

**UTOPIA'S ECLIPSE? THE HORIZON OF POLITICAL HOPE IN THE WAKE OF EMPIRE AND  
REVOLUTION**

**PLSC 22205 / CCCT 22205 / CRES 23205 / LLSO 22205**

University of Chicago, Autumn 2024

Wednesdays, 9:30am-12:20pm

Foster 107

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Gates-Blake Hall 501

Office Hours: Thursdays 2:15-4:45pm (by appointment)

### **Course description**

The twentieth century was a time of extraordinary political hope associated with socialist and anti-colonial struggles that promised to usher in new forms of human freedom. However, by the 1980s, this hope had given way to catastrophe as the horizons of political possibility and revolutionary aspiration characterizing these struggles collapsed. How do we reckon with this collapse, and what does it mean to make a life for oneself in the wake of these failed emancipatory projects?

This course seeks to explore this question by examining the place of utopian thinking, broadly understood, in the history of anticolonial and postcolonial struggles in the twentieth century and by reading this strain of thought in light of the doubts that certain thinkers have raised about the possibility of attaining utopia's promise. We will also examine debates about the possibilities of renewed utopian thinking in the present and will consider whether critical resources might be gleaned from the revolutionary failures of the twentieth century.

### **Course Requirements**

#### *Office Hours Meeting*

Every student is required to meet with me in office hours in week 1 of the quarter. You can sign up for these office hours via Canvas (extra appointments will be available in the first week of the quarter). If you cannot make any of the available times, please let me know as soon as possible and I will arrange an alternate time to meet with you.

#### *Participation*

This course will be run in seminar format, and students are expected to have completed the readings before class and to be prepared to engage actively in class discussions. The cultivation of an effective classroom discussion depends on each student being willing to play different roles. Rather than thinking about a discussion seminar as an environment for students to pose questions about the texts to the instructor, a more effective classroom discussion will result from students being willing to pose questions of interpretation or clarification not only to the instructor, but also to their peers. Students are encouraged to pose questions about the text, to volunteer to answer those questions,

and to ask one another, as well as the instructor, to clarify key concepts or ideas that are being used in the discussion.

### *Reading Responses*

With the exceptions of those completing the presentation for a given week are required to write a brief paragraph once a week (beginning in week 1) that develops a question about the week's reading assignment. This exercise will help you to prepare for class discussions. Your paragraph should be at least 150 words and the question should focus on a specific issue, argument, or concept that you find puzzling or especially thought-provoking, whether in the week's reading or in the pre-circulated presentation for that week. As you develop your questions, please feel free to draw productive connections between the texts that we are reading in this course and those that you have read (or are reading) for other courses. Whatever approach you take, be sure to include page numbers for reference. Questions should be submitted via the Assignments section of Canvas by 7pm the day before of class.

You will receive credit for your weekly questions if you fulfill the stated requirements and submit your work on time. I will give you credit for one late submission if I receive it within a week of its due date; otherwise, late submissions will not be accepted.

### *Weekly Presentations*

Beginning in week 1, a group of students will be asked to prepare a short presentation (10-15 minutes) based on the assigned reading. Presentations should identify problems or puzzles that arise out of the reading assignments and, where appropriate, make connections to previous weeks' readings. Most importantly, students should use their presentations to take a position on the author's argument by stating and developing a thesis and defending that thesis with evidence from the text. The aim here is to lay a foundation for our collective discussion and to give you some control over the agenda for our conversations over the course of the quarter. Should you wish to circulate a handout (no more than 5 pages) to help your peers follow your presentation, you should do so by 7pm the day before class.

### *Final Project*

You have 2 options for the final project for this course — you can either write a book review of a text of your choosing that bears on the material of the class, or you can come up with a question that bears on the themes of the class which you will answer in your final paper. In both cases you will produce a memo by week 5 of the course outlining your plans for the final and meet with me to discuss them.

