

# On Teaching Futuristics: Utopian Thought and Non-Traditional Students

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As a longtime teacher of college-credit courses in futuristics I have had to confront two special challenges: First, inclusion of material about utopia, a subject many students meet with scorn. And second, the presence in class of working-class men and women, many of whom are fatalistic, and generally less well informed than they might wish. I have learned much of value confronting these two challenges, and I share below some insights of possible value to others drawn to help futuristics enlarge its place and standing in the Academy.

1) Teaching about Utopia.\* To judge very cautiously from conversations with others who teach futuristics, the idea of utopia is conspicuous by its absence from the curricula.

Some teachers unfortunately think the concept passé. This misperception is refuted, however, by the seemingly endless call for Vision (a major characteristic of all utopian designs) from high-minded politicians (especially in an election year), media pundits, corporate consultants, clergy, and others whose role it is to sound the needs of the public. People everywhere appear hungry for ever finer ideas about a better society, and sound utopian thinking helps address this need.

Still others fear a contagion effect. That is, they may fear students will associate the "U" word - utopia - with the stigmatized "S" word - socialism - much to the detriment of their course. To be sure, narrow-minded critics of utopian thinking like to represent socialism as

"the most influential utopian idea of the 19th and 20th centuries ... [one] which has failed everywhere."<sup>1</sup> But this mis-perception is refuted by scholars who help us distinguish among different types of socialism (democratic versus totalitarian, etc.). They help thereby redeem both worthy concepts - utopia and socialism - from malevolent slander.<sup>2</sup>

A third plausible explanation for neglect of the concept has certain teachers wary of utopia's alleged provincialism, oppressive conformity, and haughty intolerance of deviation. They associate utopias only with "an uncomplicated warm nest from which all the noise of the real world is excluded."<sup>3</sup> But this misperception ignores the existence of many and varied utopian blue-prints, only a few of which resemble small self-righteous and self-centered communities.

Finally, some of the neglect of the concept may reflect a most revealing absence of anything valuable to say. That is, as a leader of the American Psychological Association ruefully noted in his 1998 Presidential Address, "Social Science now finds itself in almost total darkness about the qualities that make life most worth living."<sup>4</sup> Too many of our lectures, in short, may only mirror a serious imbalance in our mind set, with far more attention being paid by us to pathologies than to sources of strength and fulfillment.

Happily, new positive teaching aids can help any teacher of futuristics eager to get on with it. The 1997

\* A longer version appears in Didsbury, Jr., Howard F., editor, *Thinking Creatively in Turbulent Times*, published by the World Future Society, Bethesda, MD., 2004. pp. 296-301.

edition of the two volume work, *Foundations of Futures Studies*, by Wendell Bell, provides a unique assessment of various utopian blueprints, and makes a strong case for moral gains possible from studying them.<sup>5</sup> In 2003 I edited a collection of 47 original essays chosen explicitly for their attention to pragmatic and affordable reform options (*Viable Utopian Ideas: Shaping a Better World*). Students in my futures courses press me for the titles of more such publications, as they are eager for clues for crafting a finer future.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, in 2004 I edited four volumes of original essays on key aspects of the future that highlight many practical blueprints for doing things better.<sup>7</sup>

Where utopias per se are concerned, you cannot do better than Wendell Bell's treatment of same in his *Far less friendly, but no less valuable* is a January 2000 magazine article by an eminent physicist intent on exposing the perils lurking behind five major types of popular utopian blueprints: "We had better watch out for people selling these utopias: each of these visions abandons one or more of the grand causes - equality, liberty, and the quality of life and work - that motivated the best utopian ideas of the past."<sup>8</sup>

A bold and immediately controversial book, *NonZero*, sounds like "must" reading for any seriously concerned with utopian questions. Its author, Robert Wright, argues that Game Theory explains both natural and human history - on indefinitely into the future. He believes an on-going "win-win" dynamic assures the continued growth of complexity in both scope and depth, a scenario likely to cheer otherwise cautious utopians.<sup>9</sup>

2) Advice from the Trenches. Having incorporated utopian material into all of my sociology courses for the past 42 years, I would like now to share three pieces of pointed advice.

