

Commentary

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

Eloi Jorge¹

1. RGEAF, Universidade de Vigo, Spain

When crisis policies are articulated as humanitarian, ecological, or democratic utopias, there is a risk that they will engender dystopian side-effects, namely control, dispossession, and fragmentation. The present essay navigates this duality through four cases that are of particular significance: firstly, pandemic governance (concerning the case of COVID-19); secondly, energy transition (regarding the Iberian Peninsula); thirdly, geopolitical intervention (about the case of Ukraine); and finally, immigration (with reference to the case of Europe). Drawing upon William Foote Whyte's participant observation, this study explores how crises transform into laboratories where governance and civilizational norms are reconfigured, frequently prioritizing urgency over democratic deliberation. By mapping tensions between utopian promises and dystopian realities, the study reveals how even well-intentioned agendas may legitimize exclusion. The conclusion of this study does not involve prescriptive judgments; rather, it presents an open challenge. The reimagining of governance necessitates the acknowledgement of the utopia–dystopia continuum. In this context, aspirational futures must be tempered by ethical vigilance to safeguard civic agency and ecological justice in the midst of crisis-driven change.

Correspondence: papers@team.qeios.com — Qeios will forward to the authors

1. Introduction

In modern history, crises frequently serve as catalysts for profound transformation. Under the guise of tackling pressing global concerns, societies are increasingly being used as experimental laboratories to implement sweeping decisions with far-reaching consequences. While these interventions are often

grounded in utopian rhetoric of progress, health, sustainability, and human rights, they tend to reveal a potent dystopian undercurrent—manifesting in heightened control, repression of dissent, environmental degradation, economic inequity, and societal fragmentation.

The concepts of utopia and dystopia have long served as mirrors reflecting society's deepest aspirations and anxieties^[1]. In 1516, Thomas More coined the term "utopia" to describe an ideal society based on harmony, justice, and equality. This approach offers a blueprint for collective betterment and moral advancement^[2]. Conversely, people often imagine a dystopian world because of famous books like *1984* by Orwell and *Brave New World* by Huxley. These books depict the consequences of attempting to ensure everyone's safety and well-being. However, this can lead to unfair treatment and a lack of personal freedom. A perfect world, or "utopia," and a terrible world, or "dystopia," are not just complete opposites. They are like two ends of a line, and they can exist together in the same things that people are trying to do, like politics or technology^[3]. Policies or reforms framed in utopian terms can carry latent dystopian elements, particularly when their implementation concentrates power or limits disagreement.

This inherent duality demands that public decision-makers rigorously examine all perspectives. A failure to holistically analyze crisis responses risks exploiting either utopian ideals or dystopian fears—two sides of the same coin—to legitimize interventions that distort structural events toward authoritarian or exclusionary outcomes. When singular narratives dominate policy design, the delicate equilibrium between collective progress and civil liberties collapses, enabling governance by expediency rather than ethical rigor.

The way we do this study is based on "participant observation." This qualitative research method was first developed by the American sociologist William Foote Whyte in his work *Street Corner Society* (1943). Originally designed for ethnographic studies, the approach requires the researcher to immerse themselves in the cultural environment of the group being studied, simultaneously maintaining both analytical distance and intimate familiarity with their subject. Whyte's goal was to understand the complex social organization of a marginalized community from an insider's perspective. He wanted to know how a community that people did not care about was really organized.

Participant observation is often used to study cultures, and helps to really understand what is going on because you are seeing it firsthand. The logic of this approach, as it has been used in the ethnographic field, is applied here to a conceptual analysis of contemporary society. Instead of physical immersion in a specific community, the idea of observation is used here to think deeply about social dynamics during times of crisis, like participant observation of contemporary society itself. We look at the world we live in

as the place we are studying. We do two things at the same time: we look really closely at how society is changing, like how people think and behave, and how governments and institutions work. At the time, we remember that we are part of this society too, and what happens in it affects us. We want to figure out the society and how it is changing, and what that means for modern society.

This approach enables us to reveal the underlying logic and political implications of novel governance strategies that emerge in response to crises. This means that societies are like test labs where the government tries out social ideas. The duality central to Whyte's method becomes pronounced here; there are two groups of people in this situation: the people who make policies, who study and try to change how people behave, and the citizens, who are being watched and changed by these policies.