#### Option 1: Book review project

This project will invite you to bring the texts we have read in this course to bear on a critical assessment of a text related to the question of utopianism and its promises or pitfalls. I will give you broad latitude in your choice of text, though the kinds of texts I have in mind (and you are welcome to use these texts for your assignment if you wish) are Kristin Ross's *Communal Luxury: The Political Imaginary of the Paris Commune* (Verso, 2015) or Aaron Benanav's *Automation and the Future of Work* (Verso, 2019). You can elect to defend the author's argument or to criticize it, but in doing so you

must make reference to some of the texts that we have read in the course. It is up to you to decide how many of these texts you wish to place in conversation with the book that you choose, but you should be mindful that you are unlikely to be able to use all the texts that we are reading.

- By **5pm on Saturday, November 2**, you will submit a 2-page memo outlining the core arguments of the book you plan to critique, as you see them. The memo should outline how you plan to approach your review, whether by way of criticism or defense, and it should sketch out some tentative lines of argument that you plan to pursue.

### Option 2: Final Paper

When developing your final paper proposal, you are welcome to suggest questions that were not directly covered by the readings but that are otherwise related to the themes of the class. Irrespective of what question you identify, it must be a question that can be answered within the confines of a 10-12 page paper. This option might particularly appeal to students who are working on or planning to work on an undergraduate thesis and would like to test out their argument in their paper for this class. Or you might simply prefer to use your final project to explore a question directly instead of via a book review.

- By **5pm on Saturday, November 2**, you will submit a 2-page memo outlining your plans for the final paper. This should include (a) the question you propose to answer, (b) a brief outline of how this question relates to the themes of this course, (c) an annotated bibliography of the course texts that you will engage in your paper, making clear how each text you plan to engage bears on your question, and (d) a tentative outline of the argument you plan to make in answering your question.

### Requirements

You will meet with me in office hours the week after you submit your memo (**November 4-9**) to discuss your plans for the paper (extra slots have been made available to facilitate this). When you write your final paper, you are welcome to diverge from the approach you outline in the memo. The goal of this memo assignment is to encourage you to *begin* work on the final assignment early in the quarter.

Irrespective of which option you pursue, the final project should be 10-12 pages long, double-spaced, 12-font, with 1-inch margins. The final project is due (by upload to Canvas) on **Wednesday, December 11 at 6pm**.

### **Accessibility**

The University of Chicago is committed to ensuring equitable access to our academic programs and services. Students with disabilities who have been approved for the use of academic accommodations by [Student Disability Services \(SDS\)](#) and need a reasonable accommodation(s) to participate fully in this course should follow the procedures established by SDS for using accommodations. Timely notifications are required in order to ensure that your accommodations can be implemented. Please meet with me to discuss your access needs in this class after you have completed the SDS procedures for requesting accommodations.

Phone: (773) 702-6000

Email: [disabilities@uchicago.edu](mailto:disabilities@uchicago.edu)

### **Late Essay Policy**

Please let me know should you ever find yourself in the position of having to submit your papers late. I do not need to know why your work is late, but it is important to maintain communication when this happens.

Finally, all essays will be submitted via Canvas.

### **Absences**

Participation in class discussions is the basis of learning in seminar courses, so absences of any kind are taken seriously and will impact your grade. After you have missed two classes, you will automatically lose a full letter from your participation grade for each subsequent absence. You will be ineligible for a letter grade for the course after your fifth absence and you must instead request a W from your advisor.

Per university policy, you will not be penalized for an absence due to a religious observance if you let me know about it at the beginning of the quarter.

Finally, coming late to class affects your own ability to participate and disrupts the learning of others. Tardiness will therefore negatively impact your participation grade.

### **Individual Office hours**

I require everyone to come to my office hours at least twice during the quarter. I am happy to discuss the reading and writing assignments with you, and it is especially important to see me if at any point you are struggling in the course. Please sign up for office hours through Canvas. If no appointments show up, make sure that you have our class selected in the list of calendars on the right side of the page.

If you have a class, job, or extracurricular activity during my regular office hours, or if all of the appointments are already booked, you may set up an appointment at another time via email. Please include the days and times that you are available in your message. If you don't have another obligation during my office hours, I ask that you sign up for an appointment during that time. Please also cancel your appointment as soon as possible should you no longer be able to make it.

If at some point in the quarter you find that you are unwell but still wish to meet in office hours, I am happy to arrange to do so over Zoom.

