

The Utopia Workshop's 2027 programme is for educators / leaders living in Kingsbury and the surrounding areas of northwest London.

March - October 2027;

£420 minimum fee

You'll sign up to three learning circles, each one grappling with a particular curated reading list over 6 months. Spanning the fields of literature, philosophy, history, politics, psychoanalysis, theatre & education - and with an emphasis on the contributions from France - these lists, taken as a whole, are one representation of the vast complex puzzle of human knowledge, of the labyrinthine European library (in the process of disappearance).

A central objective of the programme is to develop skills in the design and facilitation of thriving, generative learning circles: ones that foster thoughtful and creative participation; draw out individual and group goals for research; are geared towards forming a stance and taking social action.

The final 2 months are dedicated, ambitiously, to collectively producing a play - a tried and tested way to build a community.

It's a relatively affordable way for educators to belong & to contribute to an advanced dialogic learning community in the humanities in their locality, to nurture their passions more widely. It calls for a serious commitment over 8 months to engage with the programme adequately, sustaining an intrinsic motivation to study and maintaining an active stake in the processes of collective learning:

- reading 2-3 hours a day on average;
- meeting once a week with one of your three study groups in rotation;
- stepping up to co-plan and facilitate meetings, to scribe; to reflect on the *purposes* of meeting, adapting the planned content and the way meetings are run; experimenting with format, tone, activity types, interactions, settings etc

Here's a flattened table of the lists. Everyone will work with a list from each section as part of a learning circle, each of which meet once a month:

1. Founders / Foundations: 1.1 The Eighteenth Century | 1.2 Utopian Thought in the Western World | 1.3 The Bible | 1.4 Psychoanalysis | 1.5 Marxism | 1.6 Modernism

Section 1 opens with the 18th Century - an intense period of reconfiguration on every possible front - religious, scientific, political, arts. We can recognise quite easily, in embryo, the times we're living in, and it makes for a good vantage point to look backwards in history as well as to look forward - much as the active participants of the century themselves self-consciously did. That theme of *looking back to look forward* runs through the rest of section 1: through the survey of major Utopian thinkers in the western world; in the Bible where two major civilisations meet, the Judeo-Greek, and generate the single most important common reference point in politics, education and culture for the next two millennia. There's Karl Marx examining the unfolding of history and, in the same messianic mode, identifying the agency to usher in the new dawn of human liberation. Then Freud the historian and technician of the human soul and its desires. And lastly the Modernists who take it upon themselves to grasp this whole legacy, desperate for horizons in the midst of global war. These six lists thus establish the "*founders, foundations*" of our epoch.

2. The Octagon of Agon: 2.1 Women's Symptoms | 2.2 The Self and its Double | 2.3 The Individual and Authority | 2.4 The Master-Slave axis | 2.5 Sublimations | 2.6 Gay men | 2.7 Paul Auster & J.M Coetzee | 2.8 Life and its Meaning

Most of the lists in Section 2 are anchored in the novel, which is for me the most vibrant and the least restrictive form of text. Authors are licensed to convey their own vision of just how it is that people strive to fulfil themselves in particular circumstances. Though "invented", fiction often gives us the most astute and sophisticated representations of psychology, history and philosophy interweaving in life as it is actually lived: exerting a material influence on readers that undoubtedly reshapes the present for the future. I've dubbed this section '*The Octagon of Agon*' - housing eight laboratories of conflict/antagonism, naming strife, competition and emulation as generative forces in literature as in human relations.

3. Applications / Articulations: 3.1 Theatre, Body, Language, Semiotics | 3.2 Adult Education and Groups | 3.3 Race, Nation, Empire | 3.4 Libraries, Books & Reading | 3.5 Tarot, Astrology, Kaballah, Dreams | 3.6 Comedy - Tragedy

Section 3, part-evolved in trying to place the rest of my library (at it then stood) into a structure, and I think the result works. In my longer framings, written to capture an exalted, manic burst of received coherences which shaped all these lists, you can read more. But structurally, I've called this section '*applications, articulations*'; *disseminations* might have worked too. They're some of the main facets that *should* be represented in a socially-oriented curriculum; studied and acted upon: Education, adult education in particular, and the psycho-social dynamics of groups & groupwork. Theatre, as auditorium for the body, language and semiotics. Libraries, of course, together with readers and reading, the production, translation and distribution of books. Race, Nation, Empire - the broad frameworks within which we still exist. Most idiosyncratic of the lists, 3.5 would generally be dubbed the "esoteric" shelf in the bookshop/library; it can make its presence felt for itself. Lastly, the spectrum of comedy-drama-tragedy, which is in the end, how we perceive and stage the arc of our lives.