First, I recommend extensive use in class of one's own explorations of utopian projects. I tell students about my research trips in the early 1970s to the British Garden Cities and New Towns. I discuss my consulting work in the late 1970s for HUD that had me assessing innovations developers were required by HUD to introduce into America's Planned Communities.

I review my involvement in the 1980s with urban communes and Hippie homesteads. I show slides I took during a visit in the mid-1980s to Paulo Solari's Archology building site outside of Phoenix, Arizona. And I talk about my seven research visits since 1971 to Israeli kibbutzim.

Nowadays I emphasize my on-going effort to help labor unions enlarge their vision of themselves, especially as this involves utilizing the awesome potential of computers and telecommunications - a key ingredient in new formulas for utopian gains.<sup>10</sup> Here, as with all of my classroom processing of my own experiences I strive to tell the whole story, warts and all, the better to underline how complex and challenging are real-world efforts at utopia-building.<sup>11</sup>

Second, I recommend tracing linkages between classic utopias of old and their modern adaptations. I call attention, for example, to Edward Bellamy's remarkably popular 1888 fictional state-socialist utopia, set in 2000CE.<sup>12</sup> Then I trace its link to an on-going effort around America (as in Ithaca, New York) to substitute a barter system - one only made possible by modern computers - for a capitalist cash economy. Bellamy's barter idea floundered in the late 1800s for being too complicated, a challenge easily handled today by conventional computer-based Excel spreadsheets.

Third, I recommend finding and sticking with utopian literature that "speaks" to today's student. Outstanding here is a novel I have used since its 1975 publication in nearly every futures course I have taught since then. *Ecotopia*, authored by Ernest Callenbach, raises consciousness about what might go into a total system overhaul. It offers a thorough plan for an ecologically sound, democratic, creative, and liberated society, a plan that stirs some of the best utopian dialogue I have known in class over four decades.<sup>13</sup>

Where magazines are concerned, issues of *The Futurist* (published by the World Future Society) win accolades from students open to fresh possibilities. Its eye-catching graphics, wide range of topics, and reader-friendly copy make it a sound aid to utopian thinking.<sup>14</sup>

Similarly, a young publication, YES! A Journal of Positive Futures, stands out with its positive air, its case studies of successes, and its unabashedly utopian air.<sup>15</sup>

Naturally, I also draw on a wide range of political publications, deliberately ranging from the Far Left through to the Far Right, as the study of utopian ideas is fundamentally an exercise in political theory usefully mixed with ideology, philosophy, social science insights, values explication, and Vision (often with a strong humanist and/or religious flavor).

Summary. In a very insightful assessment of our times, Andrew Delbanco identifies the absence of utopianism as the "root of our modern melancholy. We live in an age of unprecedented wealth, but in the realm of narrative and symbol, we are deprived. And so the ache for meaning goes unrelieved."<sup>16</sup> Utopian thought - and action - offer some relief. Many of us were attracted originally to futuristics by its seeming ability to help us get beyond the limits we had set for ourselves. Utopian thought has that same attraction, that same potential - provided we do our very best with it. At present too many of us teaching futuristics may make less of utopian reasoning than is good for any of us - or for the future. A small, but valuable start at reform would have us do much more.

3) Teaching Working Class Adults.\*\*  
Negative stereotypes have it that working-class unionists are not a very promising group for a college-credit course in futuristics (or much else, for that matter). Determined to put the lie to that costly image, in 1974 the American Labor Movement (in the form of the AFL-CIO) opened the nation's only union-directed residential undergraduate college-degree program. Housed at the George Meany Center for Labor Studies on a 240-bed campus in Silver Spring, Maryland, the National Labor College has ever since had unionists resident on campus for two week terms, followed by a six-month interval, all of whom do an impressive amount of earnest course work on a correspondence basis in the interim.

