

A New Heart Pulses: Democracy as Metaphysic, Poetics of Social Hope, and Utopian Pedagogies

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INTRODUCTION

Recent publications on the theme of utopian pedagogy from Darren Webb, Emile Bojesen, and Judith Suissa have noted the retrieval of “utopia” as a concept from the margins and its return to the mainstream of literature on education research. The latest of these have favored architectural metaphors — as opposed to archaeological ones — to describe a utopian pedagogy guided by a “normative vision” so as not to dissolve into an “endlessly open process of exploration.”¹ Bojesen and Suissa, while sympathetic to Webb’s cautions along these lines, have made a case for “minimal utopianism” as “pragmatic resistance” in response to the very real constraints of pedagogues whose practice remains embedded in the neo-liberal university system and its tabular mechanics of testing, sorting, and (de)valuation.² Bojesen and Suissa’s “minimal utopianism” is consistent with Suissa’s previous engagement with anarchism as a utopian tendency wherein she notes that “even the most traditional school can be an arena for challenging our preconceptions about education and promoting radical alternatives” and that an anarchist (and by implication an utopian) perspective “can help us to think differently about the role of visions, dreams and ideals in education.”³

This work, like much of that it follows upon and engages with,⁴ confronts a difficult contradiction. On the one hand, a conception of utopian pedagogy that emphasizes an ongoing process of exploration and the opening up of spaces for imagination risks an aimlessness that degrades to inertia or apologia for the status quo. On the other, imposing a crystalline endpoint on the utopian impulse hazards foreclosing on alternatives and lends itself to its totalizing pursuit. Thus, process and “blueprint” views of utopian pedagogy are set somewhat in opposition.

Here, I hope to attend in my own way to these and related tendencies and concepts and thereby contribute to the growing body of

literature around utopian pedagogies, first through an examination of utopia as a poetical and quasi-religious symbol of ultimate concern and second by considering the implications of this conception for utopian pedagogies. The discussion below will proceed along the following lines:

1. The utopian need not be construed as either an iterative process of socio-political archaeology or an explicit blueprint for a concrete political project but, instead may be taken as a poetical and (quasi-) religious tendency.
2. This tendency manifests as a symbol of ultimate concern, its referent a social hope or hopes.
3. The utopian pedagogue is, thus, probably interested in the inculcation of dispositions consistent with particular ultimate concerns and their symbols.
4. One may make some judgements about utopian content and method using (quasi-)religious criteria of (in)finitude, idolatry, and demonization.

From these, I aim to work toward a utopian pedagogy situated within the American romantic (polytheistic) tradition, as described by Rorty. It entails a Deweyan metaphysic of democracy arising from the consequences of (neo)pragmatism, secularized elements of Christianity, classical liberalism, and radical left-libertarian traditions.

AMERICAN LEFT LIBERTARIANISM AND PRAGMATISM

In her essay “The Dominant Idea,” American anarchist and pedagogue Voltairine de Cleyre describes an idealistic individualism set against what modern scholars might call hegemony, an organizing cultural and social principle or tendency, acquiescence to which is to be “seized” and “swallowed up in it.”⁵ She characterizes meaningful resistance to the dominant idea of one’s time and place as arising from the highest of hopes and encourages an idealism that aims at the stars while allowing that one may in practice hit the top of the gatepost — as opposed to aiming at the ground and being assured of hitting it.⁶ On this view, the utopian anarchist ideal of a stateless society is not simply about a difference in the will but of the will. One’s overarching ideals dictate not only what one wants, especially in the social sphere, but how one wants, makes judgements about ends and means.

I think de Cleyre's position here is consonant with that of much of American anarchism, an idealistic and utopian sensibility also insistent upon the immediate and practical concerns of social life and politics. For de Cleyre, the distinction between a reformist posture and a revolutionary one is not a bright line. Rather, revolutionary aspirations inform one's practical ameliorative efforts. De Cleyre's utopianism, an admixture of regard for the immediate and the ideal, points to some compelling affinities with the American pragmatist tradition.

First, de Cleyre was skeptical about the materialisms at the core of radical doctrines emanating from the European continent. She had little interest in teleological conceptions of history's sweep and emphasized instead a contingent, rolling contest of individual and social wills engaged in struggle over the present and future. This is consistent with American pragmatism's preoccupation with contingency, solidarity, and iterative social experimentation toward liberative ends.

