

Future Politics

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(DRAFT)

PS 374 Fall 2021

Instructor Info —



Jake Bowers



Office Hours:

<http://calendly.com/jakebowers>



Zoom



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Course Info —



Mon & Wed



1:30pm–2:50pm CT



Zoom

Overview

How can imagining the future help us understand the present? How does considering the future help us think critically about politics today? In this course we will read social science and political philosophy together with science fiction in an attempt to enhance the political, social and economic imagination of the social sciences. The future hopes and imaginings of past political thinkers do not include either enough detail or enough information about our rapidly changing technological, social, political, and economic landscape to provide us with enough practice to confidently confront the future as it happens to us. Science fiction allows us a much more detailed view of life in alternative futures, and the writers that we choose to read here tend to think seriously and logically about how current cutting-edge technology might have social and political ramifications — however, science fiction authors are also mostly focusing on plot, characters and narrative and thus may skim over core concepts that ought to organize our thinking about politics and society. Thus, we read both together in order to practice a kind of theoretically informed futurism (which is not the same as prediction or forecasting, but is more like practicing confronting the unexpected).

I think of a college seminar as a kind of guided self-study group. The students arrive because they are interested in a topic broadly. My job is to help focus the reading and discussion: I have read more of these pieces than you have, and I have given some extra thought to the question about how participants in a self-study group might get the most from their participation in such a group. To this end, this course offers multiple opportunities for reflection and engagement with the material: if you don't get it the first time, you'll have multiple opportunities to work to get it.

Learning Objectives

- Practice imagining alternative political, social, and economic futures. It is too easy to imagine future technology and too hard to imagine future political parties and constitutions and systems of taxation and corporate governance. This class aims to help you practice this kind of social, political, economic imagining.
- Engage with science fiction novels, stories, graphic novels, and movies that attempt to do this kind of task — to imagine different politics, societies, and economies. (Using the discussion questions, inclass discussion, and your own reading.)
- Engage with political philosophers who provide some frameworks for thinking about politics, society and economics that you can use to inform and structure your imagining. (Using the discussion questions, inclass discussion, and your own reading.)
- Engage with non-fiction and commentary about possible future politics, economics, and society. (Using the discussion questions, inclass discussion, and your own reading.)
- Practice writing your own scenarios or prototypes for future politics, economics and society. (Using the three assigned projects.)

Goals and Expectations

You will read *both* a science fiction novel *and* a short piece of political philosophy or other bit of non-fiction almost every week (scheduled to occur over a weekend for discussion on Mondays and for use in small group discussions on Wednesdays). Sometimes I will assign a movie or perhaps a short story instead of a novel. I hope that the fiction can help us talk more clearly about and/or understand more deeply the political theory or non-fiction social scientific work.

I am imagining that we will all talk together on Mondays for the whole classtime about the readings assigned for discussion that day. Then on Wednesdays, we will start the time with any questions you may have and then you will break into small groups to brainstorm and prototype some scenarios or design fiction, and then each group will report back to the overall class for discussion. The emphasis on Wednesday is on creating new ideas based on the readings that we talked about on Mondays.

These ideas about how the course goes could change as the course develops.

In order for you and your colleagues to get the most out of this class, I have designed the following requirements:

Attendance

I require regular attendance. I will consider an absence excused if you have an appropriate note from a dean, doctor, or lawyer. See [the official University policy on absences](#). You may have three unexcused absences this term after the first week of classes. Other absences will count as zeros in your in-class involvement grade. Please let me know if you are having technical problems. I hope that the University has resources available to help you connect via both video and audio into our Zoom meetings if you are having problems.

I will expect you to have your video on during the class except during breaks unless you talk with me about the reasons why you cannot have your video on.

Discussion questions

By 5pm the evening before each Monday class, each person will have submitted a discussion question on the class Moodle. The point of this assignment is to (1) ensure that the quality of our in class discussions is high, (2) provide some impetus for you to make time to do the reading, (3) let me know what you are thinking about the material and (4) give chances for shy folks to get credit for quality class participation — by writing thoughtful discussion questions. These questions will serve as the starting point for group discussion, so they should not be simple factual or yes/no questions. I will grade them as unsatisfactory(C-73), satisfactory(B-83), excellent(A-93) taking into account *engagement with the material*, *understanding of the material*, and *writing skills*. An excellent question shows deep reading *and* creative thinking: it does not have to be long. An unsatisfactory question shows little engagement with the reading, little comprehension of it, and/or poor writing. Poor writing alone is enough for a low grade. If you are worried about your writing, you might try checking your question using an online resource such as [Hemingway](#) or perhaps make use of some of the University's writing resources.

You will not be able to turn in these questions late, since I will use the time between the deadline and class time to read your questions.

