

Embracing the Utopian: Rorty and Dewey on Social Hope

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What is utopia, what is utopianism, and why is it relevant to education today? Reed Underwood shows the renewed importance of these questions in his article, “A New Heart Pulses.” The word, “utopia,” may sound like escapism, as Thomas More played with its double meaning as “good place” and “no place.” However, what is shared in the recent revival of utopianism, as suggested in Underwood’s article, is the future-oriented-ness of the concept. Utopianism is not a mere critique of the status quo – it aims to inspire our imagination for alternatives and to encourage our hope for the “better.”¹ It is not surprising that educational scholars David Halpin and Darren Webb, who have worked on utopianism in this broad sense, have also contributed to the growing literature on hope. In this response, I explore this element of hope, particularly social hope, which is central to Underwood’s discussion as well as to utopianism.

Let’s look at how Underwood sets up his discussion first. He begins by pointing out the problem in how to conceive “utopia.” According to him, there have been two ways, namely conceiving of it as a “blueprint,” or an “open-ended process,” which have been compared to “architecture” and “archaeology,” respectively. These two views have their own benefits and risks. The “blueprint” view enables us to work to achieve a certain end-point, but involves control and forecloses alternatives. The “process” view, in contrast, allows us to have space for alternatives, but invites aimless inquiry which does not necessarily improve the status quo. Underwood thus claims that we are in a dilemma between the two, and proposes a third way — it is to focus not on a “utopia” but on the “utopian,” and conceive it as certain individual “dispositions,” such as “utopian sensibility.” With this conception of the utopian, he proposes a pedagogy to cultivate those utopian dispositions.

What, then, is “utopian” sensibility? Underwood characterizes it as a poetic and religious sensibility with an orientation of social hope, drawing largely on Richard Rorty’s article, “Pragmatism as Romantic Polytheism” (1998). First, as Rorty describes Christianity as the “work of the strong poets,”²² the “poetic” and the “religious” are understood as the same thing, for both of them serve our “project of individual self-development”²³ or “perfection,” and help us find our “ultimate concern” (e.g. “meaning in life,” “satisfactory self-image,” or “what the Good is”²⁴). Moreover, this romantic “privatization” of the poetic and the religious is taken to entail an orientation to a certain image of society. As Rorty draws from J. S. Mill, when we pursue our private concerns, we must acknowledge that other people pursue their own and “worship their own gods, so to speak.”²⁵ With this principle of tolerance, the poetic and the religious connect to “polytheism,” and to a hope for a society where every individual pursues his or her perfection. In light of this romantic polytheism, Rorty presents Walt Whitman’s and John Dewey’s hope: “glorious democratic vistas stretching on indefinitely into the future” as a “symbol of ultimate concerns.”²⁶

Along those lines, Underwood claims that “Rorty links up the poetic, the religious, and the utopian,” and elicits a conception of the utopian as a poetic-religious sensibility with a social democratic hope. According to him, this conception is better than others, for in this conception, utopia is taken as an “outgrowth” of utopian dispositions, which represents “yet undreamt of, ever more diverse, forms of human happiness.” This utopia is neither a closed “blue-print” nor aimless “open-ended process,” but it guides our inquiry and practice. Underwood thus solves the dilemma with Rortyan-Deweyan romantic social hope.

I think that Underwood’s approach to utopian pedagogy is promising, however, the question seems to remain – *which social hope, which utopia?* In his view, in order to be utopian, one must be poetic, religious, and hope for a “democratic” society where every individual pursues his or her perfection. This hope, according to Rorty and Underwood, is Dewey’s hope. However, is it really Dewey’s democratic hope – or is it more consistent with Rorty’s “liberal hope”? Asking this question may be helpful in further exploration of utopian pedagogy, because Rortyan hope and Deweyan hope would inspire a different

set of pedagogies with a different picture of utopia (e.g. conversations and historical narratives for Rorty's "liberal utopia,"⁷ or interest, communication, and participation for Dewey's "democratic ideal"). In what follows, I briefly discuss Dewey's democratic hope in his own writings. Apparently, his democratic ideal confronts the dilemma of utopianism; but I conclude by suggesting that Dewey could also provide a solution, with his idea of "democracy as a way of life."