Second, de Cleyre was wary of militant revolutionary impulses, particularly those that were not duly regarding of actual historical conditions. Her general tendency seems to have been to hold dear her ultimate social aim of a stateless and maximally free society while engaging in concrete struggles of her place and time. Radicals in Europe and the Americas, as elsewhere, have long debated across the reformist-revolutionary divide, and in many circles, certainly, reformist has been used as an epithet. But for de Cleyre, these were less poles than roughly coequal impulses informing her praxis.

UTOPIA AS POETIC AND RELIGIOUS SENTIMENT

Thomas More's Utopians "reason on virtue and pleasure ... their chief and principal question is in what thing ... does the felicity of man consist," and they take "pleasure as the end of all our operations."⁷ When More imagined his ideal society, he organized it around shared social hopes with a significance characterized as religious. His Utopians "never discuss felicity or blessedness without joining to the reasons of philosophy certain principles taken from religion. . . without which. . . they think reason alone weak and imperfect."⁸ Likewise, Edward Bellamy traces the lineage of his utopian society through "every true religious feeling" and "every act by which

men have given effect to their mutual sympathy.”⁹ A similar relationship between the religious and social ideals can be found in the pragmatist tradition.

Dewey identified the religious in his *A Common Faith* with a change of the will rather than in it. On Dewey’s view, the religious, quite apart from religion, is part of the process of unification, both of the personality and of the self within a coherent picture of the world:

The idea of a whole, whether of the whole personal being or of the world is an imaginative, not a literal idea ... The self is always directed toward something beyond itself and so its own unification depends upon the idea of the integration of the shifting scenes of the world into that imaginative totality we call the Universe.¹⁰

Here are echoes of scholarship around utopias that emphasize their holistic nature, including Halpin, Kumar, and Levitas, and we begin to see the relations among utopian sensibilities, the religious, and imagination.

For Dewey, the process of integration via imagination was essentially poetic, alluding to Santayana, again in *A Common Faith*:

“Poetry is called religion when it intervenes in life, and religion, when it merely supervenes upon life, is seen to be nothing but poetry ... all observation is observation of brute fact, all discipline is mere repression, until these facts digested and this discipline embodied in humane impulses become the starting point for a creative movement of the imagination, the firm basis for ideal constructions in society, religion, and art.”¹¹

It is one’s integrating principle or principles that, through the imagination, bind up one’s personal and social aims and practice.

Richard Rorty saw these integrating principles more or less the way Dewey seems to have, as essentially religious and poetic. He describes the American pragmatist tendency following Emerson as romantic utilitarianism, rejecting both any “ethical motive apart from the desire for the happiness of human beings” and a “will to truth distinct from the will to happiness.”¹² The first of these

Rorty identifies with John Stuart Mill's strain of utilitarianism — as opposed to Bentham's, with which William James seems to have had a strong affinity, sharing Mill's like desire to "avoid Benthamite reductionism" and to "defend a secular culture against the familiar charge of blindness to higher things."¹³

Mill himself described his "new utilitarianism" as holding "[p]oetry not only on a par with, but the necessary condition of, any true and comprehensive philosophy."¹⁴ Mill, according to his friend Alexander Bain, "seemed to look upon Poetry as Religion, or rather as Religion and Philosophy in One."¹⁵ He believed "poetry could and should take on 'the tremendous responsibility of the functions once performed by the exploded dogmas of religion and religious philosophy'."¹⁶ Rorty traces this poetico-religious sensibility, a conception of social hopes and literatures replacing old quests for truth and dogmas, through James to Dewey, who held that "Democracy is neither a form of government nor a social expediency, but a metaphysic of the relation of man and his experience in nature" and that it follows from this metaphysic that the purpose of "[g]overnment, business, art, religion, all social institutions" is "to set free the capacities of human individuals."¹⁷

Central to the task of becoming, of pursuing the full and free play of one's personal will and power, are the integrating principles by which the self and world are unified, what might be described as objects of individual eros. Rorty borrowed theologian Paul Tillich's language to refer to these principles as *ultimate concerns* that people, through symbols, may "worship with all one's heart and soul and mind," and he cited as an example American poet Walt Whitman's *Democratic Vistas*, a poetic exhortation to build an American "cooperative commonwealth" — a utopian project if ever there was one.¹⁸

I think Rorty is right to link up the poetic, the religious, and the utopian in this way, but I think he misrepresents Tillich when he writes of the "symbols of ultimate concern" as objects of worship. Tillich was quite explicit that symbols are not to be worshiped but rather that ultimate concerns themselves are to be worshiped *through* them.

