

Utopian Literature
Institute for Social Ecology
Fall 2026
Tuesdays, 5 PM (PST) / 8 PM (EST)

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What can utopian literature do for us in these bleak times?

In *The Anthropology of Utopia* (2014), Dan Chodorkoff writes that “Without a vision of the society we desire, it will be impossible to ever achieve it.” At least since Thomas More’s *Utopia* (1516), utopian literature has offered numerous visions of alternative societies. Most theorists of the genre divide utopian literature in two main categories: *traditional* and *critical* utopias. Traditional utopias are generally accused of offering blueprints of flawless societies, closed off to any criticism and change. In contrast, critical utopias depict dynamic, imperfect alternatives, as famously suggested by the subtitle of Ursula K. Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia* (1971). As Kathi Weeks puts it, “Rather than shielding the vision to protect it as an attractive solution,” authors of critical utopias “invite critical judgement of its possibilities and limitations [...] Utopia is conceived more as an ongoing process than a solution, more a project than an outcome.” In this course, we will read three works of utopian literature that exemplify and potentially move beyond the critical form of the genre: Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed*, Kim Stanley Robinson’s *The Ministry for the Future* (2020), and Eman Abdelhadi and M. E. O’Brien’s *Everything for Everyone: An Oral History of the New York Commune, 2052-2072* (2022). Throughout, we will ask ourselves: what can utopian literature do for us right now, when many of us feel submerged in an immobilizing fatalism?

Paulo Freire and Mark Fisher denounced capitalist ideology for its promotion of the fatalistic view that there is no alternative to capitalism, therefore all we can do is resign ourselves to the increasingly devastating consequences of its perpetuation. More recently, Naomi Klein and Astra Taylor have argued that the “end times fascism” we are up against “is a darkly festive fatalism—a final refuge for those who find it easier to celebrate destruction than imagine living without supremacy.” Together, these thinkers suggest that one of the fights we urgently need to wage is against this kind of fatalism. Moreover, they suggest that utopian literature can play a vital role in this fight. As Klein and Taylor write, we need to “counter their apocalyptic narratives with *a far better story about how to survive the hard times ahead without leaving anyone behind*. A story capable of draining end times fascism of its gothic power and galvanizing a movement ready to put it all on the line for our collective survival. *A story not of end times, but of better times*; not of separation and supremacy, but of interdependence and belonging; not of escaping, but staying put and staying faithful to the troubled earthly reality in which we are enmeshed and bound.” How do the utopian novels in this course counter the endless apocalyptic narratives that reinforce the fatalistic sense that “it’s easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism,” as Fredric Jameson famously put it? More broadly, how can utopian literature help us survive our bleak times in collective, revolutionary ways?

9/15, Session 1: The Utopian Tradition and the New Global Fascisms

Dan Chodorkoff, "The Utopian Impulse," [*The Anthropology of Utopia: Essays on Social Ecology and Community Development* \(2014\)](#)

Naomi Klein and Astra Taylor, [*"The Rise of End Times Fascism"* \(2025\)](#)

9/22, Session 2: Utopian Literature – Traditional, Critical, and Commons

Tom Moylan, "Introduction: The Critical Utopia," [*Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination* \(1986\)](#)

Kathi Weeks, "The Future Is Now: Utopian Demands and the Temporalities of Hope," [*The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries* \(2011\)](#)

Raphael Kabo, "Introduction," *Utopia Beyond Capitalism in Contemporary Literature: A Commons Poetics* (2023)

9/29, Session 3: Critical Utopia

Ursula K. Le Guin, [*The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia* \(1974\)](#)

10/6, Session 4: Critical Utopia (cont.)

Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*

10/20, Session 5: Critical Utopia (cont.)

Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*

10/27, Session 6: From Critical to Commons Utopia

Kim Stanley Robinson, *The Ministry for the Future* (2020)

11/3, Session 7: From Critical to Commons Utopia (cont.)

Kim Stanley Robinson, *The Ministry for the Future*

11/10, Session 8: From Critical to Commons Utopia (cont.)

Kim Stanley Robinson, *The Ministry for the Future*

11/17, Session 9: Commons Utopia

Eman Abdelhadi and M. E. O'Brien, *Everything for Everyone: An Oral History of the New York Commune, 2052-2072* (2022)

11/24, Session 10: Commons Utopia (cont.)

Eman Abdelhadi and M. E. O'Brien, *Everything for Everyone*