

**New Speculative Fiction and Political Philosophy**  
**Le Guin, Miéville, and Stephenson on Society and the State**  
**Experimental College, Tufts University**  
**Proposed Syllabus**  
**Spring 2012**

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**Course Description:** Moving beyond the utopian/dystopian binary of works like *Brave New World* and *1984*, this class will engage the creative power of imaginative fiction to inform our understanding of what we mean when we talk about human nature, citizenship, property, language, technology, gender, and social policy. The emphasis is on works that avoid easy answers to these questions, and is instead intended to force us to question our assumptions about the way we frame these issues. This will be a reading-intensive course, and will require students to read one full novel per week. Supplemental readings will include short excerpts from classic texts in political philosophy and related disciplines.

**Course Wiki:** The website for the course will be a pbworks wiki (similar to my existing wikis at [ikesharpless.pbworks.com](http://ikesharpless.pbworks.com) or [animaethics.pbworks.com](http://animaethics.pbworks.com))

**Required Texts:** you must have the following text in class as needed. I recommend that you buy these texts from a used online site like [www.abebooks.com](http://www.abebooks.com). If you do so, however, be sure to buy the books with enough advanced notice to have them when the course begins. Supplemental course readings will be provided online at the pbworks site and/or in a course packet.

- Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*
- Ursula K. le Guin, *The Dispossessed*
- Ursula k. le Guin, *The Lathe of Heaven*
- Ursula k. le Guin, *The Left Hand of Darkness*
- China Miéville, *The City and the City*
- Neal Stephenson, *Snow Crash*
- Neal Stephenson and George Jewsbury, *Interface*
- Alan Moore, *The Watchmen*
- Margaret Atwood, *Oryx & Crake*
- China Miéville, *Embassytown*
- Mark Twain, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*
- Ray Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451*

**Grading**

- Vocab Journal (10%)
- 1<sup>st</sup> Short Paper: Engaging the Supplements (15%)
- 2<sup>nd</sup> Short Paper: Cross-Comparison (15%)
- Long Paper (40%)
  - Outline (5%)
  - Rough Draft (5%)

- Final Draft (30%)
- Participation (20%)
  - 20% of this grade will be based on student uploads to the pbworks website (2% each, due 2 hours before class, but preferably the evening prior. There are eleven upload options—one per week, excepting the session on NGOs—and you need to do ten of them)
  - Although there is no specific grade for in-class participation, active and productive participation will help if your final grade is hovering between two grades; the inverse, regarding poor participation, is also true.

**Note on Papers:** Be sure to carefully check your work for spelling errors and grammatical flow. You can rewrite your papers you are dissatisfied with your grade, and I will average the two grades. I will also dock your grade by a third of a letter grade for every unexcused calendar day (*not* class day) a paper is overdue.

**Formatting Guidelines:** This information will be provided again when we discuss writing assignments, but here is the gist of my formatting requirements: have an engaging title, 12-pt font, Times New Roman, 1 inch margins, double spaced, no spaces between paragraphs, justified, with page numbers, parenthetical citations and bibliography. Also: any citations longer than 3 lines should be indented on both sides, 10-pt font, single spaced, and without quotation marks. Any papers submitted electronically should have the student's last name and the assignment title as the document name.

**Vocab Journal:** This journal should be kept, either physically or as a word/ebook/etc. file throughout the course—students should locate at least five words in each week's reading (whether the book or the supplement) that they are either marginally or completely unfamiliar with, and to write out their definition and a sample sentence demonstrating the word's use. Selected words can be either 'traditional' or neologisms particular to the works in question, but, if neologisms, they should be meaningful or plot-specific rather than merely random proper nouns, etc.

**First Short Paper - Engaging the Supplements:** (Additional details forthcoming) The focus of this assignment will be to directly engage one of the core texts with its accompanying supplemental material. For instance: a direct analysis of why *The Lathe of Heaven* corresponds to Burke and Oakeshott's conservative skepticism about the desirability of social engineering.

