G91.2112

Russian Utopian Fiction

Fall 1998

T 6-8 Prof. Eliot Borenstein

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By its very nature, utopianism is aggressively interdisciplinary: the search for a perfect world has resulted in a prose genre that straddles the boundary between fiction and philosophy, while the potential applications of utopian theory to political practice is the stuff of sociology, political theory, and experiments in “intentional communities.” Utopianism rather quickly spawned its skeptical counterpart, anti-utopianism (an argument with utopia), as well as a specific anti-utopian genre that has become a cliché of science fiction and film: dystopia (utopia gone wrong).

In this course, we will examine the development of the utopian tradition, primarily (though not exclusively) as a literary genre and philosophical thought experiment. Though defining the features of the genre will be an important component of our task, we will also examine the larger questions raised by utopian fiction: what is the impulse behind utopian literature? What is the relationship between utopia and the novel? How does time pass in utopias? How do we get from “here” (the imperfect world) to “there” (the perfect one), and how is this journey enacted in fiction? Why are the family, sexuality, and the role of women so central to the utopian tradition? How does utopian fiction at times inspire the reader to action, resulting in attempts to put fictional/philosophical models to the test (in communes, intentional communities, etc.)? What is the utopian conception of pleasure? Is there any place for the frivolous or the playful?

Utopianism is particularly important to the literary and cultural traditions of Russian and the former Soviet Union, an area of the world that has the dubious distinction of being the first country to attempt to put utopian ideas into practice. Though a large portion of our texts will be Russian, it is nonetheless impossible to understand Russian utopianism outside the context of the European utopian tradition. Hence the inclusion of such essential works as Plato’s Republic and Thomas More’s Utopia.

Course requirements: It is essential that you keep up with the reading assignments and come to class prepared either to make observations or ask questions. Attendance is, of course, mandatory.

Class participation. Most class periods will be conducted as seminars; only occasionally will I spend the entire class giving a lecture. Everyone is encouraged to participate in discussion, which will be facilitated by the short papers (see below). Class participation is a factor in your final grade.

The Internet. If you do not already have an e-mail account, you must apply for one immediately. You will be expected to use the Internet/World Wide Web as a source of information for your research and presentations.

Writing Assignments: There will be three short papers and a final seminar paper.

The short papers may be no longer than two pages, and they can be about any of the works we are reading. These papers are a tool to help you think about an aspect of the text that interests you, and any ideas you generate in the course of these assignments would be welcome contributions to class discussion. You must turn in the short paper by the beginning of the last class during which the text is being discussed. That is, if you want to write a response to We you must turn this paper in by November 10. If we are only spending one class period on the work, then you must turn in the short paper at the beginning of that class. No late short papers will be accepted under any circumstances.

You may not wait until December to turn in three short papers. The semester has been divided into three parts, and you must write one short paper by each of these three deadlines. That is, your first short paper must be turned in no later than October 13, your second short paper is due no later than November 10 and the third short paper is due no later than December 8 (note that this is also the deadline for the final paper. Though you are not allowed to wait to do all the short papers until the end of the course, if you feel you would rather do your short papers earlier (turning two short papers during the first or second segments of the course), you are free to do so.

The topic of thefinal paper is yours to choose, but you must come talk to me about it in advance. It is hoped that the short papers will lead you toward topics for your longer paper. Your final paper may be based on a short paper.

The final paper must be turned in on December 8.

I welcome full or partial drafts of any of these writing assignments. Drafts of the short papers must be shown to me no later than one week before the due date; drafts of the long papers must be submitted no later than two weeks before the due date.

I will not accept papers by electronic mail.

Final Grade. Your final grade will be determined as follows:

Short papers: 30%

Class participation: 20%

Final paper: 50%

CLASS SCHEDULE

September 8 (T) Introduction

September 15 (T) Plato’s Republic

t For Today:

J Read Books 2-4, 5, 7 (see handout)

September 22 (T) More’s Utopia

t For Today:

J Read Utopia

September 29 (T) Yom Kippur

t For Today:

JNo class

October 6 (T) Campanella/Bacon

t For Today:

J Read City of the Sun

J Read Campanella handout

J Read The New Atlantis

October 13 (T) Revelation

t For Today:

J Read Revelation

Deadline for Short Paper# 1

October 20 (T) Marx/Engels

t For Today:

J Read The Communist Manifesto

October 27 (T) Chernyshevsky

t For Today:

J Read What is to Be Done?

Novmber 3 (T) Dostoevsky

t For Today:

J Read Notes from Underground,

November 10 (T) Zamyatin

t For Today:

J Read We

Deadline for Short Paper# 2

November 17 (T) Platonov (1)

t For Today:

J Read Chevengur

November 24 (T) Platonov (2)

t For Today:

J Read Chevengur

December 1 (T) Platonov (3)

t For Today:

J Read Chevengur

December 8 (T) Mayakovsky

t For Today:

J Read The Bedbug

Deadline for Short Paper# 3

Final Paper due