This essay explores this critical tension by investigating four contemporary cases that demonstrate how crises become vehicles for experimental governance: (1) the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent push for a global pandemic treaty; (2) the Iberian Peninsula blackout used to justify aggressive lithium mining policies, often overshadowing complex wildfire narratives; (3) Western investment in the Ukraine conflict, framed as a defense of freedom yet acting as a strategic distraction from internal European socioeconomic challenges; and (4) the instrumentalization of immigration to reshape labor markets and living standards. Each theme is examined through the lens of the utopia-dystopia paradox, revealing the intricate contradictions of civilizational control mechanisms that masquerade as benevolence and necessity.

2. The COVID-19 Pandemic: A Utopian Vision of Global Health vs. Dystopian Control

The course of the novel coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) pandemic was marked by the clash of two visions for global public health: one grounded in solidarity and collective hope, the other shadowed by the drift toward authoritarian governance. On the utopian side, the crisis briefly revealed the possibility of a borderless scientific community. Governments, scientists, and international agencies such as the World Health Organization (WHO) engaged in unprecedented collaboration. Shared data accelerated vaccine development, expanded surveillance systems, and enabled real-time information exchange^[4]. Ambitious proposals such as the Pandemic Treaty promised to enshrine equity, resilience, and shared responsibility into a reimagined international order^{[5][6]}.

At the national level, many countries displayed extraordinary adaptability. Stringent hygiene protocols, universal masking, and enhanced monitoring in hospitals led to measurable reductions in endemic infection rates, despite elevated antibiotic usage^{[7][8]}. The surge in intensive care admissions and drug-resistant infections prompted the swift implementation of infection-control policies^{[9][10]}. These decisive measures showcased how public health systems could mobilize with speed and resolve in the face of unprecedented threats^[11].

Yet this vision of planetary solidarity contained within it the seeds of its undoing. The very tools designed for transparency and protection soon expanded into instruments of surveillance and control. Emergency powers, lockdowns, and digital tracing technologies widened the scope of state authority, raising profound ethical questions of proportionality and accountability^{[12][13]}. The logic of the panopticon, once theoretical, migrated into the digital sphere^[13]. Mobile applications, vaccine mandates, and information controls were often imposed behind opaque decision-making processes, fostering censorship, mistrust, and the normalization of coercion^{[14][15]}.

The Pandemic Treaty illustrates this duality. Presented as a framework for global solidarity, its legally binding provisions also risk granting supranational bodies the power to override national sovereignty, enforce compulsory health measures, and regulate public information flows^{[16][6]}. While such centralization might accelerate emergency responses, it simultaneously threatens to institutionalize extraordinary powers under the guise of humanitarian urgency.

Demographic analysis underscores a similar tension. Despite dire projections, the pandemic's long-term effects on global population dynamics—such as birth and fertility rates—proved modest and transient. Early lockdowns depressed birth rates, but most quickly rebounded, suggesting structural resilience rather than collapse^[11]. This resilience highlights how despair was often overstated, yet it also raises the question: were coercive policies justified when their supposed demographic consequences proved fleeting?

Ultimately, the pandemic was not only a biological crisis but also a living experiment in governance. It redefined the boundaries between autonomy and authority, scientific expertise and political control, compassion and compulsion. The geopolitical instrumentalization of public health exposed how aspirations of solidarity can be repurposed into tools of power consolidation and norm reconfiguration. The danger lies not only in future outbreaks, but in the persistence of emergency controls beyond the crises that justified them—in the transformation of temporary necessity into permanent governance.

3. The Iberian Peninsula Blackout: A Utopian Energy Transition vs. Dystopian Exploitation

On April 28, 2025, the Iberian Peninsula was plunged into darkness by a massive and unexplained blackout. Although officials attributed the collapse to grid failure and technical malfunction, the scale and suddenness of the event raised unsettling questions about energy security, infrastructural fragility, and the geopolitics of decarbonization. More than a disruption, the blackout became a symbolic rupture—a moment that redefined public discourse. Cast as both a crisis and an opportunity, it served as a staged reset that reframed the urgency of the green transition and cleared the path for controversial projects once deemed politically unviable.

In the immediate aftermath, Portugal and Spain positioned themselves as European leaders in the race toward decarbonization. Ambitious green agendas were rolled out with renewed determination: Portugal announced vast investments in solar power, battery production, and electric vehicle infrastructure^[17]. Lithium—elevated to the rank of “critical raw material”—became the emblem of this new energy order. Backed by the EU Green Deal, governments accelerated mining ventures in ecologically fragile rural regions. Forests and farmlands were reclassified as “energy corridors,” environmental assessments were streamlined, and public consultations were reduced to formalities.