The French Connection: I've written a meandering whimsical essay [- here -](#) on Anglo-French connection. In short: France has a self-reflexive national culture which treats refined thinking and literary expression as an art with a serious function; even over two centuries of political decline, French figures have still held the ascendant in the social sciences and humanities. So, on *these* reading lists you'll find a few hundred French texts in English translation, and a fair number in the original.

On a subjective level, I studied French at A-Level locally, and then for a year at Oxford (envisioning a future as European corporate leader). This was a quarter of a century ago. Students (*some*) were still fighting the battle against tuition fees, for Free Education as a social good. We all denounced then, exactly what we're facing now, only the results have come sooner and been worse.

For the last week, the face of the CFO of the Bank of England, who was in the same year as me at Somerville College in Oxford, stared at me, a generic black woman on the front page of this season's college magazine. I finally paused and saw *her* particular smile and put a name to her. For a week she had existed simply as an ironic *imago* of Black Success. One wonders whether the college debated pulling her from the cover, as the autumn issue coincided with ongoing furore over the suicide of the first black professor (of Sociology in the faculty of Education) at Cambridge. That's precisely where I re-applied to follow a course in Education Studies with English Literature, soon after quitting Oxford: where I was introduced to Bourdieu, Durkheim, Foucault, Piaget - not noting the continued French connection.

Now, back here, a snapshot of the NW London - one which I'm responding to with this programme: we have a French international school housed in what had been my local library at the old Brent Town Hall. Conversely, a boy was stabbed to death in the main foyer of the replacement council civic centre, where the new library itself has the feel of a foyer (before entering the actual foyer), overlooked by a mezzanine floor where people in distressing housing situations meet the gatekeepers over the borough's few resources. There was also a stabbing some months prior to that at my old school, which incidentally, also built itself a new foyer, inaugurated as a podium for the police to give statements to the media, and yet most of its classrooms haven't been refurbished since my time.

In this, the National Year of Reading, you'd be hard-pressed to find a state sixth form in the area that still offers French. Not even at the prestige-seeking Michaela Academy could they cobble together an A-Level cohort last year. It was the same at my old school, in its centenary year, and no doubt elsewhere too. Then, there's the new-build academy where only STEM is offered at sixth form. After Further Maths, having an A-Level in French is a prime indicator that you'll study at the top 30 UK universities but with the post-16 ladder dismantled, so the higher echelons

of modern language education have in turn collapsed , with a fire-sale of their repositories. The humanities more broadly, ever under siege, at least in their own discourse since their very inception in the university, are now perhaps finally to succumb.

So, on *these* reading lists there is a necessary defence - once more - of the European imaginary.

To digress: The Bank of England CFO notes in her interview how she had been excited to be able to study, alongside Chemistry, *the history and philosophy of science - and some German*. I'm not here to make a case for chemists to become bankers, or for literature graduates to become PM as the current incumbent; for "transferrable skills" and "social mobility". But before I move on, below, to a more impassioned and grassroots plea for reading, in itself, I'll just note that even as the new PM takes a predictable populist stance, on the football pitch of education politics, to champion the parity of the plumber: the AI firms and the corporate recruitment spokespeople now say - having made the STEM fodder we've been churning out surplus to requirements - that what they're really seeking is people with a wider intelligence, a classics graduate for example.

A segue:

"A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at, for it leaves out the one country at which Humanity is always landing. And when Humanity lands there, it looks out, and, seeing a better country, sets sail. Progress is the realisation of Utopias."

There's an English elegance to the red optimist lipstick slapped on the face of Utopia by Oscar Wilde here, the promise of a positively industrious romance. Utopias can though be just as much gaudy, and deranged, emerging from anxious nightmare as much as daydreamed fantasy, with both ethereal domains having the same imprecise relation to that sketchy realm we call reality. The map of utopia can be set down with the absolute rigour of a master draughtsman, by a controlled and controlling mind, the full mandate of reason exacting prescriptions, with diagnoses watertight. Utopias, suspending disbelief, cast seductive shadows, artful as a bohemian boudoir; promise no safety to the faint-hearted, selling illusion - salutary snakeoil to the willing - caution and conservation thrown to the wind. They corral the chanting masses, and enchant the adventurer with the journeys now permitted by the mental chains thrown down. Magnetise serendipities that defy the here and now.

