IDS 2935: Utopias and Dystopias

Quest 1: Justice and Power

I. General Information

Class Meetings

- Spring 2025
- Attendance: 100% In-Person, No GTAs, 35 Residential
- MWF Period 6 (12:50pm–1:40pm)
- Weimer Hall (WEIM) 1076
- 3 Credits

Instructor

- Dr Eloise Davies
- CSE E568
- Office Hours: Mon. 2–3pm and by appointment
- eloise.davies@ufl.edu

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. You can also find some of the relevant texts on the UF library electronic course reserve.
2. The writing manual for this course is: *The Economist Style Guide*, 11th edn. (2015). ISBN: 9781610395755. This is available as a PDF on Canvas.
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. (R)

    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 (4 all term): 20%**
    a. Every 2–3 weeks you will turn in to Canvas two questions regarding that week's readings, quoting the text briefly to identify any confusions, factual questions, or conceptual problems you encountered as you read the text. Postings must be at least 200 words. Please post your reflection before the Wednesday class. See Canvas for details.
    b. Due weeks 2, 4, 10, 14

3. **Experiential Learning Component (Museum Visit): 10%**
    During the semester, students will visit the Florida Museum of Natural History to view the South Florida Peoples and Environments Exhibit. Through engaging with the exhibit, students will investigate how the age and travel and exploration – particularly in the Americas – provided inspiration for utopian writing. Students will write a short reflection on the visit which will be discussed in class in Weeks 7 or 8.

4. **Your Own Description of Utopia (500 words) with Analysis (1000 words): 25%**
    a. 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 at least 500 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. You should also include a reflection on whether you would or would not choose to live in the society you have created. Is this a true utopia, a dystopia or somewhere in between? This analytical section will be at least 1000 words (min. 1500 words total). See more details on required elements in Canvas. See Canvas for more details.
    b. Due week 9

5. **Final Analytical Paper (1000 words): 25%**
    a. During Week 13, you will submit a 1,000 word (minimum) 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 course material on the history and philosophy of that relationship. Your paper must incorporate at least four course readings. See Canvas for more details. Professor will provide written feedback. See grading rubric below. (R)
    b. Professor will evaluate and provide written feedback, on the student's written assignments with respect to grammar, punctuation, clarity, coherence, and organization.
    c. You may want to access the university's Writing Studio.
    d. An additional writing guide website can be found at OWL.
    e. See Writing Assessment Rubric on syllabus.

III. Annotated Weekly Schedule

WEEK 1: GREEK MODELS

Jan 13–17: 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 (59 pages):

1. Plato, *Republic*, ed. G.R.F. Ferrari and trans. Tom Griffith (Cambridge, 2018), pp. 144–181 [Book 5].
2. Plutarch, 'Lycurgus', in *Lives* Vol. 1 (Cambridge, MA, 1914), pp. 227–267 [dual language; 21 pages]

WEEK 2: DEFINING A GENRE

Jan 22–24: 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

WEEK 3: RHETORIC AND UTOPIA

Jan 27–31: We will consider versions of political utopian writing this week. Leonardo Bruni and Gasparo Contarini's panegyrics praise idealised visions of Renaissance Florence and Venice. What is the line between panegyric and utopia? How far is rhetoric inherently utopian?

Readings (60 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. Gasparo Contarini, *The Government and Commonwealth of Venice*, trans. Lewis Lewkenor (1599), pp. 1–21 [Book I].

WEEK 4: GENDER AND UTOPIA: I

Feb 3–7: 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 (56 pages):

1. Christine de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, trans. Rosalind Brown–Grant (1999), pp. 5–30, 57–73, 107–110, 195–97, 201–202, 235–240.

Assignment: Reading Reflection #2

WEEK 5: ISLAM AND UTOPIA

Feb 10–13: Philosophical dialogues borrowed from classical philosophy the notion that ideal theocratic societies, with gods held in common, could flourish. One such work was Tommaso Campanella's *City of the Sun* (1601), a utopia we will place in the context of European fear of–– and admiration for––the Ottoman empire.