Communities that voiced resistance were branded as anti-progressive or even anti-European^{[18][19][20]}. The Iberian Peninsula seemed poised to embody a continental utopia of ecological modernity. Yet the glow of this promise quickly revealed its shadows. What Brás et al.^[21] describe as “green sacrifice zones” emerged across rural landscapes—territories where sustainability rhetoric legitimized extractive practices that dispossessed communities, eroded biodiversity, and hollowed out democratic participation. In this context, the transition to renewables mirrored older patterns of “energy colonialism,” perpetuating the same inequalities historically tied to fossil capitalism^[22]. The pursuit of clean energy, instead of realizing a just and participatory transition, replicated entrenched asymmetries of power and deepened socio-ecological divides.

Wildfires added another layer of complexity to this unfolding dystopia. With growing frequency across Iberia, they were routinely blamed on climate change and rural neglect. Yet these disasters became politically expedient narratives. Fires were invoked to delegitimize traditional agricultural and forestry economies, justify the displacement of local populations, and accelerate the conversion of contested lands

into industrial sites. In some instances, announcements of new mining or energy projects followed closely on the heels of destructive fires, fueling suspicions that catastrophe itself was being instrumentalized as a tool of governance.

At the structural level, the Iberian energy transition exposed the paradoxes of green policymaking under neoliberal governance. Spain and Portugal undeniably reduced carbon emissions through wind and solar deployment, but the benefits were unevenly distributed. Policy frameworks favored established energy actors while sidelining community-based innovation^{[23][24]}. In Portugal, austerity-era fiscal constraints further curtailed decentralized alternatives, leaving the system exposed to market volatility^[25]. Technical challenges—intermittency, inadequate storage, and grid inflexibility—continued to undermine resilience, ensuring that vulnerability was never far from the surface.

These dynamics fractured trust. Gains in employment and emissions reduction were offset by widening urban–rural divides and a growing perception that the transition was being imposed rather than co-created. International models of participatory governance, such as post-growth political economies, demonstrated that more democratic pathways were possible^[26]. Yet Iberian policy remained dominated by top-down decision-making, where speed and scale took precedence over inclusion. As Morin et al. ^[27] note, the tension between rapid deployment and socio-environmental justice remains one of the defining contradictions of the energy transition.

The blackout, then, was more than a technical failure. It illuminated the contradictions of a green utopia constructed on extractive foundations. It showed how urgency and fear can be transformed into instruments of control, where the ecological transition becomes less a project of empowerment than a mechanism of dispossession. The Iberian case warns that without democratic safeguards, the noble ambitions of climate governance risk mutating into a green dystopia—where the language of survival justifies the erosion of rights, and where the promise of renewal conceals the persistence of inequality.

4. Western Investment in Ukraine: A Utopian Defense of Democracy vs. Dystopian Distraction

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 unleashed a wave of moral fervor across the West. Military aid, humanitarian assistance, and sanctions were cast not merely as policy measures but as acts of solidarity with democracy and sovereignty. The European Union and its allies revived a moralistic, almost messianic discourse: the defense of European values against authoritarian darkness. In this register,

Ukraine's struggle transcended its borders to become a universal cause—a utopian project of freedom, unity, and the reaffirmation of a rules-based international order.

By 2025, Western aid had surpassed EUR 1 billion (USD 1.1 billion) to meet Ukraine's critical needs^[28], spanning direct financial transfers, weapons deliveries, and infrastructure support. The EU alone mobilized over €27 billion in grants and loans^[29], embedding this assistance within a broader vision of integration. Official rhetoric promised not just military victory but a rebirth of Ukraine: transparent governance, anti-corruption reforms, and sustainable reconstruction. In its utopian framing, the war was not only about defense, but about renewal—a chance to re-found Europe's democratic mission.

But the glow of this vision soon revealed its shadows. While vast sums flowed eastward, many European societies contended with inflation, weakened public services, energy insecurity, and eroding trust in institutions. For some governments, the war became a convenient theater of moral clarity that diverted attention from domestic failures^[30]. The slogan of “sacrifice for freedom” was mobilized to silence dissent, enforce political conformity, and justify austerity or security-heavy policies^[31]. Solidarity, once a unifying principle, risked mutating into an instrument of discipline and control.

The economic dimension sharpened this dystopian turn. Defense corporations reported record profits, while funding for healthcare, education, and social protection stagnated. 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.

Ukraine's reconstruction, too, carried its own perils. While foreign investment and aid were vital, persistent oligarchic influence, institutional fragility, and financial instability^{[32][33][34]} threatened to undermine reform. The utopian promise of democratic renewal risked collapsing into long-term dependence—an integration model that entrenched vulnerability and curtailed autonomy. Freedom, framed as sovereignty, could paradoxically evolve into tutelage.