Why get involved with the Utopia Workshop?

The reading lists here overlap with the content found in the humanities departments at university. So you could invest in an MA at an established institution (for however many thousands of pounds) or an online short course (for the same price as this one). Either way: *deepening our connection to an available human inheritance - in book form - we enrich our vision. As we make our way through our numbered days, we have a more unshakeable sense of our own place. We author our lives partaking in better-conceived worlds.*

Dead words as you read them, dead notions on campus. There are basically student-customers buying their ticket to a promotion, albeit increasingly unsure it will pay off; and there are harried, sessional academic providers - as the whole enterprise is gutted in their midst. The aim with this programme isn't to create a cheaper way to gain a piece of paper of lower currency. And neither is it, actually, to cultivate a circle of amateur academicians who love books and knowledge in the abstract (nice as that might be).

All those involved in the dissemination of knowledge - writers, researchers, librarians, editors, publishers, booksellers, teachers, technicians, book club convenors, the man on the street - may be awash with vanity and self-interest, with a love of power, their superiority and legacy, and so on; they may have their heads in the clouds, up their arse, or in the sand. Nonetheless, there *is* overall an undeniable sense of the inheritance of a shared mission; one as fundamental, say, as protecting the ecological bases for survival. And I'd urge, intrinsically connected to it.

Humanity has always needed bread but also roses. And even more than we organise life for ease or for empire, for beefsteak and for beauty, we are also defined by the propensity to question. We go to such lengths to know more in the pursuit of half-glimpsed answers. The desire to pursue, promulgate and perpetuate knowledge is, for some, as strong as the urge to procreate for others. The well-springs for both are retreating. . Human fecundity - the very sperm and ovaries of the young - is in crisis. And at the exact same time that human intelligence *itself* abdicates its authority to the artificial, we see humanity renounce its very will to reproduce. Is it wrong to outline a feedback loop between the two?

So. This library is curated around some of the *large* themes in human psychological, philosophical and cultural history & actuality in the hope that we will - that is, some among us will - generate a capacity to *think* adequate to the situation that faces us, and not to turn away, with a mask of arrogance. And preceding the crystalised *thought* is something perceived as *felt*. (See the article on Bion, Deleuze, Gendlin on this). So the priority here is not on political

programme, the municipal plan, in leaping to techno-, medico-, eco- fixes. Where science and technology do feature on the reading lists, it's within the larger frame of human evolution and human purpose, as disciplines that emerged as subordinate branches of philosophy-theology. Where politics appears, it too is framed as a living, engaged philosophy at moments in history. This programme preserves a space to step back, to not be directly yoked to a practical agenda, even as it eschews an overall detachment from the world as it is and could be.

The objective here is a "serious" one, but it is also that *romantic* one rhetorically derided above. It will be evident to all those who, at some point, have experienced the exciting compulsiveness of glimpsing new vistas of research, who have felt the pull of the *whole*; who (all pretension aside) know the awe and luxe of entering into quiet, self-paced dialogue with the leading lights of the human intellect and imagination, the interplay between the mind and the physical page in the spring and summer months. Most precious of all, and really what you're buying into if you join this programme, will be found in forging a circle of real-life, stimulating interlocutors and collaborators, at a time when *trust* is nil-by-mouth, and the desire to relate to self and self-other is terminal.

I've used AI a lot this year to generate these reading lists; it's a compulsive interlocutor. In the first couple of months, I found myself texting an annoyingly perky American colleague saying that I felt like talking to Gemini was like being in discussion with him. Four months further on, it's much murkier than that, but this isn't the place to talk about my relationship with Gemini. I'm saying I cannot *wait* to get back to the books, the sources. AI has been a tool, a *powerfully* convenient and compelling one, that has allowed me to get past the fact that there *hasn't been* a readily convenable academic circle to consult with. It's a case of chicken, AI, and egg. Except it isn't. There's zero substitute for the 44 years before this one, wandering alleys in different cities sniffing out book stalls, the association of authors with seasons and liaisons, for the experts and aficionados, the self-generated serendipities - call it my god-delusion - both away from and at the screen. AI is an astonishing searchlight, but what it finds has been produced by people; layered, textured, finely wrought people; networks, institutions and civilisations that have risen through the deluge and the inferno, quaking.

