

Dystopia and disutopia: Hope and hopelessness in German pupils' future narratives

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Abstract Within the academic field of futures in education there has been concern that pupils' negative and pessimistic future scenarios could be deleterious to their minds. Eckersley (Futures 31:73–90, 1999) argues that pessimism among young people can produce cynicism, mistrust, anger, apathy and an approach to life based on instant gratification. This article suggests that we need to discuss negative and pessimistic future visions in a more profound and complex way since these contain both hope and hopelessness. A pessimistic view of the future does not have to be negative in itself: it can also illustrate a critical awareness of contemporary social order. This article therefore aims to explore hope and hopelessness in young people's dystopias about the future. Adopting dystopias may open up possibilities, whereas adopting disutopias will only lead one to believe that there are no alternatives to the current dominant model of global capitalism. Even a dystopia that predicts the end of the world as we know it might be the beginning of a world that we have not seen yet.

Keywords Futures · Narratives · Dystopia · Disutopia · Hope · Social change

Introduction

Within the academic field of futures in education there has been concern that pupils' negative and pessimistic future scenarios could have a destructive effect on the minds of young people. This article should therefore be understood in the light of these publications in the field of futures in education. One focus in this research has

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been to analyse how images of the future reflect pupils' overall outlook of the future (Eckersley 1988, 1992, 1995; Hannan et al. 1995; Hicks 1995, 1996; Johnson 1987; Wilson 1989). Much of the research has been on discerning preferable and non-preferable futures and on analysing the relationship between the story (what kind of future) and storyteller (age, gender, nationality, religion, culture) (Gidley and Hampson 2005). Analysing people's future visions is actually very much about analysing our contemporary society, as Hicks writes: "Hopes and fears for the future often influence decision-making in the present" (2012:7).

Within the academic field there has been a worrisome assumption that young people have overall negative feelings about the development of society and that these could be destructive. Research from, predominantly, the UK and Australia has highlighted young people's feelings of despair and powerlessness about the future (Eckersley 1988, 1992, 1995; Hannan et al. 1995; Hicks 1995, 1996; Johnson 1987; Wilson 1989). Many young people are concerned about the environment, the economy and unemployment (Eckersley 1996; Hannan et al. 1995; Hutchinson 1992). In their UK study, Hicks and Holden (1995) argue that pessimism grows with age: seven-year-olds have an optimism about the future which is later replaced by scepticism. Eckersley has argued that children and young people tend to react personally to global threats in apocalyptic frames (1999). He has warned that:

pessimism among young people could produce cynicism, mistrust, anger, apathy and an approach to life based on instant gratification rather than long-term goals or lasting commitment. (1999: 88)

Eckersley argues that society often fails to provide a vision of the future that gives hope to people and that "failure to provide a broad cultural framework of hope, meaning and purpose in young people's lives could be weakening their resilience, making them more vulnerable to these problems" (1999: 88). There is a perception that a positive outlook for the future is essential for the well-being of pupils.

Over the course of my 3-year-long research project, I collected and analyzed data on how a sample of German pupils studying politics made sense of social change and what forces drive social change in society. I asked the pupils to write a paper on how the world will have changed in 20 years and what social factors will have led to these changes. The study was performed in three classes (12th/13th grade) at two different Gymnasiums (equivalent to high schools in the US or grammar schools in the UK) on the subject of politics in the city of Oldenburg in Lower Saxony, Germany. The pupils were aged between 17 and 19 years; the sample size was 52 pupils.

A negative and pessimistic tone was found in most of the written narratives. There was also a slight discrepancy between a negative outlook regarding society in general and a more positive outlook for the participants' personal futures. The aim of this article is not to examine whether German pupils are more pessimistic or optimistic than pupils from other nations: the aim is rather to discuss negative and pessimistic future visions in a more profound and complex way since these contain both hope and hopelessness.

Pupils' pessimistic future visions do not have to be without hope. On the contrary, critical visions of the future show an engagement with negative aspects of

contemporary society. The distinction between dystopias and disutopias is a possible way to separate hopeful and hopeless future narratives. Dystopias could open up possibilities whereas disutopias will only lead to the conclusion that there are no alternatives.

Dinnerstein and Neary discuss disutopia as a future without any alternatives and see it as “the political celebration of the end of social dreams (1999:3)”. Dystopias could in contrast open up possibilities whereas disutopias will only lead to the conclusion that there are no alternatives to the current dominant model of global capitalism. Most of the dystopian narratives have traces of hope. An interesting aspect is the constant interplay between, on one side, hope (society can change) and, on the other hopelessness (all attempts to change will fail).

This article concludes that an understanding of the difference between dystopian and disutopian future narratives could help scholars and teachers to work with negative future narratives in a progressive and critical way. Imagining negative outcomes of the future could be very much seen as part of a critical educational agenda. Chege argues that the goal of critical pedagogy is to equip the student “with skills that enable them to reflect and critically engage their experience” and “to equip them to challenge social conditions that shape and influence their experiences” (Chege 2009:235). According to Giroux, education should give pupils the skills to imagine different futures (Giroux and Giroux 2006:29). By working actively with dystopian and utopian elements of pupils’ images of the future, scholars can narrow the distance between progressive teachers and pupils.