But it makes sense to see, as Rorty does, in both Dewey and Whitman the same treatment of the United States as "a symbol of openness to the possibility of as yet undreamt of, ever more diverse, forms of human happiness"

and to recognize that fidelity to that possibility represents a “social and moral faith.”¹⁹ Its proper exercise is in creating conditions for freedom and flourishing in a society in which “poetry and religious feeling will be the unforced flowers of life.”²⁰ It abandons quests for *the truth* and *the right* to pursue instead the end of ever greater and broader human happiness, its various faces projected in the ideals of different poets — among them our utopian dreamers.

TOWARD A UTOPIAN PEDAGOGY

The utopian tendency when taken as a particularly vivid poetic-religious attachment to particular social hopes, needs neither archaeological nor architectural metaphor. One’s utopias are neither excavations nor erections but rather symbols of one’s ultimate concerns. And so long as those concerns are oriented around a hope for “as yet undreamt of, ever more diverse, forms of human happiness,” one need not be anxious about maps and blueprints. These will be the natural precipitates of such a utopian perspective, their aims among the stars, their notches at the top of the gatepost. But if one accepts this view of a utopian sensibility, what sort of pedagogies suit its formation? The discussion above suggests a few useful principles.

First, *contingency*. The deadliest blight to social hope is the essentially conservative view, too often explicitly or tacitly enjoined upon young people in schools, that the social facts of the day represent a culmination, a terminus, that these are to be received as settled. Edward Bellamy’s protagonist in *Looking Backward* observes that it was in the late nineteenth century “firmly and sincerely believed” that the social situation “had always been as it was, and it always would be so” and that it “was a pity, but it could not be helped, and philosophy forbade wasting compassion on what was beyond remedy.”²¹ One of the central aims of the utopian pedagogue must be to heave against such an attitude, to encourage, as de Cleyre did, thoughtful resistance to “The Dominant Idea” of one’s age.

For pragmatists, the injunction that all products of inquiry are provisional extends to all aspects of human experience and activity, including social arrangements, the state, and the law, which Emerson writes “is a memorandum” and

“all alterable,” that “we may make as good, we may make better.”²² To the young citizen, “[s]ociety is an illusion,” its personages and institutions set before her in “rigid repose.”²³ Promulgation and preservation of this illusion is the foreclosure of innumerable utopian visions. It reduces the expansive territory of the highest dreams of youth to a few flattened and withering acres insufficient to accommodate moderate reforms, much less Tolstoy’s Kingdom of God or Whitman’s cooperative commonwealth, and those who should be creators, prophets, and poets are constrained to the lesser relations of consumer, supplicant, and taxpayer. The utopian pedagogue ought to believe as Emerson did, that “[w]hat the tender poetic youth dreams, and prays, and paints to-day ... shall be triumphant law and establishment for a hundred years until it gives place in turn to new prayers and pictures.”²⁴ The utopian pedagogue, along with his students, ought to be skeptical of any belief that “closes the door to further examination of history” so as not to also close the doors to the broadest and brightest hopes for the future.²⁵

Second, the utopian pedagogue must believe and teach that diversity is an end in itself. It is the aim and sign of freedom and flourishing. It is not enough to say that diversity is nice. What is needed is the sense that freedom means the free play of individual capacities to be and become and that this entails not only rights but duties, that one’s own freedom begins where others’ does. Where difference is scarce so is freedom, one’s own liberty bound up with that of his neighbors.

This relation of freedom to diversity suggests a different conception, too, of equality. Dewey believed the meaning of equality for democracy is that “every existence deserving the name existence has something unique and irreplaceable, that it does not exist to illustrate a principle, to realize a universal or to embody a kind or class,” and implies not an “external and mechanical” and “quantitative” relation but rather, in spite of difference, the “inapplicability of considerations of greater and less, superior and inferior,” a “metaphysical mathematics of the incommensurable in which each speaks for itself and demands consideration on its own behalf.”²⁶ This is a reciprocal and mutual individualism centered on freedom, equality, and diversity.

Third, the utopian pedagogue must have something to say about belief. For pragmatists since James and Peirce, beliefs are “rules for action.”²⁷

The degree to which a belief changes one's behavior and, thus, the world is its sole significance. A belief in an ideal like freedom or equality or justice is no belief at all if it is not borne out in one's actions. There are not separate worlds for thought and practice, just the one where these are in unity.