History offers caution. Western interventions, however well-intentioned, have often fostered corruption, democratic disillusionment, and local resistance^{[35][36]}. In Ukraine, as during Euromaidan, utopian visions of external salvation— whether pro-Western or pro-Russian—risked masking the realities of dependency^[37]. The very process intended to secure sovereignty threatened to reproduce new forms of external control.

Strategically, the scale of Western support has intensified geopolitical divides. Rather than paving the way for compromise, it hardened Ukraine's role as the front line of a renewed Cold War. Reconstruction risks unfolding under the permanent logic of securitization— anchored in military dependency, economic surveillance, and geopolitical immobility. Recent commentary underscores these fault lines. Public patience is fraying, with Ukraine increasingly perceived as a costly commitment without a clear horizon^[38]. Analysts predict that financial and military support will diminish as fatigue deepens and domestic crises demand attention^[39]. Politico^[40] highlights widening rifts within Europe itself, revealing unity to be more fragile than official rhetoric suggests. What began as a utopian project of solidarity is now strained by fractures, waning commitment, and strategic drift.

The Ukrainian case thus embodies the paradox of democratic utopia: a vision of freedom and renewal that doubles as a tool of geopolitical strategy. The defense of democracy functions both as a moral imperative and an ideological veil—obscuring domestic shortcomings, diverting resources, and reproducing inequalities. What began as a utopia of unity risks curdling into a dystopia of control, where solidarity becomes surveillance, sacrifice becomes permanence, and democracy is defended at the cost of its own erosion.

5. Immigration: A Utopian Vision of Diversity vs. Dystopian Economic and Social

For decades, immigration has been framed not merely as a policy choice, but as Europe's destiny—a civilizational lifeline in the face of demographic decline. It was celebrated as the engine of renewal: replenishing shrinking workforces, sustaining pension systems, and filling critical labor shortages in construction, agriculture, healthcare, and elderly care^[41]. In this vision, immigrants embodied the ideal of global citizenship— bearers of cultural vitality, economic dynamism, and democratic resilience. Diversity promised to enrich social life, inspire creativity, and fortify Europe's liberal order. Immigration, in this utopian register, was both a moral imperative and a pragmatic solution—a story of openness, solidarity, and inevitable progress.

Yet beneath this radiant horizon, fractures soon appeared. The flows of labor that sustained economies also unsettled them. In many regions, the influx of low-skilled workers drove down wages, intensified competition for housing, and strained fragile public services^[42]. Practices such as “wage dumping”— where migrants were paid below market rates—undermined labor standards and fueled resentment

among native workers^[43]. What had once been framed as a universal good revealed itself as an uneven bargain: prosperity for some, precarity for others. The promise of renewal collided with the gravity of inequality.

Demographic arguments, too, proved less certain than their utopian advocates suggested. Europe's aging societies were indeed vulnerable, yet demographic resilience often emerged after crises, complicating the narrative that immigration alone could resolve decline^[44]. What policymakers heralded as an indispensable cure increasingly appeared as a temporary fix—one that carried structural costs.

These tensions made immigration a central battleground for politics^[45]. Populist and nationalist parties seized on economic grievances and cultural fears, reframing immigration from a project of openness into a specter of disorder^[43]. Cultural anxieties fused with material pressures: fears of identity loss, civic fragmentation, and social instability grew more pronounced^[46]. Governments oscillated between inclusive rhetoric and restrictive policies, producing a contradictory patchwork: open labor markets alongside hardened borders, humanitarian promises shadowed by securitized enforcement^[45]. What had once been a symbol of cosmopolitan unity now became a mirror reflecting division.

Behind this ambivalence lay a deeper political economy. Immigration did not simply answer demographic need; it served as a lever for restructuring labor markets and social contracts^[42]. Business lobbies defended liberal migration policies to secure flexibility and contain wages. Technocratic elites embraced multicultural rhetoric as a buffer against criticism of austerity, deregulation, and welfare retrenchment. Progressive narratives of diversity, while noble in appearance, often obscured this instrumentalization. Immigrants became symbols of cosmopolitan virtue, even as many were confined to low-wage, precarious niches^[45].