This article will be divided into five main parts: “[Background](#)” discusses the theoretical framework of this article; “[Narrative and method](#)” discusses the methodology of the study; “[Findings](#)” presents the empirical analysis; and “[What does a dystopian future narrative really mean?](#)” presents a discussion of the empirical data.

Background

This article is based on research that aims to shed light on how pupils make sense of the future of society in general and social change specifically. The overarching aim is to create a profound and complex understanding of negative future narratives or dystopias as pupils interact with contemporary society.

Among many scholars, the lack of utopian future scenarios is seen as a negative sign. Habermas perceived an exhaustion of utopian dreams, which he argued could be linked to a legitimation crisis of the welfare state. He saw doubts about the emancipator potential of non-alienated social labour in late capitalist societies (1989). Bauman argues further that we have now reached a post-utopian society (2004). The lack of belief in a utopian, or at least better social order than the current one, has led some to adopt a pessimistic outlook. Weiler goes even further and paints a bleak picture where most individuals sleepwalk through their lives that are dominated and determined and living in deluded mediated fantasies (Weiler 2003). Critical scholars argue that the current lack of belief in a different social order can

be understood through the dominance of postmodern capitalism (Ainley and Canaan 2005; Giroux 2004; McLaren 2001).

Hicks mentions the Beyond Current Horizons programme that explored “the socio-technological developments likely to shape the future and the subsequent challenges this will pose for education” (Hicks 2012:9). He argues that this study dismissed the thought that young people should be “taught to think creatively and critically about the future” and that education “merely responds to extrapolated socio-technological demands” (2012:9). Hicks argues that education reflects the values of the dominant political ideology which in the West is neoliberalism. Hicks sees, in dominant futures that are unfettered, technocentric, and based on free market economics, constant consumerism, and narcissistic individualism, “This ideology is inevitably reproduced in schools and underpins most western views of the future” (2012:12).

My research in Germany tells another story where the sample of pupils are critically engaged with both contemporary and possible futures. Interestingly, even in the most negative and pessimistic future narratives, there are different levels of hope. To be able to capture the seeming contradiction of hope in dystopian future narratives, this article aims to differentiate between utopian, dystopian and disutopian future narratives. This article suggests that pessimistic future narratives with dystopian elements should not be perceived as more hopeless than utopian thinking. On the contrary, some dystopian thinking lets us imagine how a transformation will start, what will be the drivers of change or what will prevent a utopian vision from becoming reality. This article will therefore distinguish between pupil dystopias that could precede a more hopeful and socially-just future and disutopian elements that can only be understood as expressing hopelessness.

Utopia, dystopia and disutopia

The concept of utopia has been directly linked to the concept of hope. Utopian Socialists imagine a more socially-just society. Moylan sees utopias as “figures of hope” (Moylan 1986:1). The expression “utopia” was coined by Thomas More in his (in)famous book from 1516 “which signifies simultaneously the good place (eu-topia) and the no-place (ou-topia)” (Garforth 2009:8). Krishan Kumar defined utopia as a “work of imaginative fiction in which, unlike other such works, the central subject is the good society” (Kumar 1991:27). Kumar argues further that a utopia is about the principles of a good society that are shown in operation and in a narrative form (Kumar 1991:31). In many ways, utopia has been perceived to be linked with progress and more importantly the dream of progress. Oscar Wilde linked progress and utopia:

A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at, for it leaves out the one country at which Humanity is always landing. And when Humanity lands there, it looks out, and, seeing a better country, sets sail. Progress is the realisation of Utopias (Cited in Garforth 2009:6).

There is a risk of seeing utopia as a blueprint that needs to be followed. Often utopia is more about a desire for a better world than real and exact guidance towards a

static social vision. Both Marx and Engels rejected utopian thinking since, to them, it was nothing more than an escapist daydream. “For Marx and Engels, utopias were fanciful pictures of a better society that functioned as escapist if wistful distractions from the realities of proletarian struggle; ideological compensations for alienation and exploitation” (Garforth 2009:7). Utopian thinking has also been linked to keeping the hope for an alternative future alive and engaging critically with contemporary society. As Bauman puts it: ‘Any utopianism worth the name must engage in a significant polemic with the dominant culture’ (1976:47).

Levitas argued that utopian desire is rooted in the “socially constructed gap between the needs and wants generated by a particular society and the satisfactions available to and distributed by it” (Levitas 1990:181–182). Utopias (and of course dystopias) “are not just ways of imagining the future (or the past) but can also be understood as concrete practices through which historically situated actors seek to re-imagine their present and transform it into a plausible future” (Gordin et al. 2010:2). Hence, utopias have often been linked to hope. However, utopian thinking is not the only route to imagine different futures: dystopian narratives can also play an important role in re-imagining the present.

A dystopian future vision does not mean per se a hopeless view of the future but it could imply an actual critical understanding of contemporary society. Dystopias should be understood as a critique instead of a celebration of a possible tangible future (Compare Marcuse 1964). “[D]ystopian writers tend to show the unwanted or unforeseen consequences of progress” and dystopia is often seen as an expression of fear, pessimism and revolt (Ania 2007:157).

