# Political Science 139: Utopian and Dystopian Politics

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## Important Dates

- **First Day of Class:** April 2, 2018
- **Short Paper Due:** May 11
- **Book Reports Due:** May 21
- **Last Day of Class:** June 8
- **Take Home Final Due:** June 13 5pm

## About This Course

**Instructor:**
- M. Christopher Sardo, PhD

**Meeting Time and Place**
- MWF 10-10:50am, SSL 145

**Canvas Site**
- TBD

**Important Dates**

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**Assessing your Success**

**Building an Inclusive and Equitable Classroom**

**Course Schedule**

**Novels for Group Presentations**

## About Me

**Email:**
- [msardo@uci.edu](mailto:msardo@uci.edu)

**Office Hours**
- Wednesdays 2-4pm or by appointment

**Office:**
- SSPB 2271
GOALS FOR THE COURSE

Throughout history, philosophers, novelists, essayists, and filmmakers have imagined what a perfect society would look like: a world with no war, violence, suffering, or injustice. Utopian thinking seems to be an inherent part of human political theorizing, and raises several questions:

• Are these merely examples of wishful thinking or unbridled optimism?
• Are utopias really no-places, as the Greek root would suggest, or are they valuable guides for improving our society?
• Have the horrors of 20th century totalitarianism definitively proven that utopias are really dystopias in disguise?
• Or should we treat utopias as cultural and political artifacts that reveal their societies’ political values, anxieties, and challenges through their ideals and aspirations?

These questions will occupy our study of utopias and dystopias throughout the term, as we survey the history of utopian thinking in Western thought. The goal of this course is to understand political thinking more generally through studying utopian thought as a particular modality of political theory. That is in addition to studying utopias and dystopias as political ideals or warnings we will use them to gain an understanding of the purposes and goals of politics and the nature of political theory as a human endeavor.

We will begin in classical Athens with Plato’s *Republic* and Aristophanes’ satire *Birds*. We will then turn to the early modern period with Thomas More’s *Utopia*, Margaret Cavendish’s *The Blazing World*, and Marx’s communist utopia. Subsequently we will turn the reactions against utopianism in both literature and political theory including the works of Dostoevsky, Hannah Arendt, and classic dystopian novels. We will close our course with a study of the ambiguities of utopia and the inescapability of politics by reading Ursula K. Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed* and the question of whether or not utopian thinking is a thing of the past.

By the end of the quarter, you will be able to:

- **Read and interpret influential texts in the history of Western political thought, appreciating both their historical and political contexts as well as their value for the present**
- **Analyze utopian and dystopian thinking to identify and compare competing political values and ideals**
- **Utilize the resources of this course to make arguments explaining, interpreting, and/or, critiquing political phenomena**
- **Write interpretive essays that analyze, synthesize, and evaluate political theoretical texts.**
Most of our readings for this class will be drawn from the following books. Please purchase, rent, or borrow the following:


- The remaining readings are articles or book chapters that will be available on the course canvas site and will be noted with CR in the syllabus’s reading schedule.

- You will also need to purchase, rent, or borrow your assigned dystopian novel.
Assessing Your Success

These assignments are used to measure progress towards our learning objectives:

Attendance and Participation: The only way to learn political theory is to practice political theory. The classroom is not a place to learn passively but an opportunity to grapple with some of the most pressing and challenging questions of politics with your peers. Bring your questions, interpretations, criticisms, and analyses to class. Participation also requires preparation: please carefully read all assigned readings and bring them to class for a thorough discussion.

Discussion Questions: Every class, one third of the class will submit discussion questions or passages for discussion on the canvas page. These are intended to provoke discussion during class and help us grapple with the course themes. Each student will submit one question per week.

Short Paper: In lieu of a midterm exam, every student will write a short – approximately 4 pages – critical-interpretive paper engaging at least two of the course’s assigned texts, in response to one of the provided prompts. The prompts will be distributed 2 weeks before the due date. These papers will be argumentative in nature, defending a theoretical, interpretive, or political claim using the course readings as evidence. You will be evaluated on the strength and coherency of the argument, the level of detail and analysis of the texts, as well as the clarity and style of the prose.

Group Book Report: Students will be assigned in groups of 4-5 to prepare book reports from an assigned novel. Each group will prepare a 3-4 page book report that summarizes the novel, provides an interpretation of crucial passages, characters, and themes, and makes an argument for its contribution to our understanding of utopianism or dystopianism. Groups will present their book reports to the class during Week 8 (about 10-15 minutes) Students are responsible for reading their assigned novel and working as a group on the presentation. All members of the group will receive the same grade. The list of potential novels is below.

