

Peer Review

Review of: "Society's Impactful Decision-Making: Every Coin Has Two Sides, After All, Ranging from Utopia to Dystopia"

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Review upon invitation of *Society's Impactful Decision-Making: Every Coin Has Two Sides, After All, Ranging from Utopia to Dystopia* by Eloi Jorge

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I agree with the author's assessment that utopian policies engender dystopian results. With time, I have come to think that one must get rid of the "good intentions–bad results" courtesy. Utopian projectors did not think well; they built on erroneous or malignant assumptions in the first place. Many of these projects can be subsumed under what John Gray broadly calls political gnosticism, an attempt to fix the ills of this world with the madness of ideology, religious or secular. Sometimes it is simply stupid or evil in a less grandiose sense—of the "banality of evil" that Hannah Arendt discussed, which appears when people lose the prudential power of reasoning and politico-ethical autonomy, becoming only cogs in the bureaucratic machine.

As for the concrete cases the author analyses, I agree with his negative assessment of pandemic governance and its consequences. I am eager to underline the disproportionality that the author mentions: the thing itself—the disease—for most of the healthy population was not nearly as dangerous to warrant such a radical and long-lasting intervention into societies across the world. We have witnessed and lived through a rather perverse theatre of civic morality paired with pharmaceutical economy, discipline, and punishment. I applaud the resilience of human life to pathogens, both of biology and society, although I fear the consequences of the latter. Indeed, it was a bad "living experiment in governance," and I am afraid that the danger of "the transformation of temporary necessity into permanent governance" still lurks, although it is important to say clearly it was not a necessity at all in the way it was presented and implemented in many countries.

As for the author's critique of the EU Green Deal, I am not an expert on the subject, especially on the Iberian Peninsula, but the author's critique sounds convincing and corroborates the more general pattern of ideological fanaticism informing public policies: "Communities that voiced resistance were branded as anti-progressive or even anti-European. The Iberian Peninsula seemed poised to embody a continental utopia of ecological modernity." Putting catastrophes into "politically expedient narratives" and turning them into "tools of governance" sounds all too familiar to me. As for the author's hinting at more democratic pathways of decision-making and critique of top-down neoliberalism, on the other hand, they seem too facile and might hide another utopia turning into dystopia. The author should also think about that.

As for helping Ukraine, the author writes: "The European Union and its allies revived a moralistic, almost messianic discourse: the defense of European values against authoritarian darkness." It is true that European values have turned grey in the meantime, and many freedoms have been curtailed, not the least of which is free speech, but Putin's rule and policies seem to fit the label of authoritarian darkness quite well. In this case, the author's discourse seems to descend into mere phrase: "Public wealth was increasingly diverted to militarization, even as everyday livelihoods came under strain. The noble defense of freedom thus acquired a darker shadow—fueling inequality, narrowing democratic debate, and deepening the gap between lofty rhetoric and lived reality." Whatever problems Ukraine might have, I think it is important not to relativise aggression. Perhaps similarly to the last case, where speaking from a country that was part of a communist federation makes one more sceptical of political solutions being smarter than the economic ones, here a difference in geographic distance might play a role: Portugal is much further from Ukraine than Croatia.

The author's analysis of the migration problem, the last of his cases, is better: "Governments oscillated between inclusive rhetoric and restrictive policies, producing a contradictory patchwork: open labor markets alongside hardened borders, humanitarian promises shadowed by securitized enforcement ... Immigrants became symbols of cosmopolitan virtue, even as many were confined to low-wage, precarious niches". This sounds familiar. Indeed, the problem of immigration is a good example of the "utopia as discourse—dystopia as practice" divide. However, in this subject, it is also important to have a clear picture of the fundamentals: if there is an internationally recognized democratic community with legal borders, those who cross them outside the law are illegal immigrants and are breaching a fundamental right of a community to decide on accepting outside members. If one wants to abolish borders, and still keep the vocabulary of nation-states and their democracies, then he is playing with

words in a way that sophists did. That is obviously quite an old game, but I think it is important to be clear about the basics. No amount of discourse on human rights, better tailored for a few East-European dissidents crossing the Iron Curtain than the mass migration from the Global East and South to the West and North, can solve the real political problem. If the point is to abolish the nation-state with its borders, it is to be replaced with—what? Global human rights guaranteed and enforced by whom and how?

To conclude, having in mind all the discussed cases, I agree it is important to keep “democratic safeguards” against all brands of utopian thinking. However, I am not sure about “dialogical institutionality, pluralistic expert panels, and social impact observatories,” whatever that might mean. I am skeptical towards deliberative democracy. It might serve only as a façade of ideological posturing or, worse, indoctrination, without real power or with power against the freedom of the individual. Accountable democratic governments and pluralistic media might do as well, although this does not function too well at times, I admit.

Finally, as for style, I like more idiosyncrasies that enable me to hear the human voice of the author in all its imperfections. Highly polished narratives with specific phraseology sometimes disappoint. For some reason, many texts sound the same recently, offering the happy middle ground as garnered with an academic variant of marketing clichés, as a formally boosted variety of Giddens’ third way politics.

The examples?

Introduction and conclusion, for starters:

“This essay, in turn, operates as a form of conceptual participant observation of society itself. By meticulously attending to how crises reshape civic norms, institutional authority, and collective behavior, it seeks to uncover the tacit logic and sociopolitical consequences of experimental governance.”

“The path forward is neither surrender to hopeless realism nor naïve adherence to radiant futures, but the persistent pursuit of a governance that is at once visionary and humble, ambitious and self-reflective. That is the only utopia worth pursuing.”

The methodological part could also benefit from a less superficial treatment:

“Philosophically, this inquiry is guided by the methodological lens of participant observation, a qualitative research approach pioneered by William Foote Whyte in 1943. Originally employed in ethnography to understand cultural groups from within, this immersive method requires a dual engagement: analytical distance alongside intimate familiarity.”

“This pattern is not accidental but symptomatic of an experimental mode of governance where societies function as laboratories for social engineering. As Whyte had previously posited, participant observation in this context unveils its dualistic character: that of the policymaker who studies and manipulates, and that of the citizen who is observed and molded.”

This part is also amusing:

“In stark contrast, “dystopia”—popularized through seminal works like Orwell’s 1984 and Huxley’s Brave New World—depicts societies where the pursuit of order, security, or efficiency leads to Manuscript (excluding authors’ names and affiliations) repression, inequity, and the erosion of individual autonomy.”

To finish, are we human or are we—chatters? ;)

Declarations

Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.