... And so, *projecting* forward to the start: the idea isn't that people enter a library and languish in it like a sanatorium. The books, that quiet time, having a circle of like-minded humans should act as a resource and touchstone for whatever it is you're already doing; as a springboard for what you might want to do next; with people you already know or those you meet here. The thing I have routinely sought for myself, and seek again for myself and for others through this project, is just to be around people who are thinking, researching and experimenting with a level of depth *and* breadth, genuinely as though our lives and our contributions mattered, had purpose. Not in a little modest niche, with hobby horses and pet fixations, but with that megalomania which in other times was called - simply and

grandly - *learning*. For the specialist to home in on the detail, they still need to telescope out for the overview and to see the detail in its connections.

Outer NW London is, Zadie Smith notwithstanding, a literary wasteland on the surface. If I was already a bit of a localist, growing up and living here most of my adult life: what with the pandemic, the ageing-dying of relatives, the springing forth of quite brittle branches of a dwindling family tree, it has been reinforced the urgency to stop *this* area deteriorating any further into a mere dormitory zone, constantly socially-cleansed, for mere transient existence and destructive-consumption. The grotesque developments we're seeing (whether the betting and the chicken shop are symbols of it; whether people name it as pot holes, high rises, fly-tipping or something more sophisticated) are utterly connected, to my mind, with the absence of an active community of readers. At any rate, it is the intervention I still want to make: to use my experience with books, community education and social action, in the classroom, on stage and in the streets as a vehicle for change. To galvanise a community of readers, who'll then do what they have always done.

So yes, this project is consciously, if wearily, embattled. Because almost every aspect of contemporary life militates against it working. It's a winnable cause because its mode of action is life-affirming, and the potential results generative and worthwhile. There people do exist with the foundations to read, with the means to reclaim the time to do so. The task now is to find them & get them together. I mean, that is, for you to get yourself up.

We are, to some extent I believe, products of recurring inner-conflicts - which you might call personal fate or destiny. OK. I think that goes for all of us. Beyond the particular issue, or complex of issues that we grapple with: there is the library that unites us. That gives us un-coerced space to commune with people long dead and distant. It's a sanctuary, This library has its definite preoccupations of course, but the collection is neither dogmatic nor arbitrary. In fact, it is assembled quite in the spirit of the education I had growing up: ecumenical and broad, but also an arena set for open debate and contestation.

Totally anticipated-imagined objections

How are people expected to have the time, the money - especially the time? If there's no qualification at the end of it, then... ? What is it I'm paying for? Are you qualified? Why have you decided on the / these courses and the reading lists? All valid. I'll answer the main one now.

18 or so hours a week is a *commitment*; for most people it will require a significant reorganisation of their situation; "no one" is likely to be sitting around with 18 hours to suddenly give to something. Yet, people *do* decide to pursue higher education courses with similar time requirements for part-time study, and they

continue to do so even though it's an increasingly futile gesture as an economic strategy, and even counterproductive to getting a job.

It's an overarching fact that every second of life under the system we're enmeshed in is compelled to be economically productive - so the once-promised horizon of reduced work compulsion, more genuine leisure, longer-healthier lives has gone in reverse: the impact of social defeat. Women's social and economic freedom for my generation in the UK has been accompanied by rising housing costs and wage deflation such that their full-time work and cheap migrant labour pay to reproduce a barely viable middle-class life. Where is the give?

Anyway, that's the story. I'm not saying it's not real - I've been an organiser on these material issues. But more compulsive than this apparent reality, as I've seen it, is for us to dutifully *perform* that we're *ideologically compliant*, which can take a really wide variety of forms. To champion the system or to complain and bemoan it, or to resist in preordained ways. To become an activist, an artist, a nihilist, a drop out, a drunk. What's *most* important is to insist that we're not so foolish as to *decide* to stake an ounce of the stability we have for something as preposterous as simply *to know*. One's safety-net can be really quite substantial when push comes to shove - i.e. allows more than a few months freedom, using savings, backups, with personal or social assistance - when there's a permissible need. For a baby yes, to relocate or retrain. Even social goals are sanctioned - to turn your expertise in suffering into a cause; to go from couch-to-5K-to-marathon to end cancer. The sacrifice in the name of total vanity likewise needs no apologies: for a souped-up car-tank, to become a man-mountain at the gym, to make it onto the leaderboard no matter how trivial or destructive your field. To perform unemployment or longterm sickness with due diligence. To make sure you're elevating your employability, that you're dead-set on applying for jobs. These ends fall within the ambit of possible elasticity of the system. But not allowed is to stop. To mourn. To just seek to know.

