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Utopia, Apocalypse, and the Millennium

Spring 1998

T-Th Prof. Eliot Borenstein

4:20-5:35 Russian & Slavic Studies

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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?

As we trace the development of utopian thought, we will find that it quickly became wedded to a teleological or eschatological view of history: utopia is seen as the culmination of historical progress, the goal toward which humanity has been striving. In Christian Europe, utopia becomes conflated with the kingdom of heaven to be established after the end of the world. Later utopian (and anti-utopian) fictions often place their “perfect” societies in a post-apocalyptic framework. The apocalypse adds particular moral and temporal dimensions to utopia: not only does utopia become the endpoint of history, a realm that exists almost outside of time, but the perfection of the coming world can be invoked to justify the cataclysm that precedes it.

This wedding of utopianism and apocalypticism can be seen in millenarian movements throughout history, from medieval sectarian revolts to such contemporary “cults” as Heaven’s Gate (America), Aum Shinri Kyo (Japan), or the Great White Brotherhood (Russia). Yet millenarian and apocalyptic thought are not the exclusive property of religious believers; as we can see today, people throughout the world are awaiting the year 2000 with both trepidation (the “millennium bug”) and anticipation (the expectation of a “New Age”).

Course requirements: No knowledge of any foreign language is expected, as all works will be read and discussed in English. 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 a mix of lecture and discussion; only occasionally will I spend the entire class giving a lecture. Everyone is encouraged to participate in discussion, which will be facilitated by questions that I will be distributing in advance over electronic mail, and by the response papers (see below).

The Internet. If you do not already have an e-mail account, you must apply for one immediately. Once you have an account, please subscribe to the class electronic mailing list, TBA@lists.nyu.edu. This list will be used for making announcements to the class and for distributing class materials (including discussion questions). In addition, I hope that the list will provide an opportunity to continue our discussions of the texts (and the issues that they raise) outside of class.

To subscribe, send mail to: listproc@lists.nyu.edu. The subject line may be left blank. The message should say only:

subscribe TBA@lists.nyu.edu Firstname Lastname

You will get a message welcoming you to the list.

Writing Assignments: There will be three short response papers, a mid-semester paper (6-8 pages), and a final paper (10-12).

The response 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 response 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 Notes from Underground, you must turn this paper either on February 10 or February 12. If we are only spending one class period on the work, then you must turn in the response paper at the beginning of that class. No late response papers will be accepted under any circumstances.

You may not wait until April to turn in three response papers. The semester has been divided into three parts, and you must write one response paper by each of these three deadlines. That is, your first response paper must be turned in no later than February 17. your second response paper is due no later than March 31, and the third response paper is due no later than April 30. Though you are not allowed to wait to do all the response papers until the end of the course, if you feel you would rather do your response papers earlier (turning two response papers during the first or second segments of the course), you are free to do so.

The topics of your mid-semester paper and final paper are yours to choose, but you must come talk to me about them in advance. It is hoped that the short response papers will lead you toward topics for your longer papers. Both your mid-semester and your final papers can be based on response papers, as long as you are not tapping the same response paper for both longer works.

The mid-semester paper is due on March 12 and the final paper must be turned on April 30.

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:

Response papers: 30%

Mid-semester paper: 30%

Final paper: 40%

A significant role is also played by class participation (see below).

Class participation. Most class periods will be a mix of lecture and discussion; only occasionally will I spend the entire class giving a lecture. Everyone is encouraged to participate in discussion, which will be facilitated by questions that I will be distributing in advance over electronic mail, and by the response papers.

Active and constructive class participation can significantly improve your final grade. Frequent absences can have a negative effect on your final grade.

Texts: Some texts will be available in a packet at Unique Copies. All of the books you are expected to buy can be purchased at Posman Books (One University Place, 212-533-BOOK).

No book order for this class has been placed with the NYU Book Center.

Editions: Many of these books come in different editions and different translations, and I understand that you might prefer to buy used copies of these editions to save money. Therefore I am including my recommendations/warnings about the various editions of each of these books.

Bacon, Francis. The New Atlantis. This can be found in Famous Utopias.

Bellamy, Edward. Looking Backward. Feel free to use any edition.

Cohn, Norman. The Pursuit of the Millennium. Excerpts from this book will be provided as a photocopy.

Campanella, Tommaso. City of the Sun. This can be found in Famous Utopias. The censored parts will be included in the xerox packet.

\*Chernyshevsky, Nikolai. Vera Pavlovna’s Fourth Dream. At Unique Copies, you will be provided with a xeroxed copy of Michael Katz’ translation of Vera Pavlovna’s Fourth Dream (from What is to Be Done?). If you choose any other translation, you are likely to make the reading experience even more painful.

\*Dostoevsky, Fedor. Notes from Underground (Part One). You will be provided a copy of this text at Unique. Feel free to use any edition.

Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. Herland. Feel free to use any edition.

