does this even work?

(the second assignment)

It’s one thing to imagine (or promise) utopia, it’s a whole other kettle of fish to put it into practice. In fact, the fundamental aspect of utopia, it’s “nowhere”-ness, seems to point to the futility of attempting to actually create one. And yet, somehow, people still try, and, even more strangely, sometimes succeed (not to mention frequently failing).

The first assignment looked at the textual basis for utopian/dystopian worlds, seeking to understand how words, images, and ideas could be used to create alternative places. But places don’t just exist on the page or on the screen or in your mind. They also exist in the “real world!” Your task, this time, is to find some real experiment in utopian living/practices, to try to understand better how it works, and explain it to others.

In order to make *your* project work, you need 4 (four) things…

1) you need a **question!** How and why is this utopian thing supposed to work? You will want to consider “work” in at least 2 different senses. First, you want to ask, “Does this work”? That is, how well does the reality live up to the promises and goals of the place (which means identifying said promises and goals). Second, in order to better understand your answer to the first question, you want to ask, “How does this work”? That is, you want to consider the types of practices, habits, rules, norms, structures, times, places, peoples, hobbies, codes, gestures, knowledges, commitments, etc. that go into the social production and reproduction of this place/society/community and how they fit together (or don’t!) to create the relations and structures you uncover. This is the rough structure of the question, although your specific one may look different.

2) you need a **case**! This might be the hardest, or the easiest, part of the process. The key is knowing where and how to look. You can look across the field of time (the past 🡨🡪 the present), space (nearby 🡨🡪 the other ends of the earth), scale (tiny communes 🡨🡪 global systems), ideology (so many choices!), outcome (failure 🡨🡪 success), etc. There is a list of possibilities in the works right now to help you organize your thinking, if you are having difficulties coming up with something – I will put it online by the end of the week/

3) you need **data**! The type of data that you will be able to use will depend on your case, as well as other access-influencing matters. It will also be affected by the sort of questions you want to ask/answer (as well as vice versa). You can think of data sources as either primary or secondary. Primary sources come directly from the case itself, and can include first-hand knowledge (ethnography), documents (content analysis), and/or information provided by participants (interviews). Secondary sources rely on other people’s analysis of data, and tend to fall into categories such as history, journalism, documentaries, or social science (note: these could, for certain research questions, also be treated as primary sources). If we had all the time in the world, you might feel safe considering the wide range of data options. Since time is shorter, secondary sources are likeliest the most sensible choice, but that will vary depending on your case and your connections.

3) you need an **argument**! First, you want to think in terms of the question you want to answer. As mentioned above, you can think first, in terms of simple starting points (Did it work? How did it work?), which will lead to other questions (What does it mean to work? What are the problems that it tries to address? What new problems are created?). You can keep going like this forever, if you wanted to, but at some point you want use these answers to form an argument. Question + evidence ≠ argument! Do not simply to present your evidence; use it effectively to construct your argument and lead to your conclusion. Evidence/data is a means to an end, not an end in itself, and even the most “obvious” evidence does not necessarily lead to any specific conclusion. Thus, I urge you to be clear, both to yourself and to the reader, precisely what your argument is and how works in your paper.

Stuff to know:

Early draft due April 6 (that’s far away, but spring break is in the middle, and think about how much you want to work during that week (hint: not at all))

Later draft due April 13.

Length 5-6 pages, using focused, non-fluffy writing.

Introduction

* create a context for your analysis (what is the framework for understanding your argument?)
* introduce your case
* state your argument (in one (1) sentence thesis statement.) just to be sure, underline your thesis.

Description

* you don’t want to “plot summarize” your case, but it may be useful to provide pure descriptive facts early on in order to set the foundation
* don’t give too many “facts” – just enough to allow you to prepare for your argument
* it’s better to tell a story than to just provide a list of facts

Supporting Point 1

* start with a topic sentence. This is what your paragraph is about – the “controlling idea.” Don’t include other stuff that’s not on topic! If it’s important, either change the topic or move to another paragraph.
* Explain the controlling idea (what does it mean and why does it matter?)
* Provide evidence/example
* Explain the evidence/example – do not expect your reader to make sense of examples. Examples on their own are meaningless – you have to provide the interpretation.

Supporting Point 2

* same as above

Supporting Point 3

* same as above

Supporting Point X

* same as above
* until you use up all your points/examples/evidence

Conclusion

* synthesize your points, don’t just summarize/restate them
* explain why this matters (the “so what? question) – this can take any number of forms, although it should be of relevance to your intended audience and supportable by your argument. But it should be bigger than the what you’ve just shown (another way to think about this is, if you’re right, what then?)
* does your conclusion imply/suggest a course of action? What is it?
* Does your research open up new questions? Great. But don’t end with a bunch of open questions. That’s a no-no. Instead imagine ways to answer those questions and propose a course of action (see above).
* Do you have to do all of these? No.