For the pragmatist then, beliefs about natural sciences are no different from one's religious and political ideals in that all are meaningful only insofar as they figure into our action in and upon the world — Charles S. Peirce's characterization of beliefs as rules of action, in fact, was published in a popular scientific magazine while James's allusion to it was made in a lecture on religious experience. Thus, the unity of all inquiry has been a central theme in American pragmatism.

The special way of believing we are most concerned with here, utopian thinking, I have argued amounts to veneration of what Tillich called a "symbol of ultimate concern." For Tillich, the ultimate concerns themselves were not chosen consciously. Rather, these are obtained through a religious experience he called "being grasped by" the ultimate, a moment in which one's universe is remade, reoriented. The utopian pedagogue is interested in the development in young people of capacities for being "grasped by" an ultimate concern that points toward greater human flourishing and for making and identifying symbols thereof. On the first count, it is worth considering the kinds of experience we call conversion.

Tillich conceded that most people grow into ultimate concerns, that ideals are most often absorbed in childhood and adolescence and retained through the rest of life. But, of course, it is not uncommon for one to develop very different affinities and beliefs from those of one's family, teachers, and community. Tillich saw such shifts as conversion experiences, in which one's ultimate concerns are reconfigured, one is grasped by another overarching principle or tendency. In the context of religion, this commonly means the apparently sudden rejection of one god or gods for another or one ritual tradition for another, through which both one's conception of the ultimate and the symbols through which one honors it are changed. For radicals like de Cleyre, the coalescence of self and world into the most earnest sort of social hope represents such a conversion as well, as de Cleyre described in her poem "The Burial of My Past Self":²⁸

The seed must burst before the germ unfolds,

The stars must fade before the morning wakes;
 Down in her depths the mine the diamond holds;
 A new heart pulses when the old heart breaks.
 And now, Humanity, I turn to you;
 I consecrate my service to the world!
 Perish the old love, welcome to the new —
 Broad as the space-aisles where the stars are whirled!

In both circumstances — the process of growing up and into a set of ultimate concerns and that of conversion — the pedagogue may play a role. Of course, this is the great anxiety of cultural reactionaries, that schools are machines for leading the young astray from some grand Truth, that they are simply sites of indoctrination. And there is some reason for worry. Schools certainly can be used as such, most troublingly to the oppressive ends of a totalizing state. But the utopian pedagogue too loathes indoctrination, especially if she is a pragmatist for whom the dogmatic and doctrinaire are anathema.

And yet there can be no objectivity or neutrality on the part of an earnest teacher. These are sobriquets for mindlessness and quietism, poor models for young utopians. Rather, it is entirely appropriate for the utopian pedagogue to develop a liberative heuristic consistent with the Deweyan “metaphysic of democracy” in the hopes that the young people in his charge might be grasped by an ultimate concern aimed at ever greater human flourishing, the ever greater free play of all kinds of human capacities. This project necessarily eschews appeals to authority and dogma, undemocratic and impoverished means to inspire real belief and hope.

The utopian pedagogue also has a responsibility to guide young people away from some of the hazards inherent in relations to the ultimate and its symbolic representations. For Tillich, there is a critical distinction to be made between ultimate concerns and one’s symbols for them. As in the religious context, worship of the symbol in itself is idolatry, a redirecting of one’s love and loyalty from the infinite to the finite, a substitution of content (God, socialism, etc.) for concept (ultimacy) that Tillich called demonization.

Among the examples Tillich uses to illustrate this distinction be-

tween the ultimate and its symbols is nationalism. The nationalist turns his gaze from the ideal of an equitable, just, and beloved community to the state, the territory, a *volk*. He makes an idol of the nation, not the hopes it ought to embody, worships the finite rather than the infinite through flags and baubles. He is aiming at the ground and sure to hit it.

Utopian thinking becomes idolatrous, too, when the utopian vision is taken itself to be the ultimate rather than a symbol thereof. One's utopia must always be understood heuristically, not dogmatically — as with Cornel West's Marx-influenced-but-not-rigidly-Marxist (that is, not teleological or dogmatic) prophetic pragmatism.²⁹ The utopia must be understood as a poetic embodiment of ultimate hopes, not the hope itself. To make of it the ultimate is to worship an idol, to pervert one's faith, to court dogmatism and a totalizing impulse.

