

# A CRISIS OF HIDDEN UTOPIAS

MICHELLE TOURBIER  
Durham University



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**D**emocracy around the world is increasingly seen to be “in crisis”. This crisis is typically exemplified through growing distrust in democratic processes, distrust in traditional gatekeepers of knowledge, increased support for authoritarian solutions, suspicion of those who are culturally ‘other’, the troubling of truth, and rising populism. Consequently, educators are increasingly asked to respond to the crisis. However, the question is whether we are truly experiencing a crisis of liberal democracy or whether it is in fact a crisis of multiple and proliferating ‘hidden utopias’ which is to blame? I propose that recognising ‘hidden utopias’ and the role they play in political conflict can provide scholars and educators a new way of responding to this ‘crisis’ in liberal democracy.

Dewey once sought to imagine what schools might look like in Utopia. He radically suggested that, “the most utopian thing in Utopia is that there are no schools” (Dewey, 1933). In Dewey’s utopia, children would simply gather together with more mature people in gardens, orchards, greenhouses, workshops, historic museums and scientific

laboratories to learn. Teachers would need to be, “married persons and, except in exceptional cases, have had children of their own” (para. 5). Focus would be on creating those things which could be enjoyed immediately. The emphasis would be on developing the child’s capacities as opposed to merely acquiring knowledge. The only attitudes promoted would be the, “elimination of fear, of embarrassment, of constraint, of self-consciousness” (para. 22). External attainments and learning outcomes would be thrown out and learners would be eager to seek out problems to solve.

Dewey’s utopia reveals an ardent faith in a child’s natural capacity to learn given the right environmental circumstances. In this vision, education is harnessed to solve problems and engage in projects meaningful to learners, rather than teaching to outcomes determined in advance by society. Yet, there are also features in this vision which might be viewed as vulnerable to totalitarianism. For example, school and family life are effectively blended into society, giving society more power over children than some families might find comfortable. Also, who is to say that being married or having children makes a person a better

educator? Some might question whether it is truly desirable to eliminate fear since fear is sometimes appropriate and can be a potent motivator for action. Yet, while potentially problematic, by making his utopia explicit, Dewey calls on listeners to imagine education differently while making it possible to critique this vision.

The great dilemma is that every utopia is fundamentally self-contradictory and harbours a darker side (Kolakowski, 1982). Indeed, one person's utopia is often another's dystopia. For Bertrand de Jouvenel, tyranny resides within the, "womb of every utopia" (2011 p.10). Sir Thomas More, first coined the term in 1516 to depict an island paradise where all households had a say in politics and both men and women had enough leisure to pursue a life of the mind (More, 2012). However, there was no room for privacy or individuality and slaves were accepted as a labour force. More recently, utopia has been described as:

...always located elsewhere, in another place, in a past golden age, or in an anticipated future, a future often based on the idea of a past golden age from which something lost needs to be recovered or rebuilt.

However, while utopia is never located in the present it is always a product of the present, a present that is in some way at odds with itself. (Karkov, 2020 p.27)

The author traces how the idea of an Anglo-Saxon legacy came to be mythologized and historically constructed in the imagined idea of the English nation, language and culture. It is what Bauman describes as a “*Retrotopia*” (2017) and it can be seen at play in the discourse of ideas surrounding “creedal identities” like those in Trump’s promise to Make America Great Again, the UK’s education policy of Fundamental British Values and even in Fukuyama’s polemic against identity politics (Ward, 2020; Fukuyama, 2019).

Hidden utopias might not at first be recognized as utopias. However, they can be recognised in the discourses which promise a better world. Being implicit, hidden utopias are rarely subjected to critical reflection. These are the worlds we secretly wish for and the spaces we escape to in our private moments to seek refuge from the present. We might construct these worlds by ourselves and for ourselves. More often than not, these are worlds constructed for us by

others, and which are internalised and embraced as imperfect ideas rather than as fully formed ideologies.