In calculating the grade based on the reading questions, I'll drop your lowest four scores. This means that you can either skip the assignment four times with no penalty or you can turn in ill-considered or poorly-written questions four times with no penalty.

Involvement/Participation

Quality class participation does not mean “talking a lot.” It includes turning in assignments on time; attending classes; arriving on time; thinking and caring about the material and expressing your thoughts respectfully and succinctly in class.

The best in-class participation that I have seen has come from people who have done the reading carefully and then listen closely to their classmates and respond thoughtfully (if possibly critically or supportively). This class is not a place to make speeches. Nor is it a place to sit in silence. You get credit for daring to guess or giving unexpected answers. Although I will call for volunteers to answer the questions I pose, I will probably call on you if you consistently don't raise your hand or if you keep avoiding my gaze.

Of course, a discussion class via Zoom is a new thing for us all. So we will all be learning how to best participate in discussions together this term. So, my policy here is not set in stone.

Short Papers: Scenarios or Design Fictions

Although most of the course involves close engagement with reading and topics defined here in the syllabus, I want you to have a chance to engage with the material on your own as well as a place to practice using your imagination on your own. I

will ask that you write three 2-page single-spaced papers throughout the term. I envision that these papers would be **design fictions** or **speculative prototypes** of some kinds — in which you write a short piece or produce a short podcast or video from the perspective of a future in such a way that we learn about that future and its upsides and downsides. For example you could write as if you lived in some future — perhaps writing a letter to a friend, or a party platform (or a letter or report about an experience with a political party), or something else (a comic, a short video, a podcast see for example the **Flash Forward** podcast for a series of short fictions that start many episodes.). For another set of examples of such work, see the **Op-ed from the future series of the New York Times**.

I am currently imagining that each paper would be about 2 pages single-spaced of the fiction itself (you as the future author) and then 1 page single-spaced where you explain how one or more of the political theory readings or nonfiction readings from the class (or that you bring in from outside the class) informed your choices in the design fiction.

If you want to submit a video or podcast or comic (like an advertisement from the future, a video tutorial for how to live with/enjoy/cope with a future object or situation) that is also fine. Please talk with me about it first so that we can figure out how to evaluate it.

Presentation

The last week or so of the course will be devoted to presentations of one of your three scenarios or design fictions to the rest of the class. You can choose which one you want to present. I currently imagine that each person will have roughly 5 minutes to present using slides or some other presentation tool, but we could change this if we wanted to increase the time devoted to presentations.

Grading

I'm currently planning to calculate your grade this way: 15% for Attendance/Class Participation (recorded on Moodle), 15% Discussion Questions (graded on Moodle), 65% scenarios or design fictions (each paper about $65/3 \approx 21 \frac{2}{3} \%$), 5% Presentation

I do not curve. If all of you perform excellently, then I will say so to the computer system of the University. That said, I am a hard grader with very high standards: I have never given all As, or even mostly As. I hope I can assign all A's this term.

All written work in this class will assume familiarity with the principles of good writing in (Becker, 1986). If you do not know why one should avoid the passive voice, ask me in class or in office hours and I will post relevant chapters from Becker on the topic. You may want to paste bits of your text into <http://www.hemingwayapp.com/> as well in order to check your writing clarity.

There will be only one extra credit opportunity for the class. Successful participation in the Political Science Subject Pool is worth 2 percentage points (to the overall course grade). An announcement with more details will be made in class in September.

Conduct

I expect you to observe the **University of Illinois Campus Code of Conduct** when writing your papers (and in general). So, for example, I expect that you will use the words of others without proper attribution. Violations will lead to a failing grade for that assignment. If you have any questions about what counts as plagiarism, ask the professor.

Diversity and Inclusivity

I expect that all members of this class contribute to a respectful, welcoming and inclusive environment for every other member of the class.

Students with disabilities

Contact me as soon as possible (and definitely within the first 2 weeks of class) to request any accommodations needed.

Emergency Response Instructions

University policy is Run, Hide, Fight.

Computing and Writing

The discussion questions on the Moodle will mostly just be typed directly into the Moodle text editor although I will recommend that you type them first in a plain text editor on your device first — so that an internet glitch doesn't cause you to lose work.

Your design ideas / prototypes can be turned in as pdf documents or shared with me as Google Docs (or using Box documents or Dropbox Paper) — or if they are multimedia, in some other appropriate format. I do not want to download Word documents. Please do not turn in Word documents.

