Star Trek and Society

Professor Jason Barr
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Office Hours: Tuesday and Thursday, 5:30 pm – 6:30 pm (or by appointment—just shoot me an email and we can pick a time to zoom or meet in person)
Course website: Canvas

Course Time and Location: Tuesday & Thursday, 4:00 PM - 5:20 PM, Englehard 209

Course Overview: In 1969, the original Star Trek series was canceled after only three seasons. Yet, it has become one of America's most important cultural phenomena. Created by Gene Roddenberry, the show was meant to be not only an action adventure to the stars but also a critical discussion of vital social issues, including racism, economic justice, and war and peace. The show and its offspring, such as Star Trek: The Next Generation, have engaged in a 50-year-long dialogue concerning the past, present, and future of humanity.

This course will use the various Star Trek series to discuss important societal topics. We will discuss how Star Trek engages with significant historical events, including the major wars (both hot and cold) of the 20th century, the economic ideas of utopia and equality, computerization and society, and how the economics of the future might be structured. To keep things focused, the course will only discuss episodes (and one movie) from the original series (TOS) and The Next Generation (TNG).

The main learning goals of this course are to improve critical thinking skills and to gain a better understanding of 20th-century history, society, and economics. The readings will include writings by important authors and thinkers, as well as academic writings about Star Trek. These readings, along with class lectures and discussions, and Star Trek episodes will tease out how both the series and history itself can be seen as an ongoing dialogue or “dialectic” between the past, present, and future. Our current lives have been shaped in large part by our past, and in order to gain a better sense of who we are and who we might become, we can use Star Trek as a lens through which to view the world.

Readings and TV Episodes

All TV episodes are on Paramount+ (a streaming service with a monthly fee):
https://www.paramountplus.com/.

If readings are not available online, they will be posted on Canvas. You are required to read EVERYTHING that is listed on the schedule BEFORE you attend class (recommended readings and episodes are not required, just for your interest). It is essential that you bring each day’s reading with you to class. Digital format is fine. In some cases below, pages or chapters for the readings will be assigned at least a week before they will be discussed in class. Please note, the readings and/or episodes may be adjusted as the semester progresses.

Note on readings and episodes: To keep the time commitment manageable each week will normally have you viewing one episode (45 mins) and two readings or two episodes and one reading. However, there will be some variation around this trend based on the topics.
Grading and Assignments
The percentage breakdown for the course will be as follows:
- Assignment #1: Short paper 15%
- Assignment #2: Short paper 15%
- Assignment #3: Group presentation with short paper 18%
- Assignment #4: Group presentation with short paper 18%
- Final Paper: Medium-sized paper 20%
- Class Participation: Required 14%

Class Participation and Attendance
Attending class is not optional. Class lectures not only include discussions on your assigned readings but also the material presented is what you will be writing about. In-class participation is essential to this discussion-driven course. Any student who misses four or more sessions through any combination of excused and unexcused absences will not earn credit in this class. Such students should withdraw to avoid getting an F.

Academic Integrity, Plagiarism, and Cheating
As an academic community dedicated to the creation, dissemination, and application of knowledge, Rutgers University is committed to fostering an intellectual and ethical environment based on the principles of academic integrity. Academic integrity is essential to the success of the University’s educational and research missions, and violations of academic integrity constitute serious offenses against the entire academic community. The entire Academic Integrity Policy can be found here: https://academicintegrity.rutgers.edu/sites/default/files/pdfs/current.pdf

All students are required to sign the Rutgers Academic Integrity Pledge and the Rutgers Honor Pledge on all assignments: “On my honor, I have neither received nor given any unauthorized assistance on this examination/assignment.”

Course Schedule
Abbreviations: TOS=The Original Series, TNG=The Next Generation = TNG, S = Season, E = Episode.

The course is divided into six major topics or themes, and within each one, there will be one or more lectures within those themes.

