

CARD 400: Cardinal Directions Senior Seminar
Spring 2021, Online Section 1
MWF, 1:40-2:50pm (Starting March 15)

Professor: Adam Kotsko, akotsko@noctrl.edu
Office: Virtual office hours, by appointment only

Course Description

This senior seminar serves as a capstone for the General Education program at North Central and provides students with the opportunity to reflect on their liberal arts education in the context of an interdisciplinary theme or problem chosen by the instructor. For this version of the class, our focus will be on the question of utopia vs. dystopia. In both popular culture and everyday conversation, fatalism about the future is common. Where our grandparents and (to a lesser extent) our parents expected a world of endless technological advancement and abundance, we are more likely to envision a dystopian future of environmental destruction and unbridgeable inequality. In this course, we will ask whether it is still possible to envision a more utopian future while acknowledging the very serious obstacles—political, economic, and environmental—that stand in the way of such an outcome. In doing so, we will touch on every area of the liberal arts, taking advantage of the skills and expertise every student has achieved through the course of their college education.

Learning Outcomes

Students who successfully complete this course will

1. actively engage in collaborative problem-solving.
2. integrate approaches of more than one discipline to formulate new or tackle existing complex questions.
3. reflect on the contributions of the liberal arts curriculum to their education and future goals.
4. engage in constructive dialogue in discussing and debating issues of civic importance.

Course Readings

Our primary reading for this course will be Peter Frase, *Four Futures: Life After Capitalism* (Verso, 2016; ISBN: 917-1-78168-813-7), which is available from our online bookstore as well as many other sources. Other readings will be provided via Blackboard. We will also be watching a film, which is widely available through streaming services or on DVD.

Assignments and Grading

Each week, we will have synchronous video sessions on Monday and Wednesday and participate in discussion threads on Friday (and over the weekend). I believe that all education is ultimately student-driven, and that should be the case above all for a class made up of college seniors. Through the readings and assignments, I am providing a framework, but the direction of our discussions will depend on your own efforts, individually and collaboratively. Accordingly, class participation will make up a substantial portion of your final grade: 40% for synchronous discussion and 20% for asynchronous discussion forums. In addition, a reflection paper will count for 10% of your final grade and a group presentation will make up the remaining 30%

(with 10% stemming from the quality of the presentation as a whole and 20% from each student's individual contribution).

Class participation presupposes careful and thorough preparation and serious intellectual involvement in class discussion. Students should come to class not only having read the text through, but having underlined, taken notes, and scanned over the marked text at least one additional time after the initial reading. On the basis of such preparation, students should be prepared for an intensive discussion focused on the texts or other materials assigned for that day, whether in synchronous or asynchronous format.

You must also come prepared to class, and that means having the course text in front of you, along with annotations or notes. Hard copies are strongly preferred, especially for assigned books available from the college bookstore, but if electronic copies are used, you should plan to mark them and/or take notes as you read.

My expectation for participation in synchronous sessions is that every member of class will be able to contribute with remarks and citations that are on-topic and reflect solid preparation for class. In recognition that the large class size and Zoom format may make it difficult to get into the discussion, I expect that everyone will make **at least four substantial contributions per week**, spread out over both days of synchronous discussion. A student who meets that baseline will receive a grade in the **B range** for their participation portion. Students whose contribution is notably lacking—for instance, those who speak very little, who give no evidence of having done the reading carefully, who consistently change the topic in a disruptive way, or whose primary contributions are jokes or personal anecdotes—will receive a participation grade in the **C or D range**. Students who distinguish themselves through some particular service—such as consistently contributing new topics that shape the discussion, serving as a resource for navigating the text, or making a special effort to draw in quieter classmates—will qualify themselves for a participation grade in the **A range**.

Given the limitations of the online format, the professor reserves the right, in dialogue with students, to vary the format of class with the goal of building up the group's rapport or comfort level with the software interface. If such experiments deviate significantly from the norm of open-ended group discussion, the expectations will be specified ahead of time, in consultation with students. The most likely format change is to divide the class into two groups, each of which will discuss among themselves one day a week while the other group watches.

The baseline condition for class participation is of course attendance at our meetings. Absences not only affect the individual student, but the entire group, and the same is true of habitual lateness. Lateness will count against a student's participation for that session, and in extreme cases will be treated as the equivalent of an absence. During a normal semester, my policy is that absences result in a series of increasing grade penalties, and absences equaling more than 20% of class sessions would be grounds for failing the course. Given the realities of the pandemic, I am loosening that policy to the extent that all excess absences can be made up and there is no automatic trigger of failure.