Despite carrying a full work load back home all year long with their unions, and trying to maintain a decent family life, the vast majority of matriculates (average age, 35) successfully complete the program in three or so years, an accomplishment many previously thought not a likely part of their lives this time around. To the great pride of their immediate families and their union employers (and sponsors), nearly 600 Meany Center alumni now boast a Bachelor's Degree in Labor Studies and many go on to pursue different types of Masters Degrees.

One year after the Center college-degree program began in 1974 I was invited to teach a basic sociology course, and then another in Industrial Sociology, an honor I enjoyed for over a quarter century until my resignation in 2000. Quickly impressed with the eagerness in class of my working-class co-learners, I sought and received permission in 1988 to introduce a third elective, a college credit course in Futuristics.

From 1988 through 2000 I created and taught a 3-credit course in Futuristics to about 40 working-class adults annually (or nearly 500 en Toto). Based at the AFL-CIO George Meany Center for Labor Studies in Silver Spring, Maryland, it was the first of its kind in the 200-year history of the American Labor Movement. I learned several valuable lessons which I share below.

Having first introduced the subject to college students at my home base, Drexel University (Philadelphia) back in 1980, I thought in 1988 I could merely tweak the course a bit, and adapt the syllabus and readings with little or no problem. How wrong I was! The challenge here proved formidable.

To begin with, unlike my Drexel undergraduates, my union adult co-learners had little or no formal background: Few had read or even knew about Alvin Toffler's best seller, Future Shock. Few had any familiarity with classic dystopian works like Aldous Huxley's Brave New World or George Orwell's 1984. Even fewer knew any of the utopian literature, even that of

<sup>\*\*</sup> A much longer version appeared in my book, *CyberUnion: Transforming Labor through Computer Technology* (Armonk, NY: M.E.Sharpe, 1999).

the Church, albeit most dimly sensed that much of the ideological conflict that had animated the '60s and '70s entailed profound disagreements about the preferable future(s) and how to get there from here.

To compound this problem, my union co-learners - unlike my Drexel undergrads (who were 15 to 20 years younger on average) - were initially very resistant to the sort of venture-some thinking required in a futures course. Accustomed to a world of harsh realities, frequent disappointments, daily heartache, and defensive cynicism, many were initially reluctant to engage in the "willing suspension of disbelief" that William James identified as a requisite for fresh learning.

Every year between 1988 and 2000 (when I left that faculty) I learned from course evaluations and frank feedback a little bit more about how to do a futures course better. I now approach the challenge with seven major tools, all of which I commend to your attention.

First, I encourage hope by highlighting historical matters of which my students have little or no prior knowledge. To counter the bleak view with which many begin the course, I review the extraordinary progress we have made as a species in extending our life span, raising the level of well being, and strengthening the infrastructure of governance and civility. Taking care not to ignore painful gaps in equity and the atrocities that mar the front-page daily, I help my co-learners process their many grievances with run-away capitalism and other mortal threats to the world's well being. I go on, however, to emphasize my belief that more has been gained than lost in recent centuries, a trend line that I think we have it in our power to extend for time indefinite - provided we find the willpower, creativity, and capacity to care enough about one another.

Second, I review recent well-known successes of major unions in this or that organizing drive or political campaign - here in the USA or abroad. I emphasize the long-range planning entailed in such campaigns, and I identify such planning as a key component of futuristics. I also discuss how FORTUNE 500 companies and all major branches of Federal, state, and local

government make extensive use of futuristics. I also talk about my occasional consulting with this union or that eager to explore ideas with a professional forecaster.

Third, I refer over and again to the democratic dimension in futuristics, emphasizing thereby their responsibility for becoming major players in helping to decide our future(s). I reject the notion that there is any one future to be predicted, as in the absurdity of the paper's daily horoscope column. Instead, I work closely with them in explicating probable, possible, preferable, and preventable futures. We assess the strengths and weaknesses of each, but only after first uncovering and weighing the major values underlying each - and I link all of this to futuristics. We make the future in the present, I maintain, either through acts of commission or omission, and the responsibility - especially in one of the most advanced democracies the world has ever known - is fundamentally ours!