Take-Home Final: The final will be a take-home final consisting of 2 short essays – approximately 3-4 pages each. The types of questions will mirror the short paper prompts, asking you to develop an argument using the assigned readings as evidence. There will be two sets of prompts and you will answer one prompt from each set. The first will focus on the second half of the course, while the second will be cumulative in nature. As with the short paper, you will be evaluated on the strength and coherency of the argument, the level of detail and analysis of the texts, as well as the clarity and style of the prose.

Breakdown of Final Grade

- Short Paper, 25%
- Group Book Report, 25%
- Discussion Prompts, 5%
- Take Home Final, 35%
- Attendance and Participation, 10%
BUILDING AN INCLUSIVE AND EQUITABLE CLASSROOM

Learning is a project that we work on together; success in the classroom requires all of us working together to build an environment where all of us are empowered to learn, contribute, and produce our best work. Your success in this class is important to me. If there are aspects of this course that prevent you from learning or exclude you, please let me know as soon as possible. Together we’ll develop strategies to meet both your needs and the requirements of the course.

Respect in the Classroom

• All members of the UCI community deserve to be treated with respect and dignity. While well-reasoned, passionate, and contentious debates and disagreements are encouraged, I will not allow belittling, insulting, or mocking others based on their race, gender identity or expression, nationality or ethnic background, sexuality, religion, class, or any other aspects of identity.

Accessibility

• If you require accommodations, you have a right to ensure they are met. Please notify me as early as possible so I can ensure you have the resources to do your best work.

Office Hours and Communication

• Office hours are a resource to help you achieve your best in this course. Please come to office hours when:
  • You have questions, are excited, or want to learn more about the material
  • You are unsure about an assignment's expectations or grade
  • You are under stress because of a personal matter
  • You were unable to attend a class meeting
  • You want to talk to me about school, life, or anything else
• If you cannot make my scheduled office hours, please email me to schedule a time.
• Email is a great medium for clarifying assignment questions or scheduling meetings. Unfortunately, it is not a good medium for reviewing material, discussing the substance of assignments, or asking questions about graded material. We can learn better and more efficiently by meeting in person about these matters.

Scheduling, Emergencies, and Makeups

• Please note the dates and times of all assignments in a planner or calendar app. If you have a university approved conflict (religious observance, athletics event, academic competition), please let me know early so we can make arrangements.
• I also know that things don't always go according to plan. If an unplanned event or emergency is preventing you from completing assignment, we can work together to arrange a makeup. Please contact me within 24 hours and provide documentation and we can go from there.

Your Health and Success

• I want you to be successful in this class, at UCI, and in life. Your physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health are just as important as your academic success. I encourage you to let me know if you are facing any challenges precluding you from doing your best work so that we can work together to address.
# COURSE SCHEDULE

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| 4/2 | What is Political Theory?  
• What is the discipline of political theory?  
• How does it relate to political science?  
• Why should we study political theory? | No Assigned Readings |
| 4/4 | The Dilemma of Utopia  
• What defines a utopia?  
• What are some of the promises and perils of utopian thinking?  
• Why should we study utopian thought? | China Miéville, “The Limits of Utopia” in *Utopia* pgs. 11-27 |
| 4/6 | The Dilemma of Utopia continued  
• What is the relationship between utopian promises and justice?  
| **UNIT 1: UTOPIANISM IN POLITICAL THEORY** | | |
| **Week 2: Plato’s Philosophical Utopia** | | |
| 4/9 | Justice in the Soul and the City  
• What is the relationship between justice and utopia?  
• What is the role of education and training in the beautiful city?  
• Does the dialogic form change the way you understand Plato’s utopia? | Plato, *Republic*, Books 2-3 excerpts: pp. 46-59, 84-102 |
| 4/11 | Justice in the Beautiful City  
• How is life organized in the beautiful city to promote justice?  
| 4/13 | Organizing the Beautiful City  
• What changes does Plato propose to political life?  
• Why are such radical changes necessary for Plato? | Plato, *Republic*, Books 5 excerpts: pp. 136-158, 165-175 |
<p>| <strong>Week 3: Plato’s Allegories and Aristophanes’ Satire</strong> | | |</p>
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| 4/16 | The Rule of Philosophy  
| 4/18 | Escaping the Cave  
• What is the meaning of the allegory of the Cave?  
• What is the form of the Good?  
• How do these ideas ground Plato’s theory of politics? | Plato, *Republic*, Book 7 excerpts: 208-214; 229-237 |
| 4/20 | Utopia is for the birds  
• What are the features of this utopian satire?  
• Is his parody effective?  
• What does the satire reveal about utopian thinking? | Aristophanes, *Birds*, all. (Content advisory: explicit sexual humor and sexual harassment) |
| **Week 4: More’s *Utopia* – Communism, Pluralism, and Control** | | |
| 4/23 | The Desire for Utopia  
• What critiques of early modern politics does Raphael make?  
• What similarities and differences are there between both the form and substance of the *Republic* and *Utopia*? | More, *Utopia*: pgs. 33-72  
**Short Paper Prompts Distributed** |
| 4/25 | The Constitution of the Utopians  
• How is Utopia structured?  
• What are the most important aspects of Utopia’s social and political order?  
• Does the form of a “travel narrative” change the way you read the text? | More, *Utopia*, 72-128 |
| 4/27 | The Constitution of the Utopians continued  
• How do the Utopians conduct warfare?  
• What are the religious practices of the Utopians?  
• What function do these aspects of political order play? | More, *Utopia*, 128-160 |

