

**UTOPIA'S ECLIPSE? THE HORIZON OF POLITICAL HOPE IN THE WAKE OF EMPIRE AND
REVOLUTION**

PLSC 22205/LLSO 22205/CRES 23205

University of Chicago, Winter 2022

Wednesdays, 9:30am-12:20pm

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Office Hours: Thursdays, 2-4pm (by appointment)

Course description

The twentieth century was a time of extraordinary political hope associated with socialist and anti-colonial struggles that promised to usher in new forms of human freedom. However, by the 1980s, this hope had given way to catastrophe as the horizons of political possibility and revolutionary aspiration characterizing these struggles collapsed. How do we reckon with this collapse, and what does it mean to make a life for oneself in the wake of these failed emancipatory projects?

This course seeks to explore this question by examining the place of utopian thinking, broadly understood, in the projects of anticolonial and socialist struggle in the twentieth century and by reading this strain of thought in light of the doubts that certain thinkers have raised about the possibility of attaining utopia's promise. Taking as a starting point the idea that utopian thinking—at least in its modern, universalistic form—has always existed in a complex relationship to the figure of the “savage Other” and the project of Western imperialism, the first half of the course will invite students to test this claim against the aspirations advanced by certain anti-colonial and left revolutionaries. In the second half of the course, we will turn to contemporary debates about the possibilities of renewed utopian thinking in the present. In particular, we will examine some important recent reflections on the postcolonial predicament to consider what we might learn from the revolutionary failures of the twentieth century and what critical resources this history has yielded to us.

Course Requirements

Participation

This course will be run in seminar format, and students are expected to have completed the readings before class and to be prepared to engage actively in class discussions. The cultivation of an effective classroom discussion depends on each student being willing to play different roles. Rather than thinking about a discussion seminar as an environment for students to pose questions about the texts to the instructor, a more effective classroom discussion will result from students being willing to pose questions of interpretation or clarification not only to the instructor, but also to their peers. Students are encouraged to pose questions about the text, to volunteer to answer those questions, and to ask one another, as well as the instructor, to clarify key concepts or ideas that are being used in the discussion.

Reading Responses

With the exceptions of those completing the presentation for a given week are required to write a brief paragraph once a week (beginning in week 1) that develops a question about the week's reading assignment. This exercise will help you to prepare for class discussions. Your paragraph should be at least 150 words and the question should focus on a specific issue, argument, or concept that you find puzzling or especially thought-provoking, whether in the week's reading or in the pre-circulated presentation for that week. As you develop your questions, please feel free to draw productive connections between the texts that we are reading in this course and those that you have read (or are reading) for other courses. Whatever approach you take, be sure to include page numbers for reference. Questions should be submitted via the Assignments section of Canvas by 9am on the day of class.

You will receive credit for your weekly questions if you fulfill the stated requirements and submit your work on time. I will give you credit for one late submission if I receive it within a week of its due date; otherwise, late submissions will not be accepted.

Weekly Presentations

Beginning in week 2, one or more students will be asked to prepare a short presentation (5 double-spaced pages) each week based on the assigned reading. Presentations should identify puzzles that arise out of the reading assignments and, where appropriate, make connections to previous weeks' readings. Most importantly, students should use their presentations to take a position on the author's argument by stating and developing a thesis and defending that thesis with evidence from the text. Students should circulate their presentation to their peers 24 hours ahead of class, and all other members of the class are expected to arrive having read the presentation and prepared to respond to the presenter's remarks.

Final Project

For students intending to graduate this quarter, the final project is due (by email) on the Monday, February 28 at 6pm. For, continuing students the final project is due (by email) on Wednesday, March 9 at 6pm. The final project should be 10-12 pages long, double-spaced, 12-font, with 1-inch margins.

This project will invite students to bring the texts we have read in this course to bear on a critical assessment of Aaron Benanav's provocative recent book, *Automation and the Future of Work* (Verso, 2019). Students can either elect to defend Benanav's utopian thesis or to criticize it, but in doing so they must make reference to some of the text that we have read in the course. It is up to you to decide how many of these texts you wish to place in conversation with Benanav's book, but you should be mindful that you are unlikely to be able to use all the texts that we have read.

In order to encourage you to begin work on this assignment as early in the quarter as possible, you are required to submit a memo to me no later than Irrespective of which approach you take, you are required to of project you hope to undertake, you must receive my approval for your chosen topic. In identifying and crafting an appropriate final project topic, you will be required to fulfill two additional writing assignments.

- First, before **noon on Sunday, January 30**, you will submit a 2-page memo outlining the core arguments of Benanav's book, as you see them. The memo should outline how you plan to approach the paper, whether by way of criticism or defense and offer a tentative outline of the argument you plan to make. You will meet with me in office hours the following week to discuss your paper in light of this memo. When you write your final paper, you are welcome to diverge from the approach you outline in the memo. The goal here is to encourage you to begin work on the final assignment early in the quarter.

Note: I will not read drafts of the final papers, but students are welcome to meet with me in office hours to discuss their papers.

Accessibility

The University of Chicago is committed to ensuring equitable access to our academic programs and services. Students with disabilities who have been approved for the use of academic accommodations by [Student Disability Services \(SDS\)](#) and need a reasonable accommodation(s) to participate fully in this course should follow the procedures established by SDS for using accommodations. Timely notifications are required in order to ensure that your accommodations can be implemented. Please meet with me to discuss your access needs in this class after you have completed the SDS procedures for requesting accommodations.

