.
- IV- Dystopia and Power
Readings: Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World*.
- V- Dystopia and Biopower
Readings: Alan Moore, *V for Vendetta*.
- VI- Our Future Utopia, Our Future Dystopia
Readings: Excerpts from commentaries and opinion pieces (TBA).