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Commentary

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

Eloi Jorge[1]

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 leveraged as experimental laboratories for implementing 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]. Coined by Thomas More in 1516, "utopia" imagines an ideal society founded on harmony, justice, and equality, offering a blueprint for collective betterment and moral advancement[2]. 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. Rather than existing as static opposites, however, utopia and dystopia function as dynamic poles on a continuum, often coexisting within the same political or technological endeavors[3]. Policies or reforms framed in utopian terms can carry latent dystopian elements, particularly when their implementation concentrates power or curtails dissent.

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.

To explore this critical tension, this essay investigates 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.

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 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. Treating modern society as an object of embedded inquiry allows us to illuminate the fragile thresholds between care and control, resilience and repression, and progress and coercion.

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 disenchanted reality.

6. Discussion, conclusion, and future directions

A thorough examination of the four thematic axes—namely, pandemic governance, energy transitions, geopolitical conflict, and immigration policy—discloses a distressing pattern: crises are systematically utilized to legitimize high-risk political and social interventions, rationalized by utopian narratives that, in application, produce dystopian consequences. This reconfiguration of the social contract, marked by the normalization of exceptions and the subjugation of scrutiny to urgency, 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.

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. In this context, the distinction between utopia and dystopia becomes indistinguishable, resulting in a perilous continuum where each solution engenders a new problem and every promise of freedom is accompanied by the emergence of a new form of dependency.

The deepest implication of this process is the erosion of the foundations of Sustainable Development Goal 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions). SDG 16 is not just one goal among others; it is the condition of possibility for all others. Without transparent institutions, inclusive participation, and access to justice, no energy transition will be just, no pandemic response equitable, and no integration policy sustainable. By privileging technocratic efficiency over democratic legitimacy, governance by experimentation risks producing the exact opposite of what SDG 16 aims to achieve: more opaque, more unequal societies, less capable of resolving their conflicts peacefully and inclusively.

However, it is crucial to avoid a fatalistic conclusion. The problem does not lie in utopian ambition itself—which is indispensable for mobilizing collective will to tackle global challenges—but in its decoupling from democratic safeguards. The challenge, therefore, is not to choose between utopia and dystopia, but

to domesticate the former to avoid the latter. This requires a profound reorientation of governance built on three essential pillars. First, the principle of ethical foresight must be institutionalized, ensuring that democratic impact assessments—systematically analyzing effects on civic participation, material equality, and fundamental rights—precede the implementation of any emergency policy. Second, we must cultivate dialogical institutionality, pluralistic expert panels, and social impact observatories. These bodies can act as vital counterweights to centralized power by providing ongoing monitoring and deliberative input on crisis policies. Third, a commitment to radical transparency is non-negotiable; decision-making processes, surveillance algorithms, resource allocation criteria, and public-private investment contracts formulated during crises must be made accessible and comprehensible for public scrutiny.

Looking forward, this reorientation must be supported by targeted scholarly inquiry. Future research agendas should be oriented towards comparative studies that dissect how different institutional architectures—from models of deliberative democracy to robust systems of checks and balances—can best resist dystopian drift during crises. Furthermore, discursive analyses are needed to map how utopian narratives are constructed and instrumentalized by powerful actors, and how they can be effectively deconstructed or reclaimed by social movements. Finally, action-research is critical to pilot and evaluate concrete models of multi-level and polycentric governance, testing their ability to implement rapid transitions in climate, digital, and health domains without sacrificing social justice and community autonomy.

Ultimately, recognizing the utopia–dystopia paradox is not an exercise in disillusionment but a clarifying political act. It means understanding that the future is not a destination reached by technocratic decree, but a space built through conflict, negotiation, and social pacts. Keeping this future open—that is, truly sustainable—requires weakening the link between crisis and authoritarianism and strengthening the bond between utopia and democracy. The path forward is neither surrender to hopeless realism nor naive 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.

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Declarations