There is no need to make up your first absence. (If students have perfect attendance, however, then in cases where a student is at the threshold between two grades, the professor will go with the higher one.) After that point, students must carry out a make-up activity per absence in order to get the participation points corresponding to that session. Absences will normally require watching a recording of the class session in question and either (1) writing a half-page, single-spaced response addressing at least two specific lines of conversation from the class or (2) scheduling a meeting of at least ten minutes with the professor to discuss the reading in light of the recorded session.

Students who do a make-up will receive participation points proportionate to their average participation grade for the two weeks leading up to the missed class—this is to make sure that you cannot actually improve your grade by skipping class and doing individual make-ups.

If multiple students miss the same class, I encourage them to schedule a group make-up discussion with the professor in order to better approximate the experience they missed. If the format of the class missed differs significantly from an open discussion, please check with the professor on how best to make up that session.

Summaries must be completed and emailed to the professor **within one week** of the absence being made up, by class time. In-person meetings must be scheduled **within two weeks** of the absence being made up. In emergency circumstances (such as extended illness), these deadlines may be extended. Grades of incomplete (“I”) are also possible in such cases.

Students requiring additional accommodations are urged to discuss this matter with the professor as early as possible in the semester and to devise a formal written plan in consultation with the relevant institutional offices. In line with the Shimer School (my home department)’s policies on attendance, accommodations will be made with the aim of allowing a student to attend at least 80% of class sessions synchronously and without placing undue burdens on either the accommodated student or the faculty member.

Discussion board postings will take the place of synchronous video meetings each weekend. There will be a reading or video associated with each discussion, which should be completed in advance of posting. The professor will provide at least one prompt to start discussion, but students are free to start their own threads if desired. If you see that there are more than 5 or 6 threads already posted, please write a response rather than posting a fresh thread; those who post a fresh thread one week should take a week or two off to give others a chance.

I expect everyone to contribute around 300 words total, to respond to other students, and to cite examples and quotations from course readings. Students who meet this baseline requirement will qualify for a grade in the **B range** for the asynchronous participation points. Students who make a good-faith effort to generate, sustain, or develop an organic discussion (as opposed to simply checking off the boxes and collecting their points) will qualify for a grade in the **A range**. Students who fail to meet the minimum requirements can expect a lower grade. The final week’s discussion board session will be the only opportunity to make up missed discussion points—more details will be provided at the time. Every discussion will be considered closed at 11:59pm on the final day listed on the syllabus for that discussion board.

The **reflection paper** will consist of a mid-term paper reflecting on how the skills and knowledge you have gained in college would apply to the scenarios from Frase's *Four Futures*. This paper must be 2-3 *full* pages in length, double-spaced with standard margins, in Microsoft Word (.doc or .docx) format, and will count for 10% of the student's final grade. (In case of technical difficulties submitting in the required format, you may use another format for the sake of meeting the deadline, but must resubmit in the required in order to receive comments and a grade.)

Students will be required to post a full draft of their paper to the Blackboard discussion board for peer review during one of our Friday asynchronous discussions (see schedule below); the final draft will be due a little over a week later (under "Assignment Submission"). Students who fail to post a draft will lose half their discussion points for that week, but can still get credit for commenting on others' papers. Final papers turned in within 24 hours of the deadline will receive a 5% grade penalty on the assignment; papers turned in within a week of the deadline will receive a 10% grade penalty, with an additional 10% penalty for each additional week (or portion of a week) the paper is late.

The **final group presentation** will bring together groups of 3-5 students with a range of different majors, who will choose one specific topic or question related to post-scarcity and show how their majors and/or anticipated professions can address that topic or question, both individually and together. This presentation will account for 30% of the final grade, with 10% coming from an overall assessment of the group presentation as a whole and 20% coming from the individual student's own contribution.

Details of both assignments will be distributed via a handout later in the term (which will be emailed and also posted on Blackboard under "Syllabus").

My expectations for both the essay and the presentation are substantially the same: they should be cohesive and well-organized, with a clear overarching focus or thesis statement, and ample supporting evidence (in the form of appropriate citations). A general rubric follows:

A: The paper or presentation demonstrates excellent competence in all areas: imaginative choice of material; excellent thesis clearly stated and supported with persuasive evidence and reasoning; well-organized ideas that unify the paper; good transitions between ideas and between paragraphs; clear and logical development of discussion; the paper is virtually free of errors in usage, grammar, spelling, and punctuation.

B: The paper or presentation demonstrates above-average competence in all areas: appropriate choice of material; good thesis clearly stated and supported with good evidence and reasons; overall unity but some disjointed paragraphs and vague transitions; ideas sometimes out of sequence, and discussion occasionally hard to follow; clear and readable language that may at times be too general, vague, or inappropriate. It is comparatively free of errors in the use of English.

