

Utopian Literature and Social Ecology

Institute for Social Ecology

Fall 2025

Mondays, 5:00 PM (PST)/8:00 PM (EST)

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What is *utopia*? And what is the inextricable, if less discussed category, *utopianism*? Most importantly, what can utopia(nism) do for us in these bleak times?

In *Utopianism and Marxism* (1987), Vincent Geoghegan described utopianism as “a utopian disposition, a utopian impulse or mentality, of which the classic utopia is but one manifestation.” Coined by Thomas More in *Utopia* (1516) with the double meaning of “no place” (*outopia*) and “good place” (*eutopia*), the term named both the fictional and seemingly paradisiacal island at the center of his narrative and the narrative itself. Thus, it came to be synonymous with the “classic” manifestation of utopianism—the so-called literary utopia. Yet, as Geoghegan suggested and other utopian studies scholars such as Lyman Tower Sargent, Ruth Levitas, and Lucy Sargisson have more recently argued, utopianism can be expressed in a multitude of forms, potentially categorized under three main ones: literature (including genres such as nonfiction and drama); theory; and practice (e.g. intentional communities, projects by social movements, performance). In this course, we will engage with these three main forms by way of literary utopias that can be more specifically characterized as literary ecotopias—Ursula K. Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia* (1974) and Kim Stanley Robinson’s *New York 2140* (2017)—as well as by way of theoretical writings by social ecology thinkers such as Dan Chodorkoff and Chaia Heller and of the utopian practices depicted in Le Guin’s and Robinson’s novels. Throughout, we will ask ourselves: what is the disposition, impulse or mentality that lies at the heart of such utopias? And what can it do for us today, when many of us feel submerged in fatalism, resigned in the face of an increasingly bleak future that seems unavoidable?

Critical thinkers Paulo Freire and Mark Fisher extensively denounced neoliberal capitalism for its promotion of the fatalistic view that “there is no alternative” to the capitalist social order (in Margaret Thatcher’s famous words), and therefore all we can do is resign ourselves to its perpetuation and its devastating consequences. Recently, Naomi Klein and Astra Taylor have argued that “end times fascism,” as they call it, “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 these kinds of fatalism. Moreover, they suggest that utopias and the disposition at their heart have a vital role to play in this fight. As Klein and Taylor write in reference to end times fascism, 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 materials of this course counter such apocalyptic narratives? And, more broadly, how can we think of utopianism as a disposition capable of countering fatalism and galvanizing revolutionary action?

Reading Schedule

Sep 15: What is utopia(nism)?

- Dan Chodorkoff, “The Utopian Impulse” and “Social Ecology: An Ecological Humanism,” [*The Anthropology of Utopia: Essays on Social Ecology and Community Development* \(2014\)](#)
 - o Further reading: Lucy Sargisson, “Definitions, Debates and Conflicts,” **pp. 7-15**, *Fool’s Gold: Utopianism in the Twenty-First Century* (2012)
 - o Further reading: Murray Bookchin, “An Ecological Society,” **pp. 324-333** and **pp. 343-347**, [*The Ecology of Freedom: The Emergence and Dissolution of Hierarchy* \(1982\)](#)

Sep 22: Social Ecology Theory

- Chaia Heller, “Toward a Social Desire for Nature,” [*Ecology of Everyday Life: Rethinking the Desire for Nature* \(1999\)](#)
 - o Further reading: Murray Bookchin, “An Ecological Society,” *The Ecology of Freedom: The Emergence and Dissolution of Hierarchy* (1982)

Sep 29: The Literary Utopia

- Tom Moylan, “Introduction: The Critical Utopia” and “The Literary Utopia,” [*Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination* \(1986\)](#)
 - o Further reading: Lucy Sargisson, “Definitions, Debates and Conflicts,” **pp. 16-20**, *Fool’s Gold: Utopianism in the Twenty-First Century* (2012)

Oct 6: Literary Ecotopias: Critical

- Ursula K. Le Guin, excerpt from [*The Dispossessed* \(1974\)](#)
 - o Further reading: Ursula K. Le Guin, “Foreword,” [*The Next Revolution* \(2015\)](#)
 - o Further reading: Ursula K. Le Guin, [*“The Day Before the Revolution”* \(1974\)](#)

Oct 20:¹ Literary Ecotopias: Critical (cont.)

- Ursula K. Le Guin, excerpts from *The Dispossessed* (1974)

Oct 27: Literary Ecotopias: Critical (cont.)

- Ursula K. Le Guin, excerpts from *The Dispossessed* (1974)

Nov 3: Literary Ecotopias: Commons

- Kim Stanley Robinson, excerpt from [*New York 2140* \(2017\)](#)
 - o Further reading: Raphael Kabo, “Introduction,” *Utopia Beyond Capitalism in Contemporary Literature: A Commons Poetics* (2023)
 - o Further reading: Mathias Thaler, “If This Goes On: Hope Lost, Hope Regained,” *No Other Planet: Utopian Visions for a Climate-Changed World* (2022)
 - o Further reading: Kim Stanley Robinson, “Remarks on Utopia in the Age of Climate Change” (2016)

Nov 10: Literary Ecotopias: Commons (cont.)

- Kim Stanley Robinson, excerpts from *New York 2140* (2017)

¹ No class on Oct 13, Indigenous Peoples’ Day.

Nov 17: Literary Ecotopias: Commons (cont.)

- Kim Stanley Robinson, excerpts from *New York 2140* (2017)

Nov 24: Literary Ecotopias: Commons (cont.)

- Kim Stanley Robinson, excerpts from *New York 2140* (2017)