

The Opium of the Intellectuals : Utopianism, Woke Political Religion, and Victimhood Culture among the Western Intellectual Classes

SOCI 324



©John Koch, from *Chronicles: A Magazine of American Culture*, August 2021

Professor Alexander Riley.....Office: Academic West 326 atriley@buckell.edu
Fall 2022.....W 7:10-10:00 pm ACWS 114
Office hours: TTh 11:25-12:25 (by appointment—you can sign up here)

As Durkheim said, society is above all the idea it forms of itself. The idea that American society has formed of itself in recent decades—with the assistance of those most systematically involved in the formulation of such ideas, the intellectuals—is not encouraging. If collective self-esteem is as important for the functioning of society as self-respect is for the well-being of the individual, then the outlook is not bright.

*—Paul Hollander, **Political Pilgrims***

What is this course about?

The title of the course is taken from a classic book by one of the outstanding French social scientists of the 20th century, Raymond Aron. *The Opium of the Intellectuals* is a critical study of the widespread phenomenon in the mid-20th century of Western intellectuals who embraced revolutionary Marxian communism as a quasi-religion. For these intellectuals, it was a system of belief immune from rational argumentative or empirical challenges, based in moralizing, mythical notions of oppressed victims who would, through their embrace of a utopian millenarianism, rise up to destroy their evil oppressors and bring eternal peace and justice to the world. Of course, the reality of world communism was diametrically opposed to this quasi-religious belief system. Instead of utopia, it produced human suffering on a scale previously unknown in our history. Aron showed how specific aspects of the sociological, psychological, and existential condition of modern Western intellectuals led to their allegiance to this destructive secular faith. A pithy subtitle for his book might have been “How and Why Large Numbers of Smart People Come to Fervently Believe Dangerously Foolish Things.”

Our focus in this seminar mirrors Aron’s, though we will be expanding the analysis into the present in addition to looking at historical examples of the phenomenon. We will engage in a historical and sociological study of the Western intellectual classes, with a particular interest in demonstrating the limits of intellectual expert knowledge, the extent of their claims to authority and power, and the ways in which as a class this group has achieved massive cultural and social power that often conflicts with and dominates the cultural knowledge and values of other groups.

Our effort is to understand and explain how many members of the intellectual classes (and subsequently many others who are influenced by their claimed expertise) come to adhere to irrational and anti-Western ideas about human nature and society, and to explore what the consequences are for the societies in which such intellectuals exercise power and influence. It is often claimed that we are in an age in which experts, who are determined by their scientific and intellectual pedigrees, rule. What does it mean for all of us when many of those members of the new ruling class embrace worldviews that are hostile to traditional understandings of human nature, antagonistic to basic moral values of Western civilization, and claim to be rooted in science and reason yet often take on the contours of a fervent ideological cult?

We will focus intensively on the American intellectual classes and spend a good deal of time investigating the phenomenon of intellectuals who embrace Wokeism, a system of radical ideas

about the causes and solutions of inequality and the nature of race, gender, and sexuality in human identity and social order that is now championed and imposed as orthodoxy in many institutions of higher education, including Bucknell.

What will I learn in this course?

You will learn about the sociological, political, and cultural contexts of the emergence of the modern Western intellectual class.

You will learn how claims to knowledge are produced and justified in human communities.

You will learn about the consequences of secularization for contemporary intellectual beliefs and politics.

You will learn to apply the concepts learned in class to individual experiences.

College Core Curriculum designations: SLSC SSLG DUSC W2

How will I be evaluated in this course?

This is a *seminar*. All class meetings are in the form of discussions. To the best of my ability to restrain myself, I will refrain from formal lecturing, though I may post some notes to our course blog from time to time to orient your reading and our discussion of some texts. In a seminar, attendance is far more important than it is in a larger, more lecture-based course. Your absences in our class will make it harder for everyone, and not just you, to get the full benefit of learning. I will therefore take attendance and a significant portion of your grade in the course is based solely on being here and participating in discussion (see below). We only meet 14 times over the semester, so any more than one unexcused absence will harm your attendance grade.

You must come to class having read the assigned material and in a state of preparation to discuss it. In a small class, it is simply not an option to sit and listen to me and your classmates; each one of you is expected to be actively engaged in the conversation every time we meet. I may call on people from time to time, not only if things are quiet but also if a few voices are dominating the conversation. Please use our time together to actively pursue your understanding of the material, which you can only do if you are engaged.