C: The paper or presentation demonstrates average competence in all areas: predictable, overly general, trite or obvious thesis supported with some irrelevant material; basic organization showing that the paper follows a logical plan; some paragraphs may disunified or misplaced,

containing abrupt shifts in ideas; wander off topic at times, becoming difficult to follow; sentences sometimes awkwardly constructed with wordy, imprecise, or trite language; mechanical errors that are distracting.

D: The paper or presentation demonstrates below-average competence in all areas: vague or carelessly thought-out thesis supported with inappropriate material; lack of overall unity, poor organization and development of ideas with some illogical transitions and weak conclusions; confusing sentences or passages whose meaning is unclear; poorly chosen language with numerous mechanical errors.

F: The F paper or presentation usually indicates failure to state and develop a main idea. It may also contain serious errors in logic, grammar, spelling, punctuation, documentation, and sentence structure.

Note on Institutional Policies

Please note that the college-wide policy on plagiarism holds for this class and that student assignments may be run through plagiarism-detection software at the professor’s discretion. Plagiarism is a very serious academic and ethical offence that can lead to failure of the assignment or course—or, after multiple instances, expulsion from college. Please consult the Student Handbook for more details of the plagiarism policy. All other institutional policies apply equally, including those related to accommodations for students with learning disabilities or differences and Title IX protections. More details on those policies are available in the Student Handbook, and students are encouraged to approach the professor with any questions or concerns they may have.

Class Schedule and Readings

*This calendar provides the schedule for assignments and readings for our time together this semester. Students should be aware that the schedule may change. All students will be alerted as soon as possible via email and Blackboard announcement. **Failure to check email regularly is no excuse for missing these updates.***

*Note also that **every weekend will have a discussion board session** unless otherwise stated. Contributions are due by 11:59pm on the final date stated for that session.*

Monday	March 15	Course introduction and syllabus
Wednesday	March 17	Frase, <i>Four Futures</i> , Introduction
Friday-Sunday	March 19-March 21	Keynes, “Economic Possibilities for Our Grandchildren”
Monday	March 22	Frase, <i>Four Futures</i> , ch. 1: Communism
Wednesday	March 24	Frase, <i>Four Futures</i> , ch. 2: Rentism
Friday-Sunday	March 26-March 28	Weeks, “The Work Ethic, Gender and a ‘Postwork’ Future”
Monday	March 29	Frase, <i>Four Futures</i> , ch. 3: Socialism
Wednesday	March 31	Frase, <i>Four Futures</i> , ch. 4: Exterminism, and Conclusion
Friday-Sunday	April 2-April 4	Phillips and Roworski, <i>People’s Republic of Walmart</i> , Introduction

Monday	April 5	Hayek, “The Use of Knowledge in Society”
Wednesday	April 7	Graeber, “Of Flying Cars and the Declining Rate of Profit
Friday-Sunday	April 9-April 11	Draft of reflection paper due (post on discussion board thread) by beginning of usual class time Friday; weekend peer review session
Monday	April 12	Klein, “Climate Rage”; Shiva, “Earth Democracy”
Wednesday	April 14	Battistoni, “Alive in the Sunshine”
Friday-Sunday	April 16-April 18	NO DISCUSSION BOARD—Papers due (under “Assignment Submission”) noon Sunday, April 18
Monday	April 19	Kim Stanley Robinson, “The King of Climate Fiction Makes the Left’s Case for Geoengineering” (interview); “We Made This Heat, Now We Cool It”; “Making the Fed’s Money Printer Go Brrr For the Planet”; “Odd Couples, Carbon Coins, and Narrative Scopes” (interview—read only up to question that begins, “I’m glad you mentioned <i>Red Moon...</i> ”)
Wednesday	April 21	Bould, “The Ships Landed Long Ago” (through last full paragraph on pg. 182); Eshun, “Further Considerations on Afrofuturism”
Friday-Thursday	April 23-April 29	Film: <i>Black Panther</i> (discussion is extended to provide students time to watch the film and gain extra credit)
Monday	April 26	Sahlins, “The Original Affluent Society”; Kallis, “The Degrowth Alternative”
Wednesday	April 28	Octavia Butler, “The Book of Martha”; Atwood, “Time Capsule Found on the Dead Planet”
Friday	April 30	NO DISCUSSION BOARD—Work time for group projects
Wednesday	May 5	FINAL EXAM SESSION 10:30am-12:30pm—Group Presentations; reports on individual contribution due by beginning of exam session