Fourth, I put special emphasis on mind-boggling matters, the better to get students to re-assess their unexamined assumptions and struggle to take an open-mind approach. Futurists, I explain, are not optimists or pessimists so much as they are possibilists. Giving Isaac Asimov credit for this thought, I use it to segue to science-fiction notions that challenge much conventional thinking; e.g., cyborgs, terra-forming Mars, inter-planetary travel, etc.

Lest my co-learners privately dismiss this as dreamy fiction, I also highlight science fact developments that are almost as fantastic as those dreamt up by Asimov and his creative fellows. We explore biotech "miracles," the prospects where Nanotechnology is concerned, the possible impact of wearable computers and personal Intelligent Agents on our lives, and so forth and so on.

Fifth, I explain the tools we have in futuristics for gathering data (Delphi Polls, Expert-Genius Interviews, large-scale polling projects, computer processing of massive data banks, etc.). I also discuss the tools we have for assessing impacts of developments; e.g., technology assessment techniques, social indicators research, computer simulations, etc. Special attention is paid to tools we have for evaluating

forecasts, and learning from their fate. Above all, however, I focus on the values inherent in reliance on this tool or than one, and to the transferability of any of the tools to their special forecasting needs.

Sixth, I take great care in my choice of literature. Trial-and-error have taught me that the books must be engaging, clear, short, and relevant. As well, it helps if they are available in an inexpensive paperback edition.

I use *Creating a New Civilization*, by Alvin and Heidi Toffler. Unlike much of Toffler's writing, this thin volume is cogent and compelling. I also draw on *Beyond Humanity*, a 1997 paperback by Gregory S. Paul and Earl D. Cox, easily one of the most mind stretching books in futuristics. Their forecast of what they call an Extraordinary Future, one predicated on the securement soon of artificial life (far beyond artificial intelligence), very advanced robotics, and Nanotechnology impacts, truly takes forecasting where it has seldom if ever gone as well.

I prepare my own chapter-by-chapter true-false open-book take-home quizzes to accompany my texts. Co-learners thank me for this in course evaluations, as it helps me highlight what I want them to focus on, and they take pleasure in getting high scores week after week. Each quiz features two write-in questions that ask what surprised, or pleased, or dismayed, or puzzled you the most in the assigned reading.

Finally, I make a point in dosing the course of connecting it to one over-arching possibility that could just make Labor's renewal a better-than-ever prospect. I call this scenario the CyberUnion Prospect, and use it to pull together many strands of the semester's work. A CyberUnion stands out in its employ of futuristics (a perspective), InfoTech (cutting-edge tools), services (cradle to grave), and traditions (Labor's soul).

Employing futuristics, a CyberUnion will replace the narrow "putting-out-fires" orientation of most unions with a longer perspective, one that encompasses the here-and-now, but extends 5 and 10 years beyond it. It will replace a narrow tolerance for shopworn communication tools (newsletters, mailings, etc.) with a

high-tech perspective, one that upgrades familiar tools (as in adding color to the newsletter even as it moves to the cutting-edge (e-mail for all; listserves for many; etc.). It will replace hollow observances of union traditions with wholehearted celebration, the better to ensure that labor's high tech gains are always accompanied by comparable high touch advances, e.g., a local's history and traditions could be "captured" in a memorable CD-ROM provided to all.

These attributes should help put labor unions on a par with the Cyber Corps rapidly coming their way. They should be able to get Americans to think of unions, and not just of corporations, when they think about successful cutting-edge 21st Century organizations. They should send the message that labor is finally and actually "with it," a message of import for the union's potential and actual membership, the media, the public, and the business community alike. And they should empower the rank-and-file as never before.