Students will be assigned to give one introduction to readings. These should be neatly focused and concise (not more than fifteen minutes) summaries of interesting points in the reading and a line of questioning to start our discussion. It is a difficult thing to properly and expertly present on a reading in such a short period of time and you will need to be prepared. You should seek to walk the line somewhere between reading a prepared text and simply ad-libbing. Generate notes to orient your presentation and practice to be aware of time. Fifteen minutes go by distressingly quickly and the texts we are reading are dense and difficult, so you need to be sharp. You should post a text version of your introduction to the course blog.

Students will also be assigned to take notes during our class discussions and then write them up for posting to the course blog. These notes do not need to be exhaustive, but they should be extensive. The minimum word count for class notes is 750 words. I will make up a schedule for this the first time we meet.

You will be asked to write a significant amount of text on our course blog over the course of the semester. This writing is the single heaviest contribution to your final grade in the course (see below for the grade breakdown). Course blog writings will vary in kind: they may include your questions about readings, as well as your responses to the questions of others; your responses to questions or topics that I have posted to the blog; your reflection on readings we have done; your observations about e.g., news items or other material from outside class that in your view can be effectively understood or analyzed using course materials. Texts from assigned reading introductions and class notes also count toward your blog writing. Basically speaking, the blog is an online extension of our class discussions plus additional reflection and conversation for which we did not have time in class.

You must make *at least* two entries per week on the blog. That's a semester minimum of 28 entries, and the minimum word count for the semester is 7,000 words (that works out to 500 per week). *At least 1/4 (that is, at least 7) of the total entries you write over the course of the semester must be in direct response to something another class member has written.* You must write consistently on the blog throughout the semester. If you write little all semester and then try to produce many entries in the last few weeks, this will substantially negatively affect your grade, even if you make the semester total and the minimum word count. Participating in the blog regularly throughout the whole semester is an integral element of the course pedagogy.

I will very occasionally respond to writing on the blog, though for the most part I will leave the discussions there to students. You should see any of my responses, as well as the responses of your classmates, as invitations to further dialogue, not as conclusions of exchanges.

I do not grade blog writing according to content with just a few exceptions. Blog writing (with the exception of class notes) should not consist of simple rote reiteration or copying of lecture or reading materials. I will not count blog writing that consists fundamentally of **discussion of things you have encountered in other courses or somewhere else in order to use them to criticize our readings, with only superficial engagement with the latter. The task of the blog is to demonstrate an effort to engage with and fully understand our course material, not to show us what you read in another course.** If you do the minimum number of entries and words, spread out appropriately across the whole semester, you will get an A on this portion of the course. Let me say this another way: *a very significant chunk of your grade in this course is completely in your control.* You do yourself a great disservice if you do not take advantage of it. *The course blog is an invaluable learning tool, and I take it very seriously.* If you want to do well in the course, and if you want to take full advantage of our time together to significantly push your own knowledge and abilities, you should take it very seriously too.

You must save all your blog writing in a text file that can easily be emailed to me at the end of the semester. If you write a considerable amount of material beyond the minimum (more than 8,500 words over the course of the semester), it will automatically boost your final grade in the course by one increment (not a full letter grade, but e.g., the difference between B and B+).

Finally, you will do one long review essay of one of five books (see below for the list) of at least 1,000 words that will be posted to the blog. These must be posted to the blog within 10 days of our scheduled reading of that book, I will say more about this in class in the first week.

The formal grading breakdown is as follows:

1. **Attendance and participation in class discussions: 15%**
2. **Short introductions of readings: 5%**
3. **Class notes: 5%**
4. **Blog writing: 50%**
5. **1,000 word review essay: 25%**

What University policies are in force in this course?

Bucknell students are responsible for the preparation and presentation of work representing their own efforts. Acceptance of this responsibility is essential to the educational process and must be considered as an expression of mutual trust, the foundation upon which creative scholarship rests. Students are directed to use great care when preparing all written work (including journal entries) and to acknowledge fully the source of all ideas and language other than their own.

I fully support the above principles and the institutional process that deals with violations of academic responsibility at Bucknell. I will not hesitate to initiate this process if the above mentioned “mutual trust” is violated in my course. In addition, it is important that you recognize that there may be instances when collaboration is appropriate in my class and other instances when it is not. Absent specific instructions to the contrary, you are to assume that all assignments are to be completed without collaboration. Finally, in acknowledging the source of all ideas and language other than your own, you must cite the creator of Internet posted information just as you would an author of a textbook, a journal article, a reference book, emails, or personal conversations from which you have used information or ideas.