The genres of dystopias and utopias may be different in their outset (overtly negative versus positive vision). Still one should not see dystopias as the complete opposite of Utopias, however. “[D]ystopia is not simply the opposite of utopia” but [a] true opposite of utopia would be a society that is either completely unplanned or is planned to be deliberately terrifying and awful” (Gordin et al. 2010:1). A dystopia is a utopia that has gone very much wrong or a “utopia that functions only for a particular segment of society” (Gordin et al. 2010:1). One could see dystopia as a critical analysis of contemporary society and its potential negative consequences for the future.

Dystopias could be seen as a reflection of contemporary society and experiences and how they then form the building stones of possible futures. Dystopias can sometimes go as far as depicting the end of society as we know it. Imagining the end of our contemporary societal system brings us to the question of what will happen after such a crisis. Therefore, every narrative needs a change and so does every utopia and dystopia.

I suggest that it is important to distinguish between a dystopian future vision (where hope is possible) and a disutopian vision (where hope is neglected). Disutopias are negative not just because they are pessimistic per se but because they do not create the space or possibility for a change or an alternative. They are pessimistic future narratives that go ‘same old, same old, but only worse’.

Jameson argues further that today we can encounter a form of anti-utopianism that could be seen as a “fiercely anti-utopian and anti-revolutionary ideology for which utopias inevitably lead to repression and dictatorship, to conformity and

boredom' (2004:41). Dinnerstein and Neary define disutopia as the “significant project of our time” which is “the political celebration of the end of social dreams (1999:3)”. They suggest that this is not apathy but rather an active process of:

involving simultaneously the struggle to control contradiction and diversity, and the acclamation of diversity; the repression of the struggles against Disutopia and the celebration of individual self-determination. The result of this is social Schizophrenia (1999:3).

Jameson argues that the march towards disutopia should be understood through rising global inequalities that divide the population into two anti-utopian halves:

In one of these worlds, the disintegration of the social is so absolute misery, poverty, unemployment, starvation, squalor, violence and death that the intricately elaborated social schemes of utopian thinkers become as frivolous as they are irrelevant. In the other, unparalleled wealth, computerized production, scientific and medical discoveries unimaginable a century ago as well as an endless variety of commercial and cultural pleasures, seem to have rendered utopian fantasy and speculation as boring and antiquated as pre-technological narratives of space flight (Jameson 2005:xii).

If we can imagine dystopias as being hopeful and disutopias as being hopeless we might gain a more complex view on how young people see the future. A dystopia must not per se be hopeless.

Narrative and method

This article is based on the findings of a 3-year-long research project. This research used a narrative approach towards the future which engages with the pupils as story-tellers. I argue that narrative approach is an effective method to analyse and understand different futures, social change and drivers of change. Narrative method can also be used in research and teaching to stimulate pupils to imagine different futures for society and to assess what form of social change could make these futures become reality. Narrative method can further be used as a critical and reflective tool for observing contemporary society. The article engages with the pupils as story-tellers. This article will therefore work primarily with the concept of future narratives of pupils which means pupils create future narratives that outline change and the drivers of change.

A narrative is a particular discourse as it forms a certain linguistic pattern that is based around plots and characters. What is common for all narratives is the plot, which defines what the story is about (Jaworski and Coupland 2000:31). There are two definitions of “plot” that are useful and insightful for this study. First of all, narratives must show a change of state, a broken equilibrium, and result in a new equilibrium. A narrative defines a temporal transition from one temporal equilibrium to another temporal equilibrium (Ochs 1998:197).

In addition, a plot needs characters, forces that are pitched against each other. Todorov suggests that characters are not only human subjects, but could and should

be interpreted in a broad way. A character could be nature, animals, time and so on (Todorov 1977:111). A narrative could therefore be defined as having three basic elements: a situation that includes conflicts/struggle, a protagonist with intentions and a sequence with implied causality which leads to a solution of the conflict (Carter 1993). Many narratives in educational research focus primarily on subject aspects by using reflection, autobiographical recording and biography (Hay 2004; Hay et al. 2004; Hay and White 2005). This study aims for narratives of larger scope that address larger societal narratives.

This study focuses on larger societal narratives. Linde (1986) discusses, for example, narratives at a group level. Linde sees the group life story as a collective analogy to the individual life story (Linde 1986). A group life story, as a national life story, tells “who we are, what must be known to know us” and it is a “discontinuous unit, built up both by the public discourse of history books, civic texts, articles about sociology, political speeches, etc., as well as by private oral narratives” (Linde 1986:999). Future narratives incorporate storytelling about society and how it will change and who/what will change society in the future. This study has created a narrative methodology based on the pupil as a storyteller in both written and oral form. The case study and methodology of this study will be presented below.

Method

This article will focus on the written narratives of pupils (written assignments and follow up interviews from German pupils) and especially the dystopian aspects of these narratives. The study was conducted in 2007 in three classes (12th/13th grade) at two different German Gymnasiums (equivalent to High Schools in the US or Grammar Schools in the UK) within the subject of politics in the city of Oldenburg in Lower Saxony in Germany. The pupils were aged between 17 and 19 years. The study was based on written assignments as a first methodological step, followed by in-depth interviews. 52 (83.9 %) pupils participated in the study out of a total number of 62 pupils in the classes. Four pupils participated in the study, but then refused to submit their written assignment. Six pupils were absent. Therefore, a total of 48 written assignments were analysed. This was followed by 10 in-depth interviews based on the written assignments. This methodological approach is elaborated upon below. The study was limited to three classes from two schools in Oldenburg, Lower Saxony, Northern Germany (Table 1).