Naturally, I had each class do an anonymous evaluation of every aspect of the course, especially the books and the essay assignments that guided their learning over the six month interval between the week-long start of the course and the one wrap-up session with which we closed it out. I took their assessments quite seriously, so much so that I had no hesitation about considering my adult enrollees as co-learners with me in a joint intellectual (and spiritual) adventure. An elective course, Futuristics generally got a full enrollment, and in the hallway scuttlebutt apparently ranked very highly.

Trade unionists are organic "futurists," devoted as they are to grievance-resolution, collective bargaining, and political influence, each a profound exercise in making the future in the present. All the more important is their matriculation in a college-level course that surfaces much that they need to know if they are to strengthen their record as future-shapers. I am pleased to have pioneered here, and I hope to soon learn of many more such efforts where ever free trade unionism is struggling to help create a world closer to our heart's desire.

Summary. We can rapidly and significantly improve our teaching of futuristics by doing

more with the concept of viable utopian ideas, and by reaching out to meet our non-traditional students more than half way. The need is great, the rewards substantial, and the stakes could not be higher.

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### Notes

1. Weinberg, Steven. "Five and a Half Utopias." *The Atlantic Monthly*, January, 2000. P.108.
2. See, for example, *Whose Millennium? Theirs or Ours?* New York: Monthly Review Press, 1999. See also Schwartz, Hillel. *Century's End*. New York: Doubleday, 1990; Strozier, Charles B. and Michael Flynn, eds. *The Year 2000*. New York: New York University Press, 1997.
3. Wagar, W. Warren. *The City of Man*. Baltimore, MD.: Penguin, 1967 ed., p.14.
4. Seligman, Martin, as quoted in "Why do people benefit from unfounded optimism?" by Terence Monmancey, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, January 24, 2000. p.C-1.
5. Bell, Wendell. *Foundations of Future Studies*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Press, 1997. Volumes 1, See also Ian Todd and Michael Wheeler, *Utopia*. New York: Harmony Books, 1978.
6. Shostak, A., ed. *Viable Utopian Ideas: Shaping a Better World*. Armonk, NY: M.E.Sharpe, 2003. On the back jacket, Peter Bishop, Director of the Masters Program in Futuristics, Clear Lake City, Texas, wrote - "If we are to achieve the society we all yearn for, we much have more vision talk.... [The writers] are focusing our eyes on the distant and positive horizon where we need to go." See also Shostak, A., ed. *Futuristics: Looking Ahead*. Langhorne, PA: Chelsea House, 2004.
7. On the back jacket, Clement Bezold, President, Institute for Alternative Futures, wrote - "It is critical that young people develop both a sense of what the future might hold and the skills for continually checking/updating their sense of the future. ... a sense of the future and for learning how to update that sense of the future.
8. Weinberg, op. cit. "Five and a Half Utopias." *The Atlantic Monthly*, January, 2000. P.108.
9. Wright, Robert. *NonZero: The Logic of Human Destiny*. New York: Pantheon, 2000.
10. Shostak, Arthur B. *CyberUnion: Empowering Labor through Computer Technology*. Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1999.
11. Shostak, Arthur B., Ed. *The CyberUnion Handbook: Empowering Labor through Computer Technology*. Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2002.
12. Bellamy, Edward. *Looking Backward*. Cambridge, MASS: Harvard University Press, 1967ed.
13. Callenbach, Ernest. *Ecotopia*. New York: Bantam, 1977ed. See also Maius de Geus, *Ecological Utopias: Envisioning the Sustainable Society*. Concord, MA: Paul & Company, 1999.
14. Available from the World Future Society, 7910 Woodmont Ave, Suite 450, Bethesda, MD 20814 (1-800-989-8274), or at major bookstores.
15. Available from YES!, P.O. Box 10818, Bainbridge Island, WA 98110 (1-800-937-4451), or at major bookstores. See also HOPE magazine: Inspiring People, Encouraging Change. ([www.hopemag.com](http://www.hopemag.com))
16. Delbanco, Andrew, *The Real American Dream*, Cambridge, MASS: Harvard University Press, 1999. P.107.