Class Schedule

8/23(Mon)	Introduction to the course and each other	<p>Today we will discuss why science fiction might be usefully paired with political philosophy and social science as a way to deepen and broaden our thinking about politics, society and the economy. Here is one answer to this question provided by Paul Krugman:</p> <p>So, the obvious question: what am I [Paul Krugman, Nobel Prize Winner in Economics], of all people, doing as host of this symposium [on the work of science fiction writer, Charles Stross]? Shouldn't I be writing about financial catastrophe or something?</p> <p>The long answer is that what drew me to science fiction, more than four decades ago — before I got into economics, and in fact part of the reason I went into economics — was a certain kind of possibility: the creation of fictional worlds, different from our own but not too different, as a way to play with ideas about who we are and where we're going. And I do mean "play" — not being too serious, mixing ideas about society, economics, politics, and so on with derring-do and romance is crucial to keeping things light enough to tolerate.¹</p>
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8/25(Wed)	Introduction to Speculative Fiction and Design Fiction	<p>Read The Wikipedia Article on Design Fiction plus Patently untrue: fleshy defibrillators and synchronised baseball are changing the future and find one other short piece online (could be a podcast or video) about design fiction — ideally about design fiction aiming to help us think about social, political, or economic futures. I'll ask you to provide a link and tell us about it in class.</p> <p>Watch this example of a fictional scenario Unvited Guests</p>
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Politics and Parties

8/30(Mon)	Democracy and Accountability	<p>Bruce Sterling (2011). <i>Distraction</i>. Spectra</p> <p>J.J Rousseau (1985). <i>The Government of Poland</i>. Hackett Pub Co Inc (see online Chapters 2,3,4,13)</p>
9/1(Wed)	Democracy and Accountability Workshop	<p>Explain the historical process that led to the USA ratifying a new constitution in 2050. Write the main points of the preamble of this constitution.</p>
9/6(Mon)	Labor Day No Class	
9/8(Wed)	Workshop TBA	TBA

¹(Quoted in "Salon Link")

9/13(Mon)	Scenarios and Futurism	<p>Read some reflections on futurism and the creation of scenarios from Jamais Cascio and listen to the podcast Swipe Right for Democracy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read: Future Thinking: Basics • Read: Future Thinking: Asking Questions • Read: Future Thinking: Scanning the World • Read: Future Thinking: Mapping Possibilities 1 • Read: Future Thinking: Mapping Possibilities 2 • Read: Future Thinking: Writing Scenarios • Read: Future Thinking: Three Possible Economic Models 1 • Read: Future Thinking: Three Possible Economic Models 2 • Extra: FYI, Future Thinking: Bibliography • Extra: Not required, listen to the podcast 'I build a world with fantasy master N.K. Jemisin' • Extra: The Purpose of Science Fiction:How it teaches governments—and citizens—how to understand the future of technology. • Extra: Utopia (The need for utopias) • Extra: Tomorrow Matters: Ignoring the Future Is Undermining the Present • Extra: The Climate Case for a Jobs Guarantee by Kim Stanley Robinson • Extra: Other bloomberg essays by Kim Stanley Robinson
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9/15(Wed)	Design Fiction Workshop	Focus on scenarios
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9/20(Mon)	The Political Economy	<p>Read: Kim Stanley Robinson (2017). <i>New York 2140</i>. Orbit</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read: Company of One: The Fate of Democracy in an Age of Neoliberalism • Extra: Listen to Podcast on Governing by Debt by Maurizio Lazzarato. • Extra: Read Review: Maurizio Lazzarato's Governing by Debt, by Moritz Altenried • Extra: Read The Coronavirus Is Rewriting Our Imaginations by Kim Stanley Robinson
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9/22(Wed)	The Political Economy Workshop	Exercise, "A Future Monument"
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Social Reproduction and Control

9/27(Mon)	Surveillance and Control	<p>C. Doctorow (2008). <i>Little Brother</i>. Tor Teen (download for free from http://craphound.com/littlebrother/)</p> <p>Michel Foucault (1995). <i>Discipline & Punish : The Birth of the Prison (Vintage)</i>. Reprint. Vintage. isbn: 0679752552 Chapter on "Panopticism"</p>
9/29(Wed)	Surveillance and Sous-veillance Workshop	Maybe a polling expert's memo; A prison design; A new system for behavior management in schools; A plan to nudge people to comply with COVID testing, mask wearing, and social distancing.
10/4(Mon)	Surveillance and Control	Watch <i>Minority Report</i>

- Read: [This year's economics Nobel winner invented a tool that's both brilliant and undemocratic](#)
- Extra: Watch [Richard Thaler's Nobel Prize Speech](#)
- Read: [Inside China's Vast New Experiment in Social Ranking](#)
- Read: [How the West Got China's Social Credit System Wrong](#)