The author created five help questions that had the purpose of guiding the pupils' writing of a future narrative without steering it in any specific direction. The first question was aimed at providing the information needed to create the first and last part of the plot, temporal equilibrium 1 and temporal equilibrium 2. The second question was posed to define disruption, which is also the main feature of the plot. The third and fourth questions were aimed at identifying actors and forces that help the story to make sense. The last question was aimed at reminding the pupils to think about the relationship between the individual and society with respect to social change. Every pupil had 60 min to write their future narratives. The written

Table 1 Assignment

“Look into the future”

Imagine that you will travel 20 years into the future and experience the future society with all its positive and negative aspects. You should now think about how society, politics, economy, your public and private life would be in 20 years

Assignment:

You have 60 min to compare the future society with the contemporary society, and to write an essay about it. Please write in complete sentences and avoid using single keywords and charts. Assume that society has changed and that there was/were one or many catalysts for these change(s). The questions below should be used as help for the content; they do not have to reflect the overall layout of the essay

1. How has society changed? How was society before the change/s and how is the society after the change/s?
 2. What was/were the catalyst(s) for this/these change(s)?
 3. What factor(s) did make the change(s) in society, what circumstance(s) tried to prevent the change(s)?
 4. Why has society changed? What kind of reasons and interests were behind such a change?
 5. What is the relationship between (wo)man and society?
-

assignments were given to the pupils who were attending elected politics courses (Politik als Leistungsfach), which meant that pupils had both an interest in the subject and in participating in the written assignment. The written assignments were carried out during the class, which meant that the assignment could be perceived as part of the curriculum. The 48 written assignments have been evaluated according to different themes. Some pupils focused on a few themes only, others mentioned a larger variety of themes, all of which are presented in Table 2.

To create a deeper and more complex public narrative, the author decided to include interviews to gain more depth. The interview guide was closely based on the written assignments of the pupils. The interviews added depth and width of material which enabled a more rich analysis. The interviews were used to explain and expand on the pupils' written assignments with a focus on drivers of change. The interviews were semi-structured.

The interview guide included questions that were based on themes from the written assignment. These were used to provoke discussion around the themes. When interesting topics were raised the interviewer followed them up. All the interviews were performed by the author together with a research assistant at the university. The average length of the interview was around 1 h. 18 pupils were selected for possible interviews according to the scheme, which was based on six thematic groups that were derived from the written assignments and each thematic group was composed of three pupils; hence, the thematic groups included 18 chosen written assignments in total.

This article focuses specifically on the dystopian aspects of these written assignments and interviews. Even though dystopian storytelling was dominant among the pupils' written assignments, there were still pupils that authored narratives with some utopian elements (a positive description of globalisation or

Table 2 Themes mentioned by the pupils

| Themes | Frequence | Theme | Frequence |
|---|-----------|--|-------------|
| Politics (including environmental and economic politics/political disenchantment) | 36 | Obsolescence | 11 |
| Technology/research | 27 | Media | 7 |
| Economy | 26 | Culture | 6 |
| Social inequality | 22 | Individualisation | 6 |
| Labour market | 17 | Communication | 4 |
| Private/family life | 16 | Societal change/revolution | 4 |
| Welfare state | 16 | Migration | 3 |
| Environmental problems/climate change | 16 | Economic/political system | 3 |
| Surveillance state/control state | 13 | Emancipation | 2 |
| Society | 12 | Health | 2 |
| Natural resources | 12 | Moral, materialism, imperialism, terrorism, transport, secularisation and developing countries | 1 per theme |

technological progress, for example) but I will touch upon these in the discussion. The narratives of pupils tended to be divided into two different types:

The first type of written assignments described the future of certain aspects of society (such as the role of politics vis-à-vis the economy) and they covered different and diverse aspects of the future: the future of education, the future of the environment, the future of media consumption. These written assignments were interesting since they touched upon different themes but they did not create the basis of a coherent dystopian narrative. Still many of these thematic paragraphs did often briefly use and/or imply elements of dystopian/disutopian narratives (such as the negative effects of the global economy on German politics, the welfare state and the labour market) and few elements of utopian narratives (such as the positive effects of technology towards living standards and development).

The second type of written assignments developed more coherent future narratives that implied a beginning, middle and end and that depicted a transition from one equilibrium to another. These written assignments tended to be more of a classical narrative with less of a focus on themes and more of a focus on a cohesive plot that describes a certain future and in some occasions also a focus on the underlying reasons why this future could or will happen. The most dystopian of these written assignments painted bleak futures about global economies that dismantle the welfare states or even the breakdown of the whole current economic system due to an overuse of natural resources or violent revolts. Many of these narratives do touch upon similar topics as the first type of narratives but the main difference is the focus on certain themes and narrative coherence.

It is important to point out that the actual written assignments and interviews show in no way complete and non-contradictory story-telling. On the contrary,

many of the narratives have both dystopian, disutopian and in rare cases even utopian elements. In the presentation of empirical material, I have aimed at including different pupils' narratives within the large empirical material of the 48 written assignments and from the 10 qualitative interviews.