I. Introduction to Star Trek
II. Ideology and the Individual
III. Engaging with History
IV. What is Utopia and Can we Achieve it?
V. Technology, Humanity, and Utopia
VI. The Economics of the Future

Please note that the following lecture schedule and readings are subject to change based on how the semester progresses. You will be given ample notice regarding any changes to readings or assignment dates.
Week 1

Jan 17: A History of the Franchise
Jan 19: A View of the Future from the 20th Century: Major Course Themes

**Episode:** TOS:S1:E8 Arena

**Recommended Episodes:** TNG:S1:E1&E2 Encounter at Farpoint
**Recommended Reading:** Interview with Gene Roddenberry (on Canvas)

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Week 2

Jan 24: Adam Smith and the Individual
Jan 26: Marx & Engels: Socialism and the Greater Good

**Episode:** TNG:S2:E9: Measure of a Man

**Readings:**
- Chapter 3 on Adam Smith, *The Worldly Philosophers*
- Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*

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Week 3

Jan 31: The Great Depression & World War II
Feb 2: Ideology and Hate

**Episodes:**
- TOS:S1:E28: City on Edge of Forever
- TOS:S3:E15: Let This Be Your Last Battlefield


**Recommended Episodes:** TOS:S3:E7: Day of the Dove.

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Week 4

Feb 7: The Cold War
Feb 9: The Vietnam War

**Episode:** TOS:S1:E26: Errand of Mercy

**Readings:**


**Week 5**

Feb 14: Empire, Colonialism & American Hegemony  
Feb 16: The Prime Directive


*Episodes:*  
- TNG: S3:E4: Who Watches the Watchers  
- TOS:S3:E3: The Paradise Syndrome

**Recommended Episodes:** “Mirror, Mirror” “Bread and Circuses” TNG: The Terrorism Episode


**Week 6**

Feb 28: What is Utopia?  
Mar 2: Star Trek and the Garden of Eden


*Readings:*  
- Thomas Moore’s Utopia (pages TBA)  

**Recommended Episodes:** TOS:S3:E20: The Way to Eden, TOS:S2:E5: The Apple, TOS: This Side of Paradise. TNG:S1:E8: Justice

**Week 7**

Mar 7: Either guest lecture or first-half recap/catch-up.  
Mar 9: Oral Presentations

Week 8

Mar 14 & 16: **Spring Break**


Week 9

Feb 21: The Collapse of the Soviet Union and the Fall of Communism
Feb 23: The End of History?

*Episode:* Discuss *The Undiscovered Country*

*Readings*


*Recommended Episodes:*

Week 10

Mar 21: Nazism and the Engineering of Utopia?
Mar 23 Hayek, Planning, and “Serfdom”

*Episodes:* TOS: S2:E21:Patterns of Force

*Readings:* Hayek, F. *The Road to Serfdom* (pages TBA)


Week 11

Mar 28: Happiness, and Society
Mar 30: Happiness, Technology, and Utopia

*Readings:*


*Episode:* TOS S1:E22: Return of the Archons

*Recommended Episodes:* *TOS:S1:E7: What are Little Girls Made Of?*

*Recommended Readings:*


Week 12

Apr 4: What’s Dystopia and are we heading there?
Apr 6: The Borg and our Future?

Episodes:

- TNG:S3:E26: Best of Both Worlds Part I
- TNG:S4:E1: Best of Both Worlds Part II

Readings:


Week 13

Apr 11: The Population Bomb?
Apr 13: Factor Substitution and Infinite Resources?

Episode: TOS:S3:E16:The Mark of Gideon

Readings:

- Paul Erlich, The Population Bomb (pages TBA)
- Julian Simon, The Ultimate Resource (pages TBA)


Week 14

Apr 18: Money in the Future
Apr 20: Work in the Future

Episode: TNG:S1:E:2: The Neutral Zone
Readings: *Trekonomics*, Chapters 1, 2 & 3

*Recommended Movie: TNG: First Contact*


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**Week 15**

Apr 25: Oral Presentations

Apr 27: Wrap up and Review