First, it is noteworthy that Rorty's focus in "Pragmatism as Romantic Polytheism," is on religion and he aims to defend "Dewey's tolerance for religious belief against those who think that pragmatism and religion do not mix."⁸ In this context, Rorty emphasizes that the private "projects of individual self-development" (e.g. poetry, religion) are distinguished from the public "projects of social cooperation" (e.g. natural science, law) and do not require the "intersubjective agreement."⁹ And, as he repeats, democracy has a "commitment to honor the rights of individuals,"¹⁰ or what Nietzsche called the "free-spiritedness and many spiritedness,"¹¹ and the only constraint is Mill's s-called harm principle.

It is undeniable that Dewey envisioned a democratic society, as Rorty quotes, where every individual is educated to "the full stature of his possibility."¹² However, it should be noted that Dewey provides a more "positive" and interactive democracy, where individual development and social collaboration are intertwined. To illustrate this, the following passage from Dewey's "The Need for a Philosophy of Education" seems relevant.

The aim of education is development of individuals to the utmost of their potentialities. But this statement as such leaves unanswered the question of the measure of the development to be desired and worked for. A society of free individuals in which all, in doing each his own work, contribute to the liberation and enrichment of the lives of others is the only environment for the normal growth to full stature. An environment in which some are limited will always in reaction create conditions that prevent the full development even of those who fancy they enjoy complete freedom for unhindered growth.¹³

Dewey thus argues that a society of free individuals which to which all the individuals contribute is the “only” environment for the growth to full stature, for we grow through “communication” with others, where we reformulate our experience and re-discover its meanings.¹⁴ As he notes, “the task of democracy is forever that of creating of a freer and more humane experience in which all share and to which all contribute.”¹⁵

One may wonder whether Dewey’s democratic “utopia” can avoid the dilemma of utopianism. As Underwood shows, the Rortyan-Deweyan version of utopia is taken as an “outgrowth” of utopian dispositions, and thereby, resolves the dilemma: however, Dewey’s democratic hope seems to entail a strong democratic “ideal” like a “blueprint” of utopia. I want to end this response with a passage from his “Creative Democracy - the Task Before Us.”

Democracy as a way of life is controlled by personal faith in personal day-by-day working together with others ... to cooperate by giving differences a chance to show themselves because of the belief that the expression of difference is not only a right of the other persons but is a means of enriching one’s own life-experience, is inherent in the democratic personal way of life.¹⁶

1 See e.g. David Halpin, “Hope, Utopianism and Educational Management,” *Cambridge Journal of Education* 31, no. 1 (2001): 103-118; Darren Webb, “Where’s the Vision? The Concept of Utopia in Contemporary Educational Theory,” *Oxford Review of Education* 35, no. 6 (2009): 743-760.

2 Richard Rorty, “Pragmatism as Romantic Polytheism,” in *The Revival of Pragmatism: New Essays on Social Thought, Law, and Culture*, ed. Morris Dickstein (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 26.

3 Ibid., 28.

4 Richard Rorty, “Cultural Politics and the Question of the Existence of God,” in *Philosophy as Cultural Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 22.

5 Rorty, “Pragmatism as Romantic Polytheism,” 24.

6 Ibid., 32.

7 See e.g. Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); *Philosophy and Social Hope* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999); John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (1916), in *John Dewey: The Middle Works*, vol. 9, ed. Jo

Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press).

8 Ibid., 25.

9 Ibid., 28.

10 Ibid. 34.

11 Ibid. 30

12 Rorty, "Pragmatism as Romantic Polytheism," 33.

13 John Dewey, "The Need for A Philosophy of Education (1934)," in *John Dewey: The Later Works*, Vol. 9, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press), 202. (Emphasis added)

14 Dewey, *Democracy and Education*.

15 John Dewey, "Creative Democracy - The Task Before Us" (1939) in *John Dewey: The Later Works*, vol.14, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press), 230.

16 Dewey, "Creative Democracy - The Task Before Us" (1939), 228.