Findings

The aim of this section is to show that there is an enormous complexity in understanding the dystopian and disutopian elements of the pupils' storytelling. The overall argument that I want to make is that the dystopian narratives show more critical self-engagement and engagement with society rather than cynicism, mistrust, anger, apathy and an approach to life based on instant gratification.

Most of the dystopian visions share similar characteristics: they are based around rising inequalities between a powerful elite and the powerless mass, they describe a hyper-capitalist society that will undermine the power of the nation state, welfare state, politics and labour unions through globalisation and technology. The consequences are a global dependence on the economy and powerful corporations. Technology is discussed in many dystopias as replacing humans as labour but also as a basis for a surveillance state. Some dystopian visions focus on the negative effects of climate change and resource depletion.

To separate hopeful dystopian narrative elements from hopeless disutopian elements, I have created a table (see Table 3) that focuses on the outcome of the future narratives. Disutopian narratives portray an endless downwards spiral which excludes any other alternatives. Disutopian narratives should be understood as hopeless, as they cannot be avoided by human agency and represent a disempowering approach to the future. Dystopian narratives could be hopeful if they assume that society can change and become better or a new start could be possible. I argue that that dystopian narrative could be hopeful and highlight the possibility for humans to imagine a different future.

Because the aim of the article is to highlight how dystopias can entail hope, we therefore need at this moment to exclude the disutopian elements of the pupils' narratives. Important here is to link hope and transitions in a dystopian narrative. In Table 4, I have represented different types of transitions based around hopeful elements among the dystopian future narratives. These are based on the dystopian future narratives of the pupils that will be presented, discussed and analysed in the next subsection.

There are three possible hopeful outcomes that could be found within a dystopian future narrative. A 'crossroad' indicates that society can change in time to avoid reaching a breaking point without a "revolt". Alternatively, a revolt would mean that a breaking point had been reached and, as a result, this revolt would have opened up possibilities for a change. "Catastrophe" means that the breaking point had been passed and that the whole societal structure had broken down. This could, in a best case scenario, mean the beginning of a new story.

The four presented dystopias (Table 5) are the most common ones among the written assignments/interviews. They represent how the dominant themes in the

Table 3 Overview of dystopian/disutopian endings

| Forecast/End | Description | Nature | Evaluation |
|-------------------------|--|---------------|---------------|
| Endless downward spiral | There is no end in sight and things will only get worse | Determinism | Hopelessness |
| Revision | Society will revise some of its negative characteristics but keep some of its better sides | Indeterminism | Hope possible |
| A new start | Society will make a complete new start and begin with something better | Indeterminism | Hope possible |

Table 4 Overview of dystopian endings

| Transition | Description | Consequence | Requirement |
|-------------|--|--|---|
| Crossroad | Society is at a cross road and will need to be reformed to avoid reaching the breaking point | Society will continue in a similar but reformed fashion. Dystopia is a warning signal | There is an agreement that change is needed and there is an opportunity to implement change |
| Revolt | The breaking point is reached and parts of society will revolt against the ruling order | The revolt will open possibilities for a new society but it could also lead to a relapse | Change can only come through strong and even violent opposition |
| Catastrophe | The breaking point is passed and the whole societal system is facing a break down | The catastrophe could lead to a new system but it could also lead to a relapse or even the end of humanity | Change can only come if the contemporary social order breaks down |

written assignments are used in a relatively coherent narrative and how these dystopias reflect different opportunities for another social reality or even, in rare cases, some hope. These dystopias are discussed below. It is necessary to point out that there are other dystopian narratives in the sample and that all narratives in the sample are not dystopian. Still, these four are the most dominant dystopian visions that cover most of the pupils' themes.

The dark globalisation

This dystopia focuses on globalisation as a force that will undermine the nation state and the welfare state by putting both nation states and their peoples in competition with other nation states and peoples. I have chosen Emilie's written assignment as an example of this dystopia. According to her vision, in twenty years, society will have faced large changes and especially the economic situation will be more determined by globalisation. She pictures a world with fewer corporations but these corporations will be much larger and mightier than today. An example of this would be that a corporation in China will produce cars that will be exported to all the countries in the world. She argues that today different producers and brands of cars exist; however in the future there will be just one brand of car. Competition would

Table 5 Overview of selected dystopian narratives

| Dystopias | Description | Could lead to |
|--|--|---|
| The dark globalisation | Globalisation will undermine the nation and the welfare state. It will create social inequality. Power will be transformed to global corporations | The economy will dominate all spheres of life |
| Techno-capitalism | Capitalism and technology will replace human labour and undermine the national labour market and the welfare state | The system undermines itself and could crash |
| Climate change and natural resources depletion | The human society and capitalism have exploited global natural resources to a degree that could either lead to a deterioration of the social, political and economic spheres or even a crash of the whole system | The degradation of global natural resources will create global tension that could lead to an undermining of the whole economic system |
| National surveillance state | The nation state focuses on surveillance in the service of a rich elite. The world is controlled by the global economy | Revolt of the poorest |

then be completely absent from the market. Products would no longer be produced in one location but in many different states. The country and location that could offer the cheapest conditions for production will then get the contract and therefore employment and wages. In other words, Emilie describes a world where countries and locations compete to have corporations produce their products there.