Courses at Bucknell that receive one unit of academic credit have a minimum expectation of 12 hours per week of student academic engagement. Student academic engagement includes both the hours of direct faculty instruction and the hours spent on out of class student work. It is likely that you will need to spend more than this minimum expected amount of time per week to do work above C-level (though you should also note that simply spending the minimum 12 hours per week is itself no guarantee that you will receive at least a C in the course).

Any student who may need an accommodation based on the impact of a disability should contact Heather Fowler, Director of the Office of Accessibility Resources at 570-577-1188.

Bucknell University Honor Code

As a student and citizen of the Bucknell University community:

- I will not lie, cheat or steal in my academic endeavors.
- I will forthrightly oppose each and every instance of academic dishonesty.
- I will let my conscience guide my decision to communicate directly with any person or persons I believe to have been dishonest in academic work.
- I will let my conscience guide my decision on reporting breaches of academic integrity to the appropriate faculty or deans.

Class Policy on Debate and Expression

It is not the proper role of the University to attempt to shield individuals from ideas and opinions they find unwelcome, disagreeable, or even deeply offensive. Although all members of the University community share in the responsibility for maintaining a climate of mutual respect, concerns about civility and mutual respect can never be used as a justification for closing off reasonable discussion of ideas, however offensive or disagreeable those ideas may be to some members of our community. The University may restrict expression that violates the law, that falsely defames a specific individual, that constitutes a genuine threat or harassment, that unjustifiably invades substantial privacy or confidentiality interests, or that is otherwise directly incompatible with the functioning of the University. But it is vitally important that these exceptions never be used in a manner that is inconsistent with the University's commitment to a free and open discussion of ideas. Although members of the University community are free to criticize and contest the views expressed on campus, and to criticize and contest speakers who are invited to express their views on campus, they may not obstruct or otherwise interfere with the freedom of others to express views.

There are long-established, generally reliable rules of comportment for critical engagement and contestation in academic settings, and this classroom is such a setting. Allowing interlocutors to speak and express their arguments is but the first part of that set of interactional rules. Beyond this, we are all required to show outward signs of our acceptance of open dialogue and basic mutual respect and magnanimity. *Ad hominem* claims should be avoided, and critical remarks should always be directed to arguments rather than to persons. Even (*especially*) when you

disagree vehemently with something that is being said, it is obligatory to refrain from using gestures and expressions that betray a lack of respect and generosity, i.e., rolling your eyes, demonstratively sighing or interrupting, etc. Breaking the rules of academic comportment destroys the possibility of critical discussion, and we cannot allow it to jeopardize our central task in the course. An important part of the pedagogy of the course involves learning skills in dispassionate, logical, and calm discussion and debate, even (*especially*) when you are highly emotionally exercised by some question or topic. All of us have such emotional investments, but there simply is no reasonable way in which all our personal emotional investments can be fairly accommodated in collective inquiry into difficult material. Allowing our emotions to dictate how we react and how we contest claims is a sure recipe for accomplishing nothing that is intellectually useful.

Class Policy on Electronic Devices

No tablets, laptop computers, cell phones, or other electronic devices may be used during class. They are a distraction from our collective business. If you must bring your phone to class, please be sure the ringer is OFF and keep it in your pocket, backpack, or wherever you store it.

Books for Reviews (with student assignments):

Paul Hollander, *From Benito Mussolini to Hugo Chavez* (Emily Ahearn and Joshua Bascoe)

Mark Mitchell, *Power and Purity* (Logan Davis and Jackie Kerler)

Joshua Mitchell, *American Awakening* (Bridget Lalonde and Nick Huo)

Gad Saad, *The Parasitic Mind* (Brynn Peddy and Grace Risinger)

Peter Wood, *1620: A Critical Response to the 1619 Project* (Symone Ryans and Alexandra Strapko)