This gap between promise and practice deepened social dissonance. Immigration boosted aggregate productivity but also provoked political backlash, especially in communities already vulnerable to economic decline^[43]. Research suggests that ethnic diversity, at least in the short term, can weaken social trust—even in societies with cultural proximity^{[47][44]}. Meanwhile, immigrants themselves often encountered systemic discrimination, exclusion, and blocked mobility^[45]. Public hostility was less a reflection of economic reality than of political framing and media amplification, which magnified cultural misperceptions into existential threats.

Historical precedent suggests that diverse societies can transcend initial tensions by forging inclusive civic identities. But such transitions require sustained, deliberate investment: equitable access to

resources, policies against segregation, and a cultural politics of mutual recognition^[46]. Without such foresight, demographic transformation risks calcifying into a latent dystopia of division, precarity, and mutual distrust. Immigration then ceases to be a path to renewal and instead becomes an arena where political opportunism thrives—where leaders invoke cosmopolitan ideals even as they implement exclusionary practices^[45].

Finally, immigration's strategic magnitude has reshaped Europe's political landscape. Rather than generating cohesion, it has deepened divisions, sharpening the lines between metropolitan optimism and provincial disillusionment. In many states, the language of multicultural solidarity now coexists with policies of surveillance, deportation, and securitization. What began as a utopian promise of openness risks hardening into a managed reality: immigrants instrumentalized as flexible labor, societies polarized along cultural lines, and democratic space narrowed by appeals to "integration" and "security." Thus, immigration embodies Europe's utopia–dystopia paradox. It offers a vision of renewal, prosperity, and cultural vitality, yet it also functions as a tool of political strategy, economic restructuring, and social control. The defense of diversity becomes both a moral imperative and an ideological veil—concealing structural inequalities, legitimizing austerity, and reproducing mistrust. As with Ukraine, the utopian promise risks collapsing into a securitized, exclusionary, and disenchanting reality.

6. Discussion, conclusion, and future directions

The participant observation experiment approach to the four thematic axes—pandemic governance, energy transitions, geopolitical conflict, and immigration policy—revealed concerning patterns. It seems that every solution creates new problems and that every promise of freedom gives rise to new forms of dependency. This creates a problematic and ambiguous blend of utopia and dystopia. Crises can be used to justify high-risk political and social interventions that are justified by utopian narratives but produce dystopian consequences. This reconfiguration of the social contract is evident in various forms, including digital health surveillance, the establishment of "green sacrifice zones," the financing of proxy wars, and the securitized management of migratory flows. It is marked by the normalization of exceptions and the subjugation of scrutiny to urgency. The most significant consequence of this process is the weakening of the foundations of Sustainable Development Goal 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions). SDG 16 is not just one goal among many; it is a prerequisite for achieving the others. Governance by experimentation, which privileges technocratic efficiency over democratic legitimacy, risks producing

the opposite of what SDG 16 aims to achieve: more transparent, more equal societies that are better able to resolve their conflicts peacefully and democratically.

However, it is crucial to avoid a fatalistic conclusion. The problem lies not in utopian ambition itself, which is indispensable for mobilizing the collective will needed to solve global problems, but in decoupling it from democratic guarantees. Therefore, the challenge is not to choose between utopia and dystopia, but rather to adapt the former in order to avoid the latter. This requires a profound reorientation of governance based on three essential pillars. First, democratic impact assessments must be institutionalized to ensure that any emergency policy is analyzed for effects on civic participation, material equality, and fundamental rights. Second, we must cultivate pluralistic expert panels. These groups provide ongoing monitoring and input on crisis policies, counterbalancing centralized power. Third, commitment to radical transparency is non-negotiable; crisis-era decision-making, surveillance algorithms, resource allocation, and public-private investment contracts must be accessible and comprehensible.

In the future, this reorientation must be supported by research that is specifically aimed at understanding it. Future research agendas should focus on comparative studies that analyze how different institutional structures, from deliberative democracy models to robust systems of checks and balances, can best prevent dystopian tendencies during crises. Additionally, studies are needed that map how utopian narratives are constructed and used by powerful actors and how social movements can effectively deconstruct or reclaim them. Finally, action research is essential for testing concrete models of multilevel, polycentric governance and evaluating their ability to implement rapid transitions in areas such as climate and health without sacrificing social justice and community autonomy.

Ultimately, recognizing the utopia-dystopia paradox is not a futile exercise; it is a clarifying political act. It means understanding that the future is not a destination reached by technocratic decree, but rather a space built through conflict, negotiation, and social contracts. The path forward is neither to give in to hopelessness nor to blindly believe in idealism. Instead, we must persistently pursue governance that is visionary yet humble, ambitious yet aware of its limitations. Who knows this is the only utopia worth pursuing.

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