According to Emilie, this will happen according to changes in affluence in the future: wealth will no longer be limited to the richest countries in the world but rather wealth will also accumulate in developing countries that provide the best production offers to the corporations (e.g. lower wages). She argues that this would mean that the German welfare state will suffer from this development since increasingly fewer people will have work and the vast majority of the population will live in poverty. The state will lack the resources to secure an adequate living standard for the unemployed and their families. The much lower revenues from income tax will lead to a negative financial situation for the state. Her dystopia ends with a short utopian note that technical progress will have eased many aspects of life and that it will become faster to travel from one point to another point. Emilie's dystopia describes globalisation almost as a natural force and provides the reader with no alternatives or ways to reform globalisation. It could be seen as a rather hopeless future vision for the welfare state and the free market. Such a dystopia describes a gradual but endless downward spiral.

An even more pessimistic version of this story is given by Karl, who paints a picture of how society is dissolved by the economy. Furthermore, he argues that people will have become egoists who only think of their own success and who try to protect and enhance their own riches at any cost. He sees globalisation as a force that coerces people to become flexible or fall away from society. All forces that try to counter globalisation "are broken by the power of the economy" (Karl, written

assignment). Both these arguments show that resistance is futile and society will go the same way, independently of whichever actions people take.

Techno-capitalism

This dystopia is a narrative about how technology and capitalism will dehumanize society, replacing human labour with robots and in the long run leading to corporations undermining the nation state/welfare state. I have chosen Franz's dystopia (here elaborated on in an interview). Franz's storytelling focuses on the effects of technology and the development of technology, which is seen as the motor of both globalisation and capitalism. Corporations will become faster, more flexible and more mobile through technology. Technology becomes a compulsion for everyone. According to Franz, the main paradox is that the development of technology will make people superfluous. Older and weaker citizens will not be able to keep pace. He predicts that each individual's compulsion towards flexibility and mobility will lead to the result that the European lifestyle will be completely changed: from the principle "We work to live" to the principle "We live to work". People will have to make their contribution to the economy; everything else will be secondary.

Economic development will be similar to that in the USA in former times when so-called trusts, large alliances and federations of huge companies will divide up the market among themselves. International firms, so-called Global Players, will decide amongst each other about their interests. In this sense, trusts of Global Players will replace national states as they can act completely beyond borders. If a product is forbidden in Germany, these trusts will produce it in another country. A company could black-mail the state by threatening to dismiss their employees and to move to another country. In this case, the state will have to "feed" the unemployed.

In the future, there will be no rags to riches and nouveau riche anymore. This will not be possible anymore. There will be only one elite and that will be the elite of the corporations. That is the elite who owns the corporations. Then there will be a second group: employees who do valuable work and therefore need to be materially honoured. The remaining groups in society will be the unimportant "rubbish", such as, for example, the 'White Trash' in the USA, who do not have any importance or value. This group will grow. Because of the high technological nature of the economy, these people will not be needed in the future.

Franz means that in the future the welfare state will not catch the poorly-educated when they fall. These people will drift away without help from the state. Franz thinks about slums in South America as an example when he reflects about this development. The slums are newly-created societies, a community, but the lives of people are short and end around the age of 40. There will be more of these parallel societies in the future: on one side mobile communities and on the other side the losers of globalisation. They will have lost everything. This hardship will create a strong value, a unity creating a regional bond. Franz wonders and doubts if they will be able to organize themselves.

There will be a higher radicalization to the left and the right in society. Instead there will be more terrorism and also a revival of national terrorism such as the Rote

Armee Fraktion (Red Army Fraction) or the Irish Republican Army. According to Franz, the increased speed will allow less time to think. Technology will “take over certain processes—thinking processes” from humans. This will create a form of atomisation. Franz argues that in the future, people will have no possibility to create new thought processes or to think about what could be done in another way. People will not reflect on whether or not they should drop an atomic bomb on Iran or not, instead they will simply do it.

The pupil suggests that in the future, the economy will be decoupled from humans and will not be fit to supply humans’ needs. According to Franz, the majority of companies consider their customers to be unimportant. The more technical companies become, the fewer consumers they will have. According to Franz, corporations will produce more and more while there will be fewer and fewer people who will want to buy. Franz sees the future outlook as bleak for society. Franz outlines two possible outcomes but in his interview he tends to favour the most bleak outcome. On one side, he paints a crossroads situation for capitalism, where capitalism will adapt to human needs and decrease its productivity or the economy will be more forceful and military involvement will help to open new markets. The last way might lead to the possibility that the entire global economy could crash. As with many other dystopian visions the author highlights what could happen if nothing changes but he does take a disutopian tone in the possibility of the underclass revolting. He also doubts capitalism’s abilities to stop expanding and adapt to the needs of the people. His main argument is that humans are today driven by a survival instinct that has gone astray.