Readings (65 pages):

1. Tommaso Campanella, *A discourse touching the Spanish monarchy* (1653), pp. 197–211.
2. Tommaso Campanella, *The City of the Sun*, trans. Daniel J. Donno (Los Angeles, 1981), pp. 27–127 [dual language; 51 pages].

Week 6: Satire and Utopia

Feb 17–21: 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 (66 pages):

1. Joseph Hall, *The discovery of a new world or A description of the South Indies Hetherto unknowne* (1613), pp. 96–122.
2. Traiano Boccalini, *I Ragguagli di Parnaso, or Advertisements from Parnassus… with the Politick Touchstone*, trans. Henry, earl of Monmouth (1657), First Century: Advertisements I, XXII & XXIX, pp. 1–4, 34–39, 47–50; Second Century: Advertisement VI, pp. 205–219.
3. Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, eds. P. Dixon and J. Chalker (Penguin, 1984), pp. 164–173 [Part II Ch VI].

WEEK 7: TRAVEL, SCIENCE AND UTOPIA: I

Feb 24–28: 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 French philosopher Michel de Montaigne, and the English statesman and pioneer of modern science, Francis Bacon.

Readings (53 pages)

1. Michel de Montaigne, 'On Cannibals', in *Essays*, trans. J.M. Cohen (1958), pp. 105–119.
2. Francis Bacon, 'New Atlantis', in *Three Early Modern Utopias* (Oxford, 1999), pp. 149–186.

Assignment: Museum Visit Assignment (details on Canvas)

WEEK 8: TRAVEL, SCIENCE AND UTOPIA: II

March 3–7: We continue our exploration of the relationship between new scientific thinking, travel and utopia 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 (63 pages):

1. Margaret Cavendish, 'The Blazing World', in *Political Writings* (Cambridge, 2003), pp. 5–24, 67–109.

WEEK 9: POLITICAL ECONOMY AND UTOPIA: I

March 10–13: Is utopian writing a form of political counsel? How are ideal versions of government received if the actual polity is governed on a different model? 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.

Readings (56 pages):

1. James Harrington, *The Commonwealth of Oceana*, ed. J.G.A. Pocock (Cambridge, 1992) pp. 3–42, 72–87.

Assignment: Original Description of Utopia & Analysis (1500 words) due: See below and Canvas for details.

[MARCH 17–21: SPRING BREAK]

WEEK 10: POLITICAL ECONOMY AND UTOPIA: II

March 24–28: This week we will examine the genre of the economic utopia. Continuing to explore the relationship between land, trade and virtue, we 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 (62 pages):

1. François Fénelon, *The Adventures of Telemachus*, ed. Patrick Riley (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 97–114, 150–172.

Assignment: Reading Reflection #3

WEEK 11: HUMAN NATURE AND UTOPIA

March 31–April 4: 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 (54 pages):

1. David Hume, 'The Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth', in *Essays, Moral Political and Literary*, ed. Eugene Miller (Indianapolis, 1985), pp. 512–529.
2. Marquis de Condorcet, 'Sketch of the Progress of the Human Mind', in *The Enlightenment: A Comprehensive Anthology*, ed. Peter Gay (New York, 1975), pp. 800–810.
3. Judith Shklar, 'The Political Theory of Utopia: From Melancholy to Nostalgia', *Daedalus* 94 (1965), pp. 367–381.

WEEK 12: SOCIALISM AND UTOPIA

April 7–11: 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 classic among European socialists in the early twentieth century and a work combining socialism with soft science fiction.

Readings (57 pages):

1. William Morris, *News from Nowhere and Other Writings* (New York, 1993), pp. 82–138.

Argument Analysis draft workshopped in class on Monday (see Canvas)

WEEK 13: GENDER AND UTOPIA: II

April 14–18: 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 a variety of modern feminist utopias, while also comparing their concerns to those of female writers encountered earlier in the semester.