Huxley, Aldous. Brave New World. Any edition is fine.

\*Kesten, Seymour R. “Introduction.” Utopian Episodes: Daily Life in Experimental Colonies Dedicated to Changing the World. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1993. 9-26. Available at Unique.

Le Guin, Ursula K. The Dispossessed. Any edition is fine.

\*Marx and Engels. The Communist Manifesto. A photocopy of the transation from Robert C. Tucker’s Marx-Engels Reader is available at Unique.

Alan Moore and David Gibbons. Watchmen. Feel free to use any edition.

More, Thomas. Utopia. This can be found in Famous Utopias. However, the separate edition I am ordering is far more complete.

\*Muncy, Raymond Lee. Sex and Marriage in Utopian Communities: 19th Century America. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973. Chapters 11 and 12. 160-197. Available at Unique.

Orwell, George. 1984. Feel free to use any edition.

Plato’s Republic. There are a large number of translations and editions; I have chosen the G. M. A. Grube translation. If you choose an edition which does not conform to the standard division of the book into ten chapters (such as the Cornford translation), you may have difficulty following along.

Platonov, Andrei. The Foundation Pit. There are two translations of this book, and I have chosen the worse of the two (the better one has not yet been published in paperback). Feel free to use any edition.

Revelation. I have not ordered a copy of this, since the New Testament is easy to find. Use any edition and translation you like.

\*Roberts, Ron E. “Walden Two and Beyond.” The New Communes: Coming Together in America. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1971. 91-99. Available at Unique.

Zamyatin, Yevgeny. We. There are at least four translations of this novel, and several editions in print. However, Clarence Brown’s recent translation is \*much\* better than all the others. This edition is highly recommended. Avoid Zilboorg’s translation like the plague.

\* = photocopy for sale at Unique copies.

Assorted handouts will be distributed in class.

CLASS SCHEDULE

January 20 (T) Introduction

January 22 (Th) Plato’s Republic (1)

t For Today:

JSubscribe to listserv

J Read Books 2-4 (see handout)

January 27 (T) Plato’s Republic (2)

t For Today:

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

January 29 (Th) More’s Utopia

t For Today:

J Read Utopia

February 3 (T) Campanella

t For Today:

J Read City of the Sun

J Read Campanella handout

February 5 (Th) Chernyshevsky

t For Today:

J Read Vera Pavlovna’s 4th Dream (Unique)

J Read Chernyshevsky handout

February 10 (T) Dostoevsky

t For Today:

J Read Notes from Underground,

Part One (Unique)

February 1 2 (Th) Millenarianism and the

Appocalypse

t For Today:

J Read Revelation

February 17 (T) Marx and Engels

t For Today:

J Read Communist Manifesto

(Unique)

Final Deadline for Response #1

February 19 (Th) Utopian Communities:

Building Heaven on Earth

t For Today:

J Read Kesten (Unique)

J Read Muncy (Unique)

J Read Roberts (Unique)

February 24 (T) Bellamy (1)

t For Today:

J Read Introduction to Looking

Backwards

J Read Looking Backwards (Chapters 1-11)

February 26 (Th) Bellamy (2)

t For Today:

J Read Looking Backwards (finish)

March 3 (T) Gilman

t For Today:

J Read Gilman Herland

March 5 (Th) Zamyatin (1)

t For Today:

J Read We (Records 1-18)

March 10 (T) Zamyatin (2)

t For Today:

J Read We (finish)

Mid-semester Paper Due

March 12 (Th) Huxley (1)

t For Today:

J Read Brave New World

(Part One)

March 17 (T) SPRING BREAK

March 19 (Th) SPRING BREAK

March 24 (T) Huxley (2)

t For Today:

J Read Brave New World

(finish)

March 26 (Th) Orwell (1)

J Read 1984 (Part One)

March 31 (T) Orwell (2)

t For Today:

J Read 1984 (Finish)

Final Deadline for Response #2

April 2 (Th) Platonov (1)

t For Today:

J Read The Foundation Pit (Part 1)

April 7 (T) Platonov (2)

t For Today:

J Read The Foundation Pit (finish)

April 9 (Th) Le Guin (1)

t For Today:

J Read The Dispossessed (Part 1)

April 14 (T) Le Guin (2)

t For Today:

J Read The Dispossessed (Part 2)

April 16 (Th) Leguin (3)

t For Today:

J Read The Dispossessed (finish)

April 21 (T) Miller/Gibbons (1)

t For Today:

J Read Watchmen (Chapters 1-5)

April 23 (Th) Miller/Gibbons (2)

t For Today:

J Read Watchmen (finish)

April 28 (T) Apocalypse Now: Millenarian “cults”

t For Today:

J TBA

April 30 (Th) Apocalypse Now: Technology and the

Millenium

t For Today:

J TBA (epidemics, global warming, and the

millenium bug)

Final Deadline for Response #3

FINAL PAPER DUE