Climate change and natural resources depletion

This dystopia is centred around how human consumption and production are directly linked to climate change and the scarcity of natural resources. The negative consequences of climate change, natural disasters and resource depletion are often described as a Pandora’s Box unleashed by human activity. I have chosen Marco’s written assignment as an example of this dystopia. He begins by arguing that the capitalist system is approaching ever closer the edge of an abyss. Marco can imagine that in the foreseeable future there will be a breakdown of both the market system and society. He links the breakdown of the economy and society with the state of the environment. Maximal destruction will hit the world if humans cannot handle the greenhouse effect and its consequences. He believes that the consequences of environmental pollution will hit the world in 20 years with full-force.

He argues that after the breakdown of the economy and society the nation state will take control of everything. The state will take control of all spheres of life, even if this might be for just a while. The nation state will then be decisive in determining what system will be used thereafter. The choice is to turn society into a sort of prison for citizens with a nation state being in full control. Marco argues further that an option to the breakdown of society could be that the world would unite and try to solve capitalism’s problems, such as debts of nations states and to start all over

again. Nevertheless he argues that this would probably end in a similar disaster. He concludes it would be better if society did not conform to the economy.

Marco spends considerable time imagining how a breakdown of society could lead to a transformation of the global order. He explains further that if this were to happen, he argues that there is also a need to change the economic system completely. As people are dissatisfied with capitalism they might find other solutions. As an example, he mentions a social market economy mixed with Marxism. He stresses the need to have an economy that operates within the environment's natural limits. Society will then have to adapt to such an economic model. Marco's assignments discuss means of how to improve society in a rather hopeful way. On the other side, his written assignments contain both more dystopian and even disutopian assessments of future alternatives. His dystopia covers aspects of a new start, revision and an endless downward spiral.

The rarest of all dystopias implies the vision of a completely new beginning. Josef thinks that modern capitalism is built on the exploitation of nature and society. The exploitation of natural resources leads to climate change and the depletion of natural resources. Especially oil has a key role in the economy. His argument is that when all oil resources are depleted, capitalism will also come to an end. Another reason for the decrease of capitalism will be that the developing world will not tolerate the exploitation by the rich countries any longer. Josef mentions that terrorism will be regarded as a form of self-defence of the suppressed. US imperialism will divide the world into two parts and will result in multiple wars. The deaths from these wars will prevent global over-population.

In Josef's written assignment, he explains that there is a drive to self-destruction in capitalism which exploits nature and society until it undermines its own basis. Josef considers in his written assignment that the self-destructive capitalism will end in a collapse. Revolts from the developing world and scarcity of resources will undermine the current global social order. He argues that after the breakdown the current pseudo-democracy and its "democratic autocratic" rulers will be replaced with a real democracy. Real participation would need a new system and a new society. This could only be achieved through revolution or the system's breakdown.

According to Josef's opinion, these issues will lead to a collapse of capitalism and our present social order. After the collapse of capitalism the ruling "pseudo-democracy" of today with their "democratic dictators" who have been appointed in time will be removed. What will happen thereafter is a form of advisory board democracy, in which everybody can participate. The plentiful legislations and laws of today will be partly replaced by voluntary agreements between people. Humans will live altruistically and respect their fellow citizens. He argues that there will be little opposition. In many ways, a dystopian narrative is the passage at the end of which society reaches finally a utopian outcome.

National surveillance state

This dystopia describes a global economy that leads to social inequalities on a global scale. According to the pupils, elites within the national borders that profit

from globalisation will use surveillance technologies and the surveillance state to keep the rest of society under control. Nils' written assignment is an example of this dystopia. Nils' storytelling starts in the present time. He begins with contemporary society developing more and more to become a global one. Globalisation is driven forward without someone or something curtailing its possible consequences. He argues that globalisation will lead to an opening of new markets, such as China, and this will lead to lower and lower wages in Germany. Moreover, he writes that an open global market will lead to a decreasing need for labour compared to closed singular markets. Nils argues that the market will be difficult to regulate and wages will be lowered, hence more and more large corporations will appear that can partly control the market.

The lower wages will produce a large global underclass (*Unterschicht*) and the middle class (*Mittelschicht*) will not be able to keep up with these large groups of companies. Nils argues that the middle class will disappear in the long term. The new underclass will only live peacefully for a while until they start to revolt. He predicts that because of the well-developed surveillance state, the revolts will be easily crushed. The underclass cannot see themselves as part of a larger picture and they cannot organize themselves. Nils says that the development in 20 years could be a state as described in the novel "1984" where people are living under total control of the state. Independent thinking in the underclass is not desired. The state will only supply the basics for survival and for being profitable in the market. The human exists only as a commodity and for the well-being of the upper class.

Nils then decides that this vision is exaggerated and argues that such global surveillance and state oppression will probably not happen. He continues and argues that such a utopian market and state could not exist since consumers are needed. Still he sees tendencies that point in that direction, such as reforms of welfare benefits (*Hartz IV*), surveillance cameras, temporary work and so on. He argues that one should control globalisation more and direct it towards a more moderate course so that most of the global population will do well.

Nils concludes that a desirable outcome would rather be a development where humans would have a more social attitude and that this social attitude would have an impact on the state. Nils' dystopia is described as a warning signal but implies a certain indeterminism; there is a possibility of avoiding this dystopia through politics and social attitudes. This dystopia argues that society is at a crossroads and could choose to go ahead in a negative direction or, on the other hand, revise the negative aspects of society. The focus of the narrative lies not in a complete new start but revising the social order that exists. Once again the dystopian narrative aims to paint a crossroads situation where the dystopian view is to highlight what aspects of society the author finds to be wrong.

