

CVSP 207 C

Utopian Thought I

Fall 2009 – 2010

Hani Hassan

Office: 307 Nicely; Ext. 4031

email: hh26@aub.edu.lb

Office Hours: 12 – 1 pm WF

& 1 – 2 pm Th.

“Utopian consciousness is a consciousness that is not congruent with its surrounding ‘existence’.”
(Karl Mannheim, *Ideologie und Utopie*, Frankfurt a.M.: Vittorio Klostermann, 1985, 171.)

❖ General overview & objectives:

In 1879 Moritz Kaufmann gave in his book *Utopias* the following definition of utopia:

“Strictly speaking it means a ‘nowhere land’, some happy island far away, where perfect social relations prevail, and human beings, living under an immaculate constitution and a faultless government, enjoy a simple and happy existence, free from the turmoil, the harassing cares, and endless worries of actual life.” (cited after Ruth Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia*, New York, London: Philip Allan, 1990, 12).

The study of utopia as a field of academic studies emanated first in the 1960’s. In the early 1980’s, Keith Taylor (London University) summoned a study group on utopian thought, which in turn, animated more specialized inquiries on diverse aspects of the subject. Since the mid 80’s an International Conference on the Study of Utopia is being held regularly in different European universities.

It was Thomas More, who first coined the term ‘utopia’ and used it as a title of a book, which appeared in Latin in 1516. More derived the term ‘utopia’ from two Greek words: *eutopos* = good place, & *outopos* = no place. Ever since his *Utopia* appeared in 1516, Thomas More has been regarded as the founder of a new genre. More’s *Utopia*, written in the wake of discovering the New World, has been observed to contain oblique reflections of this “brave” new world. Hence, ‘utopias’ usually adopt a literary, often narrative, form - describing an ‘ideal’ society on a faraway island.

As Maurice Blanchot puts it:

“The fact that literary forms, that genres, no longer have any genuine significance...indicates the profound labor of literature which seeks to affirm itself in its essence by ruining distinctions and limits” (M. Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, 220).

‘Utopia’ is such a genre that ruins distinctions and limits - it could be perceived as a literary, social, political, religious genre, or as a new genre that contains all these aspects. The ambiguity arises from finding an agreement on a definition of the ‘object of analysis’ - its content, form, & function.

According to Oscar Wilde:

“A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not even worth glancing at, for it leaves out the one country at which Humanity is always landing. And when Humanity lands there, it looks

out, and seeing a better country, sets sail. Progress is the realisation of Utopias.” (“The Soul of Man under Socialism,” in *Selected Essays and Poems*, London: Penguin, 1954, 34; cited after Ruth Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia*, New York, London: Philip Allan, 1990, 5).

Utopia –perceived as a general term for imaginary ideal societies, whether *here & now* or in the *hereafter* – is a theme, which was treated in different societies & cultures. It could be a worldly messianic state, an *elysian* field or a garden, a city beyond, an imagined island, or a presentation of a positive & possible alternative to the social reality intended as a model to be emulated or aspired to. On the other hand, the devastating wars, the fascist states, and the totalitarian regimes, which stamped the 20th century, gave rise to a genre of anti-utopias (or *dystopia*).

The aim of this course is to introduce the general theoretical frame of ‘utopian studies’ and to read, appreciate, and discuss primary texts within the genre. The course further aims at identifying and analyzing the various components and ‘ingredients’ of utopian visions, and pushing the students to evaluate these various visions, and to relate the texts to their contemporary lives and world view.

❖ **Course Learning Outcomes:** at the completion of this course, the student will have gained an improved ability at:

- Identifying the basic elements of a text in the genre of Utopian Thought
- Recognizing and understanding the central components of the various visions of ‘ideal existence’ (as encountered through a selection of texts from ancient Mesopotamia, through the Greeks, to 17th C Europe)
- Tracing the underlying assumptions of a text within the context of ‘social engineering’
- Analyzing images and their real and metaphorical employment within the texts
- Critically evaluating the utopian visions encountered
- Situating different utopian visions within their historical and cultural context
- Preparing and delivering oral presentations
- Exchanging and sharing ideas and critical opinion in an atmosphere of mutual respect and freedom

❖ **Grading policy:**

15 % Attendance and Participation (this includes participating in various in-class group work and discussions, as well as short class presentations to introduce your colleagues to various themes and/or topics encountered over the course of the semester).

25 % First written evaluation

25 % Second written evaluation

35 % Final written evaluation: the final will be a comprehensive one covering all the works of the semester, but with specific stress on the last works, i.e. after the second written evaluation.

❖ Reading Selections (available at the bookstore as a reading packet):

I. Once Upon a Time...

Selections from:

- The Sumerian hero *Enmerkas* (Langdon, Stephan Herbert, *The Mythology of All Races*, vol. V: *Semitic*, Boston: The Archaeological Institute of America & Marshall Jones Co., 1931.)
- Hesiod's *Works and Days* (tr. A. J. Athanassakis, Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1983)
- Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (tr. A. D. Melville, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986)

II. Hereafter...

- Selections from Pindar & Horace (From *The Utopia Reader*, ed. Gregory Claeys & Lyman Tower Sargent, New York & London New York University Press, 1999)

III. Social visions...

- Lycurgus (Selections from Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* as cited in *The Utopia Reader*, ed. Gregory Claeys & Lyman Tower Sargent, New York & London New York University Press, 1999)
- Solon (Selections from Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* as cited at: <http://classics.mit.edu/Plutarch/solon.html>)
- Plato's *Critias* (as cited at <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/critias.html>), and selections from Plato's *The Republic* (tr. D. Lee, Penguin Books, 1987)

IV. Travel accounts...

- Selections from Iambulus' *Heliopolis* (From *The Utopia Reader*, ed. Gregory Claeys & Lyman Tower Sargent, New York & London New York University Press, 1999)
- Thomas More's *Utopia* (tr. C. H. Miller, New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2001)
- Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis* (Montana: Kessinger Publishing Company, 1992)
- Selection from Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* from *The Utopia Reader*, ed. Gregory Claeys & Lyman Tower Sargent, New York & London New York University Press, 1999)