Course Outline

This course examines our historical understanding of work; from the Biblical identification of work (Avoda) with slavery (Avdot) to the industrial revolution and the Proletarian revolts of the 19th and 20th centuries. While there were always poor people in the world, the industrial revolution and the social process of production created a new and uniquely modern class of poor working men and women, i.e., the Masses. While the conditions of the latter improved considerably in the West, their universal struggle for justice still divides nations and societies. The reality of personal and collective suffering associated with the structure of modern work continues to challenge our thinking about individual identity, personal dignity, social fairness, and the potential for self-realization and well-being. It was Freud who famously argued in Civilization and Its Discontents that one of the two major obstacles to the realization of civilization’s order is the individual’s inherent dislike of work (that leisure is our lot). The other obstacle being the individual’s inherent susceptibility for emotions over reason (that we are fundamentally irrational). In fact, the main function of modern higher-education, we must admit, is to ensure that students, if successful, will never need to get their hands dirty, i.e., do manual labor.

Against the above philosophical, religious, political, and social assumptions that paint physical labor and the working life as a form of injustice, misfortune, and the province of those who are caught in the lower realm of existence, this course seeks to understand the redemptive nature of physical labor that is contained in the intimate relationship with the earth and the process of production. We will examine both the limited and “minor” utopian accounts that
envision the gradual and pragmatic liberation of workers from the oppressive and unjust reality of modern life, as well as the “major” utopian accounts that envisioned permanent universal solutions to the moral and social problems that always inflicted collective existence (“hell is other people”). Unfortunately, and maybe predictably, the latter accounts found their manifestation through the ideologies of Nazism and Totalitarian Communism which brought about the enslavement of tens of millions of innocent individuals and the murder of countless others. Here lies Utopia’s inherent self-contradiction. Its dreams of improving the human condition usually result in infinite misery and violations.

In this context we will isolate and examine the arguments put forward by as diverse thinkers as Marcuse, Marx-Engels, Fourier, Tolstoy, A.D. Gordon, Buber, Dewey, and Emerson who all championed the “literature of the poor, the philosophy of the street, and the meaning of household life.” In particular, the course will concentrate on A.D. Gordon’s “redemption through labor” philosophy under which, in my childhood, I lived and worked in Israel. His philosophy was part of the socialist and Zionist “minor” utopia in which he argued that the revival of both personal and national identities was necessarily and directly connected to physical labor and production. His vision was realized in many agricultural communes in Israel (kibbutzim) and was praised by many as the example par excellence of future living. We will put great emphasis on the possible reasons for the Gordonian utopia’s failure during the 1980s and the nearly total destruction of Western Labor and workers parties and unions.

The practical goal of the course is to allow students to overcome the long Western assumption that human development or progress is necessarily analogues with an escape upwards – away from the interactive and “vulgar” nature of the physical world. The ideational objective of the course is to explore the long history of insightful ideas by those thinkers and practitioners who found the “return to the ordinary” through their work in education, agriculture, law, work, medicine, and politics, redemptive and liberating.

Reading:
1. Charles Fourier, The Theory of the Four Movements
2. Friedrich Engels, Socialism Utopian and Scientific
3. Martin Buber, Paths in Utopia
5. Jay Winter, Dreams of Peace and Freedom
6. Selected reading on Blackboard

Attendance: The class does not have an attendance policy. The student is required to attend all classes and related activities. Each student is entitled to one “moral holiday” – use it wisely. Poor attendance will affect your final grade.

Grade: Final grades will be based on your participation in a class project, research papers, and presentations.

Note: All usage of cell phones or the checking of messages during class is forbidden. Usage of laptops is permitted only for legitimate note taking or assigned class projects. Continuous violations will affect your final grade.