Readings (52 pages):

1. Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, 'Sultana's Dream', in *The Essential Rokeya* (Leiden, 2013), pp. 159–168 (10 pages)
2. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Herland* (Mountain View CA, 1993), pp. 30–55 (25 pages)
3. Shulamith Firestone, 'The Ultimate Revolution: Demands and Speculations', in *The Dialectics of Sex* (Verso, 2015), pp. 86–102 (17 pages)

Assignment: Analytical Paper Due (1000 words)

WEEK 14: TECHNOLOGY AND UTOPIA

April 21–23: 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, and return to some of the broader questions about the meaning and purpose of utopian writing addressed throughout the semester.

Readings (59 pages):

1. Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World* (New York, 1946), pp. 1–32.
2. George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty–Four* (2008), pp. 3–20.
3. George Orwell, 'Imaginary Interview: George Orwell and Jonathan Swift', in *Essays* (New York, 2002), pp. 451–459.

Assignment: Reading Reflection #4

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.

Examination Rubric: Essays and Short Answers

	Completeness	Analysis	Evidence	Writing
A (90–100%)	Shows a thorough understanding of the question. Addresses all aspects of the question completely.	Analyses, evaluates, compares and/or contrasts issues and events with depth.	Incorporates pertinent and detailed information from both class discussions and assigned readings.	Presents all information clearly and concisely, in an organized manner.
B (80–89%)	Presents a general understanding of the question. Completely addresses most aspects of the question or address all aspects incompletely.	Analyses or evaluates issues and events, but not in any depth.	Includes relevant facts, examples and details but does not support all aspects of the task evenly.	Presents information fairly and evenly and may have minor organization problems.
C (70–79%)	Shows a limited understanding of the question. Does not address most aspects of the question.	Lacks analysis or evaluation of the issues and events beyond stating accurate, relevant facts.	Includes relevant facts, examples and details, but omits concrete examples, includes inaccurate information and/or does not support all aspects of the task.	Lacks focus, somewhat interfering with comprehension.
D (60–69%)	Fails fully to answer the specific central question.	Lacks analysis or evaluation of the issues and events beyond stating vague, irrelevant, and/or inaccurate facts.	Does not incorporate information from pertinent class discussion and/or assigned readings.	Organizational problems prevent comprehension.
E (<60%)	Does not answer the specific central question.	Lacks analysis or evaluation of the issues and events.	Does not adduce any evidence.	Incomprehensible organization and prose.

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 own 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 own 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 own 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 own 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 own 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 own 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 own utopia.

VI. Quest Learning Experiences

1. Details of Experiential Learning Component

1. During the semester, students will visit the Florida Museum of Natural History to view the South Florida Peoples and Environments Exhibit. Through engaging with the exhibit, students will investigate how the age and travel and exploration – particularly in the Americas – provided fresh inspiration for utopian and dystopian writing. Students will write a short reflection on the visit which will be discussed in class in Weeks 7 or 8.

2. Details of Self–Reflection Component

Self–reflection is built into many of the assignments, primarily through the reading refections that students create, the analytic essay assignment, and the description and analysis of own 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

Attendance Policy

Requirements for class attendance and make–up exams, assignments and other work in this course are consistent with university policies that can be found here.

Students Requiring Accommodation

Students with disabilities who experience learning barriers and would like to request academic accommodations should connect with the Disability Resource Center. It is important for students to share their accommodation letter with their instructor and discuss their access needs, as early as possible in the semester.

UF Evaluations Process

Students are expected to provide professional and respectful feedback on the quality of instruction in this course by completing course evaluations online via GatorEvals. Guidance on how to give feedback in a professional and respectful manner is available here. Students will be notified when the evaluation period opens, and can complete evaluations through the email they receive from GatorEvals, in their Canvas course menu under GatorEvals, or via this link. Summaries of course evaluation results are available to students at GatorEvals Public Data.