

American Studies 430.02
American Visions of Utopia
T - Fri 02:00PM - 03:20PM
GHH 206
Roger Williams University
Fall Semester, 2013

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Hours: M, T, W, Th, F: 11:00 - 12:00
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Introduction

For this end, we must be knit together, in this work, as one man. We must entertain each other in brotherly affection. We must be willing to abridge ourselves of our superfluities, for the supply of others' necessities. We must uphold a familiar commerce together in all meekness, gentleness, patience and liberality. We must delight in each other; make others' conditions our own; rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our commission and community in the work, as members of the same body. So shall we keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace. The Lord will be our God, and delight to dwell among us, as His own people, and will command a blessing upon us in all our ways, so that we shall see much more of His wisdom, power, goodness and truth, than formerly we have been acquainted with. We shall find that the God of Israel is among us, when ten of us shall be able to resist a thousand of our enemies; when He shall make us a praise and glory that men shall say of succeeding plantations, "may the Lord make it like that of New England."

John Winthrop, A Model of Christian Charity, aboard the ship Arabella, 1630

The idea of Utopia, an ideal society, has been with us from the beginning. Some of you may have read the Model in Core 102, and it stated the principles upon which the Massachusetts Bay Colony was to have been founded. We often speak of "The American Dream": but the content of that dream has changed through the years, and perhaps it would always have been better to think of plural dreams. As we shall see in this course, people have joined together to create alternative communities, based on different beliefs of perfection throughout the country's history, down to the present day. These have taken many forms. For example at one time, two very different models of community were flourishing: one based on chastity and equality of men and women, the other believing in "group marriage," everyone who lived in the community was married to everyone else in the community, and a committee decided which pairs should produce children.

The objective of this course is to explore these visions...see what they have in common with each other, as well, as how they disagree, to note enduring themes and variations on them, and perhaps to create our own visions of American Utopia.

Books for the Course.

There are four books for the course. If you picked up three in the bookstore, you did the right thing. One of the books is available online, for free. You may either read it online, or download a copy, or both. If you wish to purchase it, you can do that, too. Most online bookstores carry it. Two of them are books of readings, and two of them are novels.

Howells, William Dean, [A Traveler from Altruria](#) (1908 edition) Free.

A visitor from a far away island comes to visit America in the late 1890s in order to learn about how the greatest country in the world practices "all men are created equal". Those who entertain him find him as shocking as he finds them.

Pitzer, Donald E. America's Communal Utopias (1997)

University Of North Carolina Press

From the Shakers to the Branch Davidians, America's communal utopians have captured the popular imagination. Seventeen original essays here demonstrate the relevance of such groups to the mainstream of American social, religious, and economic life. The contributors examine the beliefs and practices of the most prominent utopian communities founded before 1965, including the long-overlooked Catholic monastic communities and Jewish agricultural colonies. Also featured are the Ephrata Baptists, Moravians, Shakers, Harmonists, Hutterites, Inspirationists of Amana, Mormons, Owenites, Fourierists, Icarians, Janssonists, Theosophists, Cyrus Teed's Koreshans, and Father Divine's Peace Mission.

Based on a new conceptual framework known as developmental communalism, the book examines these utopian movements throughout the course of their development-before, during, and after their communal period. Each chapter includes a brief chronology, giving basic information about the group discussed. An appendix presents the most complete list of American utopian communities ever published.

Fairfield, Richard, The Modern Utopian: Alternative Communities of the '60s and '70s

Process Press (2010)

Back to the Land. Urban communes. Sustainable cooperatives. Thirty years ago, alternative communities swept the nation. Today, with sustainability, peak oil and retirement concerns, people of all ages are reviving and expanding notions of cooperative living as new communities form and thrive.

The Modern Utopian is the definitive exploration of the alternative communities that fascinated a nation and redefined progressive culture in the '60s and '70s, documented by those who knew it and lived it. This photo-illustrated compilation of articles visits the fabled Drop City, Morningstar Ranch, Timothy Leary at Millbrook, Detroit's Translove Energies, the still-thriving Twin Oaks and Stephen Gaskin's Farm, and dozens of other across the nation.

Ernest Callenbach, *Ecotopia* (Novel)

Heyday/Banyan Tree Books (2004)

Ecotopia embodies in concrete, practical form the new biology-conscious philosophy that has been evolving in recent years, especially on the West Coast. The setting is the early 21st century. Ecotopia, made up of what was once Northern California, Oregon, and Washington, has been independent for several decades. At last, an official visitor from New York is admitted: Will Weston, top investigative reporter. Like a modern Gulliver, Weston is sometimes horrified sometimes impressed despite himself, and sometimes touched by the strange practices he encounters--which include ritual war games, collective ownership and operation of farms and factories, and an attention to trees and reforestation which borders on tree-worship.¹

Work for the Course

1. Utopian communities are mirrors of the societies in which they arise. If the surrounding culture was "perfect" there would be no reason for a group of people to extract themselves it and attempt to construct a culture of their own. In other words, there are inherent criticisms of the "outside" America within the communities created by people like the Shakers or the Branch Davidians. One of our objectives is to "unpack" these criticisms, think upon their validity from our points of view, and see if there are connections between those criticisms and the criticisms we read and hear about contemporary American Society.
2. Another objective is to "dig deeper" into a number of these societies using the many sources available on the Internet. I have prepared a bibliography with links, which parallels the tables of contents in our books of readings.
3. A third objective is to look at two significant sets of social criticism found in classic novels...the first from the late 19th century, and the second from the era of "The modern Utopian". We're going to think about the nature of the criticism, the traits criticized, and whether the criticisms are valid in the America of 2013.
4. Precisely how we're going to do this is a discussion I'm having with myself right now, and which I'll have with you as soon as we meet. This class looks to be small enough to work seminar fashion, with each of us making a contribution to the knowledge of all of us through our own research and sharing. When we all know each other a little better and have a sense of what our interests are, I hope to

¹ With the exception of the first, the summaries are from Amazon.com.

collaborate with you on an assignment list. (This is one of my Utopian ideals).

Attendance Policy

SHOW UP!

This is for your benefit (I hope) and even more for the benefit of your colleagues in this class. You can't teach them from your unique perspective unless you're with them, and they will lose the benefit of your critique of ideas they put forth if you're not there to put those critiques on the table.

Pledge of Academic Integrity.

You will remember this from your freshman convocation:

We, the undergraduate students of Roger Williams University, commit ourselves to academic integrity. We promise to pursue the highest ideals of academic life, to challenge ourselves with the most rigorous standards, to be honest in any academic endeavor, to conduct ourselves responsibly and honorably, and to assist one another as we live and work together in mutual support.

This pledge is as Utopian an ideal as one can imagine. Notice that plural pronouns throughout. Each year when I go to the Convocation, I recite this pledge under my breath, changing only the words "undergraduate students" to "faculty"—because it applies to us, as well. I'm looking forward very much to this course. Welcome to our Utopian educational experience.