Phone: (773) 702-6000

Email: disabilities@uchicago.edu

Late Essay Policy

Please let me know should you ever find yourself in the position of having to submit your papers late. I do not need to know why your work is late, but it is important to maintain communication when this happens. Late papers will be penalized 1/3 of a letter grade per day (e.g. an A- paper one day late becomes a B+).

Finally, all essays will be submitted by email. If there is a problem with your submission, I will contact you via email and you will be expected to send a new file to me the same day that you receive my message, otherwise the paper will be counted as late. You will not be granted a grace period simply because you didn't check your email account.

Absences

Participation in class discussions is the basis of learning in seminar courses, so absences of any kind are taken seriously and will impact your grade. After you have missed two classes, you will automatically lose a full letter from your participation grade for each subsequent absence. You will be ineligible for a letter grade for the course after your fifth absence and you must instead request a W from your advisor.

Per university policy, you will not be penalized for an absence due to a religious observance if you let me know about it at the beginning of the quarter.

Finally, coming late to class affects your own ability to participate and disrupts the learning of others. Tardiness will therefore negatively impact your participation grade.

Individual Office hours

I encourage everyone to come to my individual office hours at least once during the quarter, in addition to the required meetings in preparation for the final paper, though you are welcome to come to office hours as often as you wish. I am happy to discuss the reading and writing assignments with you, and it is especially important to see me if at any point you are struggling in the course. I set aside Thursdays for my office hours meetings, primarily between 2pm and 4pm. If you wish to meet with me, please make an appointment via Canvas. If, for whatever reason, you cannot make an appointment during this time via Canvas, I will endeavor to find some other time for us to meet.

Policy on electronic devices

You should not be using any electronic device during class unless you have received an accommodation to do so.

Plagiarism

Proven plagiarism of any kind may result in automatic failure of the course. At minimum, you will receive an F for the assignment and the case will be referred to the University for further disciplinary action. There will be no exceptions to this rule. You should consult the course's writing guidelines or contact me immediately if you are ever unsure about what constitutes plagiarism. I have also included a statement from the American Historical Association with this syllabus, which offers a detailed description of norms of academic honesty.

Grade Distribution

Participation	35%
Weekly reading response	10%
Presentation	10%
Memo: Paper thesis and plan	10%
Final Paper	35%

Required texts

The following texts are available for purchase at the Seminary Co-Op Bookstore. Readings marked with an asterisk (*) are available on Canvas (either via the Library Reserves or the Files link). Please use these editions of the texts to aid in the in-class discussion of specific passages.

1. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (Grove Press, 2004)
2. Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey (W.W. Norton, 2010)
3. Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self Determination* (Princeton University Press, 2019)

4. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford University Press, 2002)
5. C. L. R. James, *World Revolution, 1917-1936: The Rise and Fall of the Communist International* (Duke University Press, 2017)
6. William Morris, *News from Nowhere*, ed. David Leopold (Oxford University Press, 2009)
7. David Scott, *Omens of Adversity: Time, Tragedy, Memory, Justice* (Duke University Press, 2014)
8. Aaron Benanav, *Automation and the Future of Work* (Verso, 2019)¹

Reading Schedule

Week 1

5 January

Introduction

*Michel-Rolph Trouillot, "Anthropology and the Savage Slot: The Poetics and Politics of Otherness," in *Global Transformations: Anthropology and the Modern World* (Palgrave, 2003), 7-28.

*Michel-Rolph Trouillot, "A Fragmented Globality," in *Global Transformations*, 47-78.

*Fredric Jameson, "The Politics of Utopia," *New Left Review* 25 (Jan/Feb 2004), 35-54.

Week 2

12 January

Socialism and Utopia

William Morris, *News from Nowhere*, ed. David Leopold (Oxford University Press, [1891] 2009), entire.

*Karl Marx to Arnold Ruge, September 1843, in Marx, *Early Writings*, trans. Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton (Penguin, 1992), 206-09.

Week 3

19 January

Revolution!

C. L. R. James, *World Revolution, 1917-1936: The Rise and Fall of the Communist International* (Duke University Press, 2017), 63-191.

Week 4

26 January

Finding hope in the wake of betrayal

James, *World Revolution*, 192-400.

**** Memo due before noon on Sunday, January 30**

Week 5

2 February

Probing Utopia's Limits in the Wake of Catastrophe I

¹ Aaron Benanav's book will form the basis of the final assignment for the class.

Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey (W.W. Norton, 2010), entire.

Week 6
9 February

Probing Utopia's Limits in the Wake of Catastrophe II

Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford University Press, 2002), xi-xix, 1-34, 94-136.

*Theodor W. Adorno, "Resignation" (1969).

Week 7
16 February

Anti-colonial Futures: The Revolutionary Aspirations of the Third World

*Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin/White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (Grove Press, 2008), 198-206. [via library reserves]

Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (Grove Press, 2004), 1-62, 97-180, 235-39.

Week 8
23 February

The Promise of the Post-colony: Making the World Anew

Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self Determination* (Princeton University Press, 2019), entire.

Week 9
2 March

Envisaging a future from the ruins of the postcolonial present

*David Scott, *Refashioning Futures: Criticism after Postcoloniality* (Princeton University Press, 1999), 190-224.

*David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Duke University Press, 2004), 1-9.

David Scott, *Omens of Adversity: Time, Tragedy, Memory, Justice* (Duke University Press, 2014), entire.

**** Final Project due**