WEDNESDAY class schedule for SOCI 324 FALL 2021

	date	class topic	reading due [all readings are available as pdfs on the blog]	assignment due
Wed	24-Aug	<i>Intro to course: the study of the intellectual classes and how and why they believe what they believe</i>	Randall Collins, "Coalitions in the Mind"; Thomas Molnar, "The Emergence of the Intellectual"; Alvin Gouldner, "Introduction"	Post class notes (for assigned students only); Introductions to readings (for assigned students only); weekly blog

				writing
Wed	31-Aug	<i>Intellectuals in a sociological lens: who are the intellectuals? What makes an intellectual?</i>	Alvin Gouldner, "The New Class as a Speech Community"; Edward Shils, "The Intellectuals and the Powers"	Post class notes (for assigned students only); Introductions to readings (for assigned students only); weekly blog writing
Wed	7-Sep	<i>Intellectuals, religion, and secularization</i>	Alvin Gouldner, "The Alienation of Intellectuals and Intelligentsia"; Eric Voegelin, "Ersatz Religion"	Post class notes (for assigned students only); Introductions to readings (for assigned students only); weekly blog writing
Wed	14-Sep	<i>Utopianism and intellectual religion</i>	Thomas Molnar, "Secularized Religion: Pantheism," "Man-God," and "The Intellectual as a Progressive"	Post class notes (for assigned students only); Introductions to readings (for assigned students only); weekly blog writing
Wed	21-Sep	<i>Marxism/communism/antifascism as intellectual religion I</i>	Raymond Aron, "The Intellectuals in Search of a Religion"; Paul Hollander, "Themes"; Tony Judt, "America Has Gone Mad"	Post class notes (for assigned students only); Introductions to readings (for assigned students only); weekly blog writing
Wed	28-Sep	<i>Marxism/communism/antifascism as intellectual religion II</i>	Paul Hollander, "Stalin, Rakosi, Communism, and Intellectuals"; Tony Judt, "We Must Not Disillusion the Workers"; Paul Gottfried, "Antifa and the Mainstreaming of Antifascism" and "Afterthoughts"	Post class notes (for assigned students only); Introductions to readings (for assigned students only); weekly blog writing
Wed	5-Oct	<i>Black Power and the New Left as intellectual religion I</i>	Lewis Feuer, "The New Student Left of the Sixties" and "The Berkeley Student Movement"	Post class notes (for assigned students only); Introductions to readings (for

				assigned students only); weekly blog writing
Wed	12-Oct	<i>Black Power and the New Left as intellectual religion II</i>	Paul Liberatore, "Introduction," "A Revolutionary Hero," "Freedom Summer," "August 21, 1971," "Bullshit Talk by Dilettante Revolutionaries," and "The Last Visitor"; Peter Collier and David Horowitz, "Requiem for a Radical"	Post class notes (for assigned students only); Introductions to readings (for assigned students only); weekly blog writing
Wed	19-Oct	<i>Wokeism and the intellectuals I (class guest: Gad Saad)</i>	Gad Saad, "From Civil War to the Battle of Ideas," "Thinking vs. Feeling, Truth vs. Hurt Feelings," and "Campus Lunacy: The Rise of the Social Justice Warrior"	Post class notes (for assigned students only); Introductions to readings (for assigned students only); weekly blog writing
Wed	26-Oct	<i>Wokeism and the intellectuals II (class guest: Peter Wood)</i>	Peter Wood, "What is the 1619 Project?," "August 1619," "1776," and "1775";	Post class notes (for assigned students only); Introductions to readings (for assigned students only); weekly blog writing
Wed	2-Nov	<i>Wokeism and the intellectuals III</i>	Mark Mitchell, "Nietzsche's Puritan Warriors," "My Truth, Your Truth, God and Values," "Protest Trumps Debate," "Democracy as Decadence," "Identity Politics: There Will Be Blood," and "'Higher' Education and the War on Reason"	Post class notes (for assigned students only); Introductions to readings (for assigned students only); weekly blog writing
Wed	9-Nov	<i>Wokeism and the intellectuals IV (class guest: Joshua Mitchell)</i>	Joshua Mitchell, "Identity Politics: Transgression and Innocence"	Post class notes (for assigned students only); Introductions to readings (for assigned students only); weekly blog writing

Wed	16-Nov	<i>Wokeism and the intellectuals V</i>	Assorted items from Bucknell's Antiracism Resource Page	Post class notes (for assigned students only); Introductions to readings (for assigned students only); weekly blog writing
Wed	23-Nov	NO CLASS		
Wed	30-Nov	<i>Wokeism and the intellectuals VI</i>	Assorted items from Bucknell's Antiracism Resource Page	Post class notes (for assigned students only); Introductions to readings (for assigned students only); weekly blog writing