

AMERICAN UTOPIAS

Caleb McDaniel

History

2007

“American Utopias” is a course about visionary people who believed they could change the world by living in utopian communities. In the mid-1800s, for example, John Humphrey Noyes founded a religious community in Oneida, New York, in which members held property in common and practiced polygamous “free love” relationships. Other utopian planners in the 1800s created societies in remote places like New Harmony, Indiana, based on new theories of labor being developed by European socialists. In the twentieth century, during the early years of the Civil Rights Movement, a group of liberal Southern Baptists in Georgia founded an interracial cooperative farm called Koinonia Farm, which went on to become the spark for the present-day non-profit organization Habitat for Humanity. In the 1960s and 1970s, a variety of hippie communes and New Age communities were formed, some of them modeled on earlier utopian experiments like Oneida.

By exploring the history of these and other communal societies, this course will examine a variety of colorful reformers and try to understand their motivations for creating utopias. Many of the questions raised by the course are historical: Why were certain moments in American history conducive to the formation of utopian communities? What do these eccentric communes reveal about the larger society of the time, and how (if at all) did they influence society? Why and when did particular utopias disband? Other questions explored in the course are sociological. By examining planned communities, we will consider group dynamics and struggles over power that can be found in nearly every community. We will discuss how social phenomena like class and gender norms affect

relationships between people. Finally, we will think about how communities work and what makes them succeed or fail. Although the course will examine lofty questions about what an ideal community would look like, we will be equally interested in the more mundane questions of how actual communities organize and deal with the problems of communal life. As one sociologist asks, “In utopia ... who takes out the garbage?”

This course on utopias is writing-intensive. Perhaps that is fitting because the very premise for writing—the idea that we can communicate our ideas through language and even change someone else’s ideas as a result—may seem a little utopian. Most of the utopians we will study were also prolific writers. They believed that by not only living in special communities, but also by writing about them, they could *make* the world better. Our goal in this course is more modest: we will use writing to *understand* the world better. Writing in this course will not simply take the form of graded assignments—hoops you must jump through to show what you have learned. Rather, the course is built around the theory that writing is itself a means of learning. Students will regularly complete short, informal writing assignments in class designed to help formulate, analyze, and answer historical and sociological questions about utopian communities and their social environments. Some of these short writing assignments—such as short reactions to assigned readings—will be familiar to students. Other creative writing assignments, however, will allow students to adopt roles and write as if they were nineteenth-century utopian communalists, or will ask students to design and analyze their own utopian community. In addition, in-class discussions of assigned scholarly articles will

consider readings not just for what they can teach us about utopias, but also for what they can teach us about writing. Students will be encouraged to consider assigned readings as pieces of writing and to analyze how scholarly authors in different disciplines make and express arguments.

In addition to informal writing assignments, students will complete a major research project over the course of the quarter. Students will select and conduct research about a utopian community of interest to them, reporting on their findings to the class throughout the quarter. By the end of the quarter, students will complete two formal writing assignments based on their research. First, students will create or revise a Wikipedia entry of about 300 to 500 words on their utopian community. By contributing to Wikipedia, students will address their writing to general audience outside the classroom and will also think seriously about what makes a Wikipedia entry authoritative or credible. Second, students will write a 7-9 page, thesis-driven paper that identifies and answers a historical or sociological question about their research. These two pieces of writing belong to different genres and address different kinds of audience. A Wikipedia entry, for instance, resembles an encyclopedia article and should be designed more to report basic facts about a subject than to articulate an opinion or thesis about it. But a thesis-driven essay should go beyond a basic summary of research and instead offer and persuasively defend an interpretation of that research.

For all writing assignments, students will receive extensive assistance and training both inside and outside of class. Writing workshops held in class will help students at each stage of work on their research projects, from identifying a community to research to outlining and drafting

the final thesis-driven essay. Standards for evaluating and grading written assignments will also be made clear to students with “rubrics” distributed at the beginning of the quarter. All written assignments will be read and evaluated primarily for evidence that students have thought critically about their subjects, structured their essays logically, and addressed their writing to the audience appropriate to the genre of the assignment. Stylistic flair and grammatical correctness, though important parts of writing, will not affect student grades as much as argumentative boldness, clarity, and the use of evidence to defend assertions.

By taking writing about utopians seriously, this course will also treat utopians seriously. While communalists have often seemed wacky and are usually treated as such, they are worthy of study. Utopians deserve close attention if only because many of the challenges that they faced in their communities still confront local, national, and global communities today. By writing and thinking about the challenges that threatened utopian groups in the past, we will indirectly be writing and thinking about our communities in the present and how they might be able to overcome the problems created by living together. Ideally, utopian though it may seem, we may discover that communalists were on to something. And if, by writing about the world, we can understand it better, perhaps we can come a step closer to changing it too. “It is folly, it is worse than folly, it is mere individual conceit,” wrote philosopher and educational reformer John Dewey, “for one to set out to reform the world, either at large or in detail, until he has learned what the existing world which he wishes to reform has for him to learn.” The objective of this course, then, is to figure out what the history of utopian attempts to reform the world have for us to learn.