10/6(Wed) Behavioral Control Workshop Scenario TBA

10/8(Fri) Project/Paper 1 Due by 5pm

The Material World and Human Society and Politics

10/11(Mon)	Scarcity and Society 1	E. Callenbach (1990). <i>Ecotopia</i> . Bantam Books B. Ollman (1977). "Marx's Vision of communism a reconstruction". In: <i>Critique: Journal of Socialist Theory</i> 8.1, pp. 4–41
10/13(Wed)	Scarcity and Society Workshop 1	Design Fiction Provocations TBA
10/18(Mon)	Freedom Post-Scarcity and Consumerism	F. Pohl and CM Kornbluth (1953). <i>The space merchants</i> H. Marcuse (1964). <i>One-dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society</i> [Introduction, Chapters 1 & 10] ² Extra, Chicken Little by Cory Doctorow (a response to Space Merchants)
10/20(Wed)	Freedom Post-Scarcity and Consumerism Workshop	Scenario Provocations TBA
10/25(Mon)	Scarcity and Society 2	U.K. Le Guin (2003). <i>The Dispossessed</i> . Harper Perennial Modern Classics Theory: Kim Stanley Robinson (2016). "Dispossessed". Unpublished Manuscript (I think written in 2016 but not 100% sure).
10/27(Wed)	Scarcity and Society 2 Workshop	Scenario Provocations TBA
11/1(Mon)	Scarcity and Society 3	Octavia E Butler (2012). <i>Parable of the Sower</i> . Vol. 1. Open Road Media (Should we agree to read the graphic novel version?) Read: What Did Cedric Robinson Mean by Racial Capitalism? Read: Racial Capitalism Extra: To Remake the World: Slavery, Racial Capitalism, and Justice Extra: What Marx Got Wrong About Capitalism: A Racial Capitalism Reading List Extra: Toward a Global History of White Supremacy

²download for free from the [Marcuse website](#)

11/3(Wed)	Scarcity and Society 3 Workshop	
11/8(Mon)	Social Stratification	A. Niccol (1997). <i>Gattaca</i> [Motion picture]. Columbia TriStar Pictures(movie)
11/10(Wed)	Scarcity and Society 3 Workshop	
11/12(Fri)	Project/Paper 2 Due by 5pm	
11/15(Mon)	Scarcity and Society 4	Cory Doctorow (2017). <i>Walkaway: A Novel</i> . Tor Books (No need to read the Epilogue) Theory: Read the review in The Economics of Cory Doctorow's Walkaway Extra: Read the discussion of <i>Walkaway</i> on <i>Crooked Timber</i> the discussion of Walkaway on Crooked Timber . Extra: More of the <i>Crooked Timber</i> posts here and here (Doctorow's own essay) .
11/17(Wed)	Scarcity and Society 4 Workshop	
11/22(Mon)	Fall Break No Class	
11/24(Wed)	Fall Break No Class	
11/29(Mon)	Feminism	Joanna Russ (2018). <i>The female man</i> . Open Road Media (first published in 1975) Kim Stanley Robinson (n.d.). "Joanna Russ, <i>The Female Man</i> ". Unpublished manuscript
12/1(Wed)	Feminism Workshop	
12/6(Mon)	Presentations Day 1	
12/8(Wed)	Presentations Day 2	
12/10(Fri)	Project/Paper 3 Due by 5 pm	

Some Readings

Becker, Howard S. (1986). *Writing for Social Scientists : How to Start and Finish Your Thesis, Book, or Article (Chicago Guides to Writing, Editin*. University Of Chicago Press. isbn: 0226041085.

Butler, Octavia E (2012). *Parable of the Sower*. Vol. 1. Open Road Media.

Callenbach, E. (1990). *Ecotopia*. Bantam Books.

Doctorow, C. (2008). *Little Brother*. Tor Teen.

Doctorow, Cory (2017). *Walkaway: A Novel*. Tor Books.

Foucault, Michel (1995). *Discipline & Punish : The Birth of the Prison (Vintage)*. Reprint. Vintage. isbn: 0679752552.

Le Guin, U.K. (2003). *The Dispossessed*. Harper Perennial Modern Classics.

Marcuse, H. (1964). *One-dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*.

Niccol, A. (1997). *Gattaca* [Motion picture]. Columbia TriStar Pictures.

Ollman, B. (1977). "Marx's Vision of communism a reconstruction". In: *Critique: Journal of Socialist Theory* 8.1, pp. 4–41.

Pohl, F. and CM Kornbluth (1953). *The space merchants*.

Robinson, Kim Stanley (2016). "Dispossessed". Unpublished Manuscript.

– (2017). *New York 2140*. Orbit.

– (n.d.). "Joanna Russ, *The Female Man*". Unpublished manuscript.

Rousseau, J.J (1985). *The Government of Poland*. Hackett Pub Co Inc.

Russ, Joanna (2018). *The female man*. Open Road Media.

Sterling, Bruce (2011). *Distraction*. Spectra.