**Second Short Paper – Cross-Comparison:** (Additional details forthcoming) This assignment will be a cross-comparison between two or more of the assigned core readings. Themes and formats are subject to student choice, but additional guidelines will be provided.

**Long Paper Reuirements:** Students will be given substantial leeway in the format and content of the long paper, but the outline and rough draft will be used to provide guidance along the way.

**Academic Honesty:** Plagiarism and cheating will not be tolerated. If you have questions about what constitutes plagiarism, please contact me by email, phone, or in person. I would much prefer to clarify a small confusion than be forced to give you a failing grade in the class.

## Course Outline

**nota bene** – reading assignments are subject to revision anytime up to the class prior to their assignment. If you miss a class, be sure to verify the next day's readings by checking the pbworks website. I may add or remove some readings on a day-to-day basis, so be sure to pay attention in class. Also be sure to check the website regularly for supplemental online reading and other media.

### **1<sup>st</sup> week: Introductions, Course Outline and Expectations, Pbworks Tutorial**

- Richard Rorty, *Achieving Our Country* (excerpts)
- James Patrick Kelly & John Kessel, *The Secret History of Science Fiction*, Introduction

### **2<sup>nd</sup> week: Setting the Stage: Jameson & Rorty on 'Science Fiction' and 'Speculative Fiction'**

- Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*
- Continuing with week one's readings, as necessary

## Module I – Anarchy, the State, and Society

### **3<sup>rd</sup> week: Ursula k. le Guin, *The Dispossessed***

- Emma Goldman, “Anarchism: What it Really Stands for”
- Stephen Jay Gould, “Kropotkin was no Crackpot”

### **4<sup>th</sup> week: China Miéville, *The City and the City***

- Excerpts from Marx (on alienation) and Gramsci (on hegemony)
- George Orwell, “Politics and the English Language”
- Supplemental films: *Z*, *Nowhere*

### **5<sup>th</sup> week: Neal Stephenson, *Snow Crash***

- Excerpts from Tim Wu (*The Master Switch*), James Gleick (*The Information*), Robert Putnam (*Bowling Alone*), and Clay Shirkey (*Cognitive Surplus*)
- Supplemental film: *Surrogates*

## Module II – Framing “Social Engineering”

### **6<sup>th</sup> week: Ursula k. le Guin, *The Lathe of Heaven***

- Excerpts from Burke and Oakeshott
- Supplemental text: Theodore Sturgeon, “Microcosmic God”

### **7<sup>th</sup> week: Alan Moore, *The Watchmen***

- Deborah Stone, “Causal Stories and the Formation of Policy Agendas”
- Excerpts from Machiavelli, Bentham/Mill/Singer
- Supplemental film: *Dune* (and *Watchmen...*)
  - Excerpts on dependency theory

## Module III – Focus on Gender, Technology, and Language

### 8<sup>th</sup> week: Ursula k. le Guin, *The Left Hand of Darkness*

- Alternate choice – Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*
- Excerpts from Okin, Gilligan, Tronto, and others

### 9<sup>th</sup> week: Margaret Atwood, *Oryx & Crake*

- Excerpts on bioethics and transhumanism
- Supplemental film: *Gattaca*

### 10<sup>th</sup> week: Neal Stephenson and George Jewsbury, *Interface*

- Supplemental film: *Mancurian Candidate* (original)

### 11<sup>th</sup> week: China Miéville, *Embassytown*

- Selected work on language and framing

## Module IV: Revisiting the Classics

### 12<sup>th</sup> week: Mark Twain, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*

- Immanuel Kant, “What is Enlightenment?”

### 13<sup>th</sup> week: Ray Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451*

- Various, on consumerism and alienation
- Supplemental reading: Nikolai Gogol, “The Nose”

### Potential Reading Replacements

- The Hunger Games
- Neverwhere
- Flatland
- Never Let Me Go
- The Sparrow
- Invisible Cities
- Cloud Atlas
- The Master and Margarita
- Gulliver's Travels (excerpts)
- Various Kurt Vonnegut (Galapagos, Cat's Cradle, the Sirens of Titan)
- Various Philip K. Dick
- Gene Wolfe
- The Windup Girl