Nothing comes from nothing. I'd say from experience that without a period of rupture, followed by dedication, initiation, whatever you want to call it, ideas rarely take hold; you don't gain the strength to even begin to assert a countervailing force to the status quo - which persists as crisis. We have no leaders, or as I prefer to call it, adults. Being an adult is not simply a matter of adjustment to *reality*; in this context, it is the strength, creativity, the vision to refuse, in the name of something else. So if this programme requires you to go against the grain, that is deliberate.

It's also necessary. It's not the same as requiring 18 hours of reciting the rosary (though the principle of rejection has a family relationship). It's that three hours of reading gets you much further than one, and I really believe that it takes a certain *intensity* and *breadth* of study, simultaneously, for a real research to begin, for sparks to ignite and for pieces to fall into place.

You either allow a mission to burn through you or you don't.

If you've got other priorities, that's cool; you may have a better idea to pilot or find a better deal or a set-up better suited to you. *This* programme has to light up something in you, its particular lunacy.

It will sound complacent and smug to say it but: if it does fire you, money and time will follow, and the ask is quite far from the impossible. In fact, the *impossibility* of continuing the way things are, navigating through the wreckage with barely an accomplice you can trust, demands radical measures.

There's no call for me to replay the narratives concerning the impacts of social media on democratic discourse and our social fabric frayed almost beyond use. Against a local backdrop of Burnhams and Streetings, Farages, or even Polanskis - it's a fast-changing cast - the solution isn't so complicated: trust in yourself you're an adult; engage in processes where you can build trust with people you can get on a bike to see.

This is just one way: literature, collective analysis, public performance as a strategy. There are others. Hopefully this one's for you.

I'll aim to get round to writing more about my educational, organising and facilitation experience; and on the groupwork and what it might mean to be an educator in your particular field. Also, why a play?!

Some Practicalities:

The Library: All the texts on the reading lists are held as real, physical books, with multiple copies of some, amounting to well over 2500 titles. Part of the collection has been acquired from charity and second-hand bookshops in the local area, so representative of a really existing readership. I've supplemented this with a lot of online shopping, particularly for academic texts. The idea is to rent a space as a shared reading room using your course fees.

The Meetings: The discussion groups will *probably* be held in pubs or cafes; what we'd lose in control over the environment & in focus, we'd gain in connection with the wider world. But it also remains an open question.

Note: This programme can probably only run if 36 people are ready to enrol by the end of January 2027, which would create:

- 3 groups of 12 people following 3 lists from section 1 (of the 6)
- 4 groups of 9 people following 4 lists from section 2 (of the 8)
- and again, 3 groups of 12 people following 3 lists from section 3 (of the 6)

Beyond that a cohort of 48, 60, or a maximum of 72 people - at which point all 20 lists are brought into the light, with a network of people cross-fertilising them, my living utopia! In all likelihood participants will have to reach agreement on which lists to select.

The Application Process involves reading and discussing a couple of novels and an essay, a process to warm up your reading if you've not been in the habit, and to get a sense of each other before committing. Payment does have to be upfront so that I can make a budget, and so that the commitment to 8 months participation is clear. I will make sure a refund policy is in place before booking is open, but everyone should be aware that this project requires everyone's contribution to make it work; yes financial, but also personal realism about whether you see yourself rising to the challenges of this project in terms of time, focus, navigating the vicissitudes of group processes that don't have an overarching disciplinary structure.

So now take a look at the reading lists. Each list is impossibly sprawling, so there are different possible ways of tackling it, individually and collaboratively. If you enrol on the programme, you'll no doubt find yourself more absorbed in one list over another of the three that you're saddled with.

If it would help you, you could run a list you're interested in through Gemini AI, asking something along the lines of: *"I'd appreciate your analysis of the range/interconnections of the themes explored in these texts, and the avenues of research they offer"*. To get the most objective answer, remove the navigational headings. The other approach would be better to just start reading: follow your nose a bit and wait for the groups to form to map out the texts together (and to add any others).

I've spent an arduous few months producing (and reproducing!) an accompanying document for each list of AI generated summaries for every title. Some are better done than others to break the deadening templates and the repetitive hyperbole. The fiction summaries are full of spoilers - beware. The

plotlines and other structural features that would otherwise be revealed to the reader as they proceeded through the book, are laid out as artefacts for analysis.

Overall, though, I find some of these summary documents quite compelling, particularly for the theoretical sections of the lists: you get a heightened sense of awe at the panorama of viewpoints compared to skimming a list of titles on a list or on the shelf.

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