### **Policy on electronic devices**

You should not be using any electronic device during class unless you have received an accommodation to do so.

## Plagiarism, academic honesty, and generative AI

It is contrary to justice, academic integrity, and to the spirit of intellectual inquiry to submit another's statements or ideas as one's own work. To do so is plagiarism or cheating, offenses punishable under the University's disciplinary system. Because these offenses undercut the distinctive moral and intellectual character of the University, we take them very seriously.

Proper acknowledgment of another's ideas, whether by direct quotation or paraphrase with citation, is expected. In particular, if any written or electronic source is consulted and material is used from that source, directly or indirectly, the source should be identified by author, title, and page number, or by website and date accessed.

Proven plagiarism of any kind may result in automatic failure of the course. At minimum, you will receive an F for the assignment and the case will be referred to the University for further disciplinary action. If you are ever in doubt about what constitutes plagiarism, please speak with me before the assignment is due. You can find the University's policy on academic honesty here: <https://college.uchicago.edu/student-services/academic-integrity-student-conduct>. You will also find a file containing two documents on our course's Canvas site (in the Syllabus Folder) that clarify the nature of plagiarism.

I realize that plagiarism often occurs in moments of acute stress. If you ever find yourself thinking that the only way to complete an assignment is by submitting dishonest work, please reach out to me. You don't need to tell me that you are on the verge of plagiarizing, but you should seek help on the assignment. We can arrange a meeting to address your questions and concerns.

The academic honesty principles adopted for this class also prohibit the use of any generative AI tools; the use of these tools will constitute an instance of plagiarism.

## Grade Distribution

Participation	30%
Weekly reading response	10%
Presentation	20%
Memo: Paper thesis and plan	10%
Final Paper	30%

## Required texts

The following texts are available for purchase at the University Bookstore. Readings marked with an asterisk (\*) are available on Canvas. Please use these editions of the texts to aid in the in-class discussion of specific passages.

1. C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (Vintage, 2023)
2. Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford University Press, 1997)

3. David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Duke University Press, 2004)
4. Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self Determination* (Princeton University Press, 2019)
5. David Scott, *Omens of Adversity: Time, Tragedy, Memory, Justice* (Duke University Press, 2014)
6. Gary Wilder, *Concrete Utopianism: The Politics of Temporality and Solidarity* (Fordham University Press, 2022)
7. David Scott, *Irreparable Evil: An Essay in Moral and Reparatory History* (Columbia University Press, 2024)

## Reading Schedule

Wednesday,  
October 2

### Revolution!

C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (Vintage, 2023), entire.

Wednesday,  
October 9

### Rereading *The Black Jacobins* in the ruins of our present

David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Duke University Press, 2004), entire.

Wednesday,  
October 16

### Slavery and its aftermaths

Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford University Press, 1997), entire.

Wednesday,  
October 23

### The Promise of the Post-colony: Making the World Anew

\*Adom Getachew, "Universalism After the Post-colonial Turn: Interpreting the Haitian Revolution," *Political Theory* 44.6 (2016): 821-45.

Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self Determination* (Princeton University Press, 2019), entire.

Wednesday,  
October 30

### Revolutionary Disappointment

David Scott, *Omens of Adversity: Time, Tragedy, Memory, Justice* (Duke University Press, 2014), entire.

Wednesday,  
November 6

### Utopia Reconsidered I

\*Gary Wilder, "Review Essay: *Omens of Adversity: Tragedy, Time, Memory, Justice*, David Scott, Durham: Duke University Press, 2013," *The Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology*, 20.1 (2015): 189-200.

Gary Wilder, *Concrete Utopianism: The Politics of Temporality and Solidarity* (Fordham University Press, 2022), ix-136.

Wednesday,  
November 13

Utopia Reconsidered II

Wilder, *Concrete Utopianism*, 139-290.

Wednesday,  
November 20

Living On After Evil I

\*David Scott, "Preface: Europe's Disgrace," *Small Axe* 28, 1 (2024): vii-x.

David Scott, *Irreparable Evil: An Essay in Moral and Reparatory History* (Columbia University Press, 2024), 1-188.

Wednesday,  
December 4

Living On After Evil II

Scott, *Irreparable Evil*, 191-317.