

AMERICAN UTOPIAS, ON PAPER AND IN PRACTICE:

David Ciepley
Political Science
2008

The United States may be regarded as the world's utopian hothouse, not only because of the sizeable dose of utopianism in its literature and political thought, but also because of the numerous communities that have been launched here to put utopia into practice. Indeed, its first significant English colony, the Massachusetts Bay Colony, was a quasi-utopian venture to build a Holy Commonwealth, a New Israel, in New England. This course examines American utopian ideals and the troubled attempts to institute them in lived human communities.

The first weeks of the course are definitional and historical. We will explore several operative definitions of "utopia" and discuss the advantages, for analytic purposes, of adopting a narrow and precise definition over a loose, expansive one. The specific definition with which the course will work comes from Krishan Kumar, who distinguishes utopian literature—a specific product of Western European civilization—from the more commonplace cultural visions of a past Golden Age or a future Elysium. A utopia is an envisioned society characterized by social harmony and general human well-being that, from the author's point of view, could in principle be realized, using humans more or less as they are, and using entirely human (as opposed to divine) means. We give this definition specific content by looking briefly at the two main tributaries that together formed the Western utopian tradition: Christian millennialism, which gave the tradition its vision of peace, prosperity, and human concord; and Greek rationalism, which contributed the notion that this could be brought about through wholly human means (in effect, accomplishing through human rationality what the Bible promised through divine intervention).

The remainder of the course centers on five case studies, five American visions of utopia. The first—the Puritan attempt to build a Holy Commonwealth—was not utopian in Kumar's strict sense, because it conceived of itself as reliant on divine aid. Nevertheless, the case is a fitting

place to start because the Puritans introduced into the United States the millenarian impulse that would fuel so many subsequent American utopian experiments. Furthermore, it is a classic, well-documented case of the compromises that typically must be made in institutionalizing an ideal vision. As a theoretical framework for analyzing the process of institutionalization, Max Weber's writings on the institutionalization of charisma will be introduced. As their first formal written assignment, students will be asked to assess Weber's framework using the Puritan case.

The next case is Bellamy's Marxist industrial utopia, as presented in *Looking Backward*, a wildly popular novel of the late 19th century. We will read Marx's "Communist Manifesto" along side it, and for their second paper, students will be asked to assess what was gained and what lost in Bellamy's translation of Marx into an American idiom. In class, we will also tease out the traces of Christian millenarianism in both Bellamy's and Marx's visions of the future.

The third case study is B.F. Skinner's vision, presented in *Walden Two*, of a social-scientific engineered utopian community. This will be paired with a fourth case—Twin Oaks, a 1960s era commune which is still going strong and which was, in its inception, meant to pattern exactly Skinner's vision in *Walden Two* (although it was quickly transformed by an influx of hippies carrying very different "back to the land" ideals). We will read selections from the writings of Katherine Kincaid, co-founder of Twin Oaks, on the early years of the commune and the compromises that they, like the Puritans, found themselves forced to make. As a special event, students will have an opportunity to interview, via video link, two current, longtime members of Twin Oaks.

The above three cases interlock closely. Marx was the inspiration for Bellamy, who was the inspiration for Skinner, who was the inspiration for Katherine Kincaid and her fellow founders of

Twin Oaks. In comparing these cases, a pattern emerges: as the utopian vision comes closer to institutionalization, the imagined society contracts in size and wealth. Marx imagined a universal civilization of great bounty. Bellamy imagined a similarly bountiful society on the scale of the individual American states. By the time we get to Skinner and Kincaid, the aspiration is for a 1000 person, middle-class community. Finally, the Twin Oaks reality is a community of 100 persons who live in what might be called dignified poverty. For their third paper, students will be asked to reflect on this phenomena. What is it about the nature of humans that brings utopian ideals, in the cases where they have been made workable, down to such a small scale? As an alternative, students may—on the basis of what they have learned about human nature from our readings in genetics, theology, sociology, and political theory, and given the history of Twin Oaks—address the question of whether “engineered cooperation” is happy or unhappy, free or unfree.

For our final case, we will examine the contemporary utopian visions of Ray Kurzweil and other prophets of the information age, whose ideas populate our current futurist fantasies, in both utopian and dystopian inflection. Class discussion will, among other things, ponder the question of why a new technology, identically understood, may generate both utopian and dystopian visions. The final assignment is to draw on these readings to write the first four pages of their very own utopian novel, using a creative mix of standard literary devices in utopian literature (for example, the protagonist as a traveler, or sleeper). This will also be an exercise in examining their own ideals and views about human nature.

With each of the above five cases, we will examine not only the particular utopia, but the political and social context of its generation, in order to understand the kinds of conditions under which these generally available ingredients of millenarianism and rationalism are catalyzed into utopian visions. Catalysts receiving emphasis are political and social oppression (Puritans, Bellamy) and the advent of major new physical or social technologies—that is, new modes of rational control (Bellamy, Skinner, Kurzweil). This will allow the students to appreciate how utopian literature often functions as social criticism of the existing order. We will also use our cases to reflect on the tension between the human idealization of,

and genuine capacity for, peaceful cooperation, and the human passions of pride and vanity that generate violent competition. As part of this, we will examine the means that each author proposes for eliminating or deflecting the passion of pride, and as part of their final creative writing assignment, students will be asked to show how their own utopian vision deals with this problem.

Among the objectives of the course is to convey to the students the following skills:

1) An ability to fairly evaluate an abstract theoretical framework on the basis of empirical case studies (Weber’s institutionalization thesis applied to the case of the Puritans).

2) An ability to recognize a common social ideal articulated within two distinct cultural traditions, and to discern the different inflections given it by these traditions (the case of Marxism in America).

3) An appreciation of the tension between utopian ideals of cooperation and human impulses toward competition, from the perspective of genetics, theology, sociology, and political theory.

4) An ability to reflect critically on one’s own ideals—theological, economic, social, and political—in light of the consequences of efforts to put them into practice.

5) An ability to recognize and use the literary devices of utopian fiction.

In keeping with a writing-intensive course, these desired course outcomes will be primarily evaluated through written work. The first two weeks of definitional and historical materials will be accompanied by a two-page reaction paper. Thereafter will follow three five-page essays (the first of which all students are required to revise after an in-class peer review process, and the second or third of which all students are invited to revise after instructor’s grading) and a final four-page creative writing assignment. I may also collect reading notes at various points during the quarter, or assign a second reaction paper. In the first session of week 4, I will devote one hour to a presentation on the elements of a successful introductory paragraph and to a small-group exercise devoted to generating an introduction (successfully used in my FSEM). In the second session of week 4, one hour will be devoted to an in-class peer review of complete drafts of the first paper, using a rubric provided by me and with my

oversight. In week 5, I will distribute excerpts from some of the more successfully written papers, and we will discuss why they were a

success. I may repeat this last exercise for the second or third paper, if warranted.