It is the task of the utopian pedagogue to help always direct the young toward adequate symbols of liberative ultimate concerns, among these their own utopian visions. And while this may sound hopelessly open-ended, the pedagogue herself has to be grasped by particular poetic social hopes even to recognize the significance of her charges'. If she has her own vision of utopia, it has to be these ultimate hopes in back of that vision that she tacks to, regarding the utopia as symbol and always attending to its adequacy and limits as such. And the concept of belief must be treated in a way that points to its ultimate significance in practice.

Fourth, the utopian pedagogue ought to emphasize a poetic literacy, a recognition of and affinity with the unity of all forms of inquiry and experience, all faces of human nature projected onto broad and dialogic literatures. The sciences, arts, religion, political practice, these are all forms of inquiry, their products all and always provisional, no one with any preeminent claim to absolute truth, none rightly availed of appeals to authority external to human experience and desire.

For Thomas More, his Utopians' "opinions" were conceived through "education . . . and good literature and learning," and their work and leisure were to attend likewise to productive, technical, and philosophical concerns. In the utopian tendency the interplay of all aspects of human activity are to be seen in relation without hard margins, as in Kropotkin's *Fields, Factories, and Workshops* or Dewey's thought around technical education where the old, class-ossifying

distinctions between work of the brain and hand are dissolved. This view and these latter expressions of it speak to the dangers inherent in industrialized societies where technics and production have been revolutionized, as Whitman saw the situation in America, without a concomitant revolutionizing of the moral and religious. His vision of industrial democracy and cooperative commonwealth, entailed not only grand productive capacities but also “[l]iteratures, perfect personalities and sociologies, original, transcendental, and expressing ... democracy and the modern,” a “literature underlying life, religious, consistent with science, handling the elements and forces with competent power.”³⁰

Sadly, much recent emphasis in schooling in the United States has been on the narrow and small aim of quantification, box-ticking, the mechanical pouring in and wringing out of facts and rote forms. That approach silos off ways of thinking and being in the world into too-tidy subject areas and rigid grades. It denies the richness and interrelation of history, science, the arts, the universal and the particular; rejects diverse methods of inquiry and modes of affection; dispenses with personality as unmeasurable and thus valueless.

The aim of the utopian pedagogue, when embedded in such systems and confronted with such circumstances, must be to resist. In such cases that resistance very likely must take a form along the lines of Bojesen and Suissa’s “minimal utopianism,”³¹ but the overarching aim must be to guide the young to something beyond functional literacy, beyond even numeracy and a basic scientific sensibility, to a poetic literacy regarding the relatedness of things and ideals and inquiry, of personal becoming and social hope.

CONCLUSION

As I write, America seems in deficit with regard to the utopian sensibility. Our culture and politics seem too much shaped by the kinds of idolatries Tillich worried about. In the U.S., like much of the rich industrialized world, this historical moment is marked by belligerent nationalism, racialized reaction, and xenophobia. Too many are consumed in a destructive worship of the nation, a *volk*, the dead wood of old oppressive social forms.

But the utopian impulse is the very thing that is needed most in such

moments. The dark allure of vulgar nationalism, of fascism, of exclusionary violence and authoritarian submission and dominion cannot be countered meaningfully on scientific, objective, neutral, technical grounds. If there is a future for democracy, these challenges will have to be met with imagination and hope, a resolve deriving from religious commitment to freedom and happiness.

I have tried here to set out an alternative conception of the utopian in terms of religious experience, as symbols of ultimate concern through which one honors one's highest ideals. On this view, the utopian is less about concrete political content than it is about poetic representations of social hope. As such, it need not be framed in terms of archaeology or architecture but rather as an outgrowth of impulses more rightly called religious, and concerns about the particulars of a utopian blueprint are less immediate. Rather, utopian visions may be usefully adjudged by the degree to which they are deployed heuristically rather than dogmatically and by the ultimate concerns they symbolize.

From this perspective, the role of the utopian pedagogue is to create the conditions for development of dispositions consistent with the imaginative work of utopia-building. The ground for that work is prepared through an emphasis on the contingency of historical development and present social arrangements, the inculcation of one's students with an awareness of the particularity and mutability of the norms and needs and institutions of their society. It is given breadth by a regard for difference and diversity as constituents and ends of human freedom and desire. It confronts the nature of belief and its sole significance as rules of action and relates beliefs about the future to general and personal social hopes consistent with a Deweyan metaphysic of democracy. And it invites young people to develop a poetic literacy, the faculties for active engagement in and with diverse literatures that treat of the unity of human experience and inquiry without respect to any authority external to these, that permit of the sort of syntheses required of the earnest utopian with a right regard for the moral as well as the technical.

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