**Week 5: Cavendish’s *Utopia*: Science, Gender, and Sovereignty**
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| 4/30 | Science and Utopia | How does Cavendish play with the themes of utopianism?  
What is the role of fantasy and imagination in utopian thinking?  
Cavendish, *The Blazing World*: pgs. 119-203 |
| 5/2  | A Feminist Utopia? | Is there freedom in The Blazing World and *The Blazing World*?  
How does Cavendish transform utopian thinking and writing?  
Is this a feminist utopia?  
Cavendish, *The Blazing World*, pgs. 203-225  
| 5/4  | Writing Argumentative Essays | How should argumentative essays be structured?  
What are effective ways of writing argumentative essays  
No assigned readings |
| 5/7  | Revolution! | What are the arguments Marx and Engels give in favor of communism?  
Is his position utopian or anti-utopian?  
|
| 5/9  | The Critique of Capitalism and the Freedom of Communism | What are the principles that underlie Marx and Engels’ political thinking?  
What is the structure of a post-capitalist society?  
Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology* in *ME Reader*: pgs. 146-202 |
| 5/11 | Utopianism in America | How have utopian ideas shaped intentional and planned communities in the United States?  
Short Paper Due  
No assigned readings |

**UNIT 2: THE DYSTOPIAN REACTION**

**Week 7: Critiques of Utopia: Literary and Theoretical**

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| 5/14 | The Nightmare of Rationalism | How does the “Underground Man” critique utopian thinking?  
How does the “Underground Man” conceive of human behavior?  
Do you find his account accurate?  
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<td>Week 8: Dystopian Literature</td>
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| 5/21 | The Dystopian Novel | • How do dystopian novels illustrate the limits or dangers of utopianism?  
• Do they “anti-utopian,” or do they contain their own utopian hopes?  
• How do they contribute to our understanding of politics? | Group Book Report Presentations |
| 5/30 | Whose Utopia? | • What are the utopian and dystopian features of Anarres and Urras?  
• Is Odonianism a utopian philosophy? | Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*, Chapters 1-4 |
| 6/1 | The Ambiguity of Utopia | • How do Shavek’s travels complicate our understanding of utopianism?  
• What are the relationships between scientific knowledge, utopian thinking, and politics? | Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*, Chapters 5-9 |
| 6/4 | The Possibilities of Utopia | • Do any utopian possibilities remain for Shavek?  
• What does Le Guin’s science fiction tell us about our own political lives? | Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*, Chapters 10-13 |
After Utopia?
• Can utopian thinking survive the horrors of the 20th and 21st century?
• What alternative forms of utopian thinking could exist?

6/8
Learning from Utopia
• Class Review

6/13
Take Home Exam Due

Le Guin, “A Non-Euclidean View of California as a Cold Place to Be” in Utopia: pgs. 163-197
Le Guin, “Utopia/now, Utopia/again” in Utopia: pgs. 195-198

Final Exam Prompts Distributed

NOVELS FOR BOOK REPORTS

Each group will be assigned one of the following novels for their group book report. If you have suggestions for this list, I am happy to consider them.