Moyn (2010) argues that human rights is the, “Last Utopia” for cosmopolitans. Similarly, those who participated in the Black Lives Matter movement in the summer of 2020 were united in Martin Luther King’s utopian ideal, that one day America might be a nation where a child would, “not be judged by the colour of their skin but by the content of their character”. However, since these events, a counter-utopia has emerged where racism is imagined to be no longer a problem, while the discourse of racism is. At present, 15 states are seeking to ban the teaching of critical race theory in the US (Wong, 2021). In this ‘hidden’ utopia, critical race theory and the New York Time’s 1619 projects are depicted as nefarious forces against the dream of a neoliberal meritocracy.

In the capitol riots on 6 of January, 2021 multiple utopian discourses could be seen converging in support of Trump’s claims that the election had been stolen. The ‘Proud Boys’ promote the dream of a genetically engineered white ethno-state (Stern, 2020 p.9). QAnon supporters believe

that Trump is in a secret battle against the ‘deep state’, paedophile rings and Satan worshipers which will lead to a “Great Awakening”: a time when the masses will apparently come to realize the truth of these beliefs (Forest, 2021). Also in attendance, were a growing group of Christian evangelical supporters who proclaim that Trump’s win was the will of God and the beginning of a new age of religious conservatism (Christerson, 2021).

Beyond these events, Hegghammer notes how Jihadi recruits have been lured through promises of an Islamic Utopia (p. xi). Since the pandemic an anti-vax utopia has emerged in full force promoting natural remedies in lieu of vaccination. Lucia observes that while this movement draws inspiration from indigenous and Indic religions, adherents tend to implicitly imagine their own form of “White Utopia” (Lucia, 2020).

Foucault would observe that such discourses can function as a form of power by tapping into desires and working to shape identities linked to those desires (de Beistegui, 2016)(Foucault, 2008). Yilmaz & Morieson observe that populists effectively help foment identities by

borrowing from religious discourse. Accordingly, religious populists promise “paradise in the afterlife”, while secular populists promise a form of “heaven on earth” (2021). In the digital age, where private thoughts can become instantly public and algorithms work to feed into these thoughts, being able to recognise these hidden utopias at play can provide learners a means of resisting such forms of domination. Foucault would caution educators that learners should not be forced to ‘confess’ the secret worlds they hold dear since he views confession to be a key technique of domination (Foucault, 1991) (Besley, 2007). However, since Foucault asserts that we actively constitute ourselves as subjects of power, there is always the possibility of recognizing techniques of domination for what they are. It might not be possible to completely resist governance, but one can refuse to be governed “*like that*, by that, in the name of those principles” etc. (Foucault, 2007 p.44).

One way that hidden utopias might be brought into classrooms is to ask learners to identify implicit utopias at play in public discourse or fictional scenarios so that “what was unconsciously assumed is exposed to the light of day”

(Dewey, 1997 p.214). Furthermore, in *Democracy and Education* (2016), Dewey argues that the imagination enables humans to have an “end in view”. By employing the imagination, learners can think through the probable consequences of different utopias if they were to exist in the real world. Additionally, educators might apply Dewey’s theories on “*How We Think*” (1997) to hidden utopias in order to help learners recognize the “kaleidoscopic flights of fancy” that often undergirds thinking (p.3). Learners might theoretically *experiment* with different utopias by creating imaginary societies based on ‘perfect freedom’, the ‘perfect community’, ‘perfectly sustainable’, or ‘perfect well-being’ etc in diverse groups. Explorers could then be invited to *experience* each group’s Utopia through different lenses and different events. There are numerous applications, and these could become the basis for future research.

The philosopher, Leszek Kolakowski (1982) once proposed that when it comes to utopia, philosophy needs both *diggers*: those who seek to find utopia, as well as *healers*: those who seek to unmask the premises of those beliefs. I propose that in order to address the apparent ‘crisis’ in

liberal democracy, that educators should seek to cultivate learners who can excavate the hidden utopias at play in their lives and discourse while seeking to imagine more emancipatory worlds in their place. In sum, I suggest that one way scholars and educators might address the crisis in liberal democracy is by seeking to cultivate both *diggers* and *healers* of the utopian imagination.

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