Robin presents another take on the national surveillance state dystopia. According to Robin, in the future the main function of the state will be surveillance and security, since the corporations will take over many of the nation state's responsibilities. The importance of the military for international security will grow, but also the importance of internal security achieved through surveillance. Robin means that there will be a global government that will have a growing need for surveillance; these needs will only grow in the future. Humans will have to mutually

monitor each other. Robin thinks that there has been a transformation of the state since the economy has undermined the power of the state. Globalization enables unrestricted competition. Nowadays, employers can choose a Polish or African employee; they can also decide to open a branch office anywhere in the world. A German enterprise does not depend on German employees or German soil.

Since the corporations will become less dependent on the state this will lead to a state that will have to adhere to the economy. The state's power will be reduced by the global market and the state is reduced to take care of global security. Most international politics will be taken care of actors from the economic sphere. As an example, Robin names communication among states, which will mainly be driven by the economy. What role will be left for states will be as a surveillance state with international security policies that focus on the military. According to Robin, the traditional nation state which is based on culture and tradition will not exist anymore in the future; it will instead be a cooperating system of governments. This will mean that global borders will open up, similar to the EU, and maybe there will be a global government consisting of individual nation states.

Robin means that the state is responsible for the political and social consciousness of people: "(...) the state [has to] communicate to people in which direction development should go and also has to tell them what to do in order to not continue the development in an undesirable way." The state has to tell people how to behave. The problem is not that states are undermined by corporations but also that the human need for security gets out of hand. Income inequalities will create an urge among the under-privileged for obtaining more wealth. Some people having more than others will be considered unjust. It is a vicious circle; the only way out is when governments intervene.

What does a dystopian future narrative really mean?

The starting point of this article was the discussion about young people and their pessimistic future narratives. Eckersley has had concern regarding how children and young people react personally to global threats in apocalyptic frames (Eckersley 1999) and that a "failure to provide a broad cultural framework of hope, meaning and purpose in young people's lives could be weakening their resilience, making them more vulnerable to these problems" (Eckersley 1999: 88). He has argued that pessimism could be toxic and produce "cynicism, mistrust, anger, apathy and an approach to life based on instant gratification rather than long-term goals or lasting commitment" (Eckersley 1999: 88). This article has argued that even within pessimistic dystopian narratives about the future there is hope. Most of the dystopian narratives contain both hope and hopeless aspects. It is therefore important to look for these aspects and not wish that young people had unrealistic positive visions of the future.

Having said that, I did find that during the collection of the pupils' written assignments that negative discussions around the future predominated. As could be seen in the list of reoccurring themes (Table 2), most of the pupils were concerned with the failings of national politics, how technology might create surveillance

states and replace employees with robots or that the global economy might undermine both the state, politics and welfare programmes. There is also a lot of concern around the rise of social inequality, the balance between private life and work life and environmental problems. Most of these themes are used in different ways in the dystopias. When I planned the interviews I decided to ask the pupils if they could locate themselves within their own dystopian visions.

Robin's dystopia included how the global market would undermine politics and how the nation state would be turned into a surveillance state that would suppress the marginalised masses in a future global society. Robin foresaw that he would need to relocate for work to France or America or even Asia. Maybe he would only be able to find work outside Germany. He also imagined that he would need to be flexible and mobile—to be able to work anywhere to find employment. Since this was a rather general answer, I asked further what this would mean for his own personal future.

Yes, I think, what I just said, that I would probably—that it would be good, that I would work in another country and that it is primarily important to be able to master other languages, primarily to master English, that through my work I will be linked to many other countries and to work together with companies from other countries. That I would be working with many more cultures and states.

I asked him if the described development would be disadvantageous or if he only saw benefits.

No, I am not necessarily seeing disadvantages for me personally. But I am of course seeing disadvantages in a larger context. I am not seeing it as disadvantage that I now need to emigrate to France to find job: that would be no problem for me. Not a bigger problem. I would accept that. But it is of course disadvantageous, that the other developments that I have described, they are of course disadvantageous [Surveillance State, Rising inequalities etc.].

I asked further if these changes would not affect him personally in the future.

No, not in a narrow sense. No. I am not exposed to an imminent risk through [the changes].

Franz is the author of a technocapitalist dystopia which projected doom and gloom as a result of the contemporary capitalist order. He stated first that in the next 20 years there will not be many changes. When I asked further about himself in future society he continued: “You can also speak about that in relation to hope.” He continued further on whether he would experience his described dystopia.

Yes, that is the question. Let us say in this way. Since I will not probably experience this really crass future society, then I would say—I think now, I would either—either belong to the normal ‘Educational Elites’ (Bildungselite), if they in quotations marks ‘still exist’—if I would then think that they

would still exist in the next 20–30 years, I would then belong to them. Or maybe I would be in the absolute Elite. This is the question: into what extent or to what extent I will have luck. You have to be in the right time at the right place.

I discussed the case of having bad luck then. Franz elaborated on the possibility that bad luck would strike him.

I could also have bad luck. But on pure statistics, you can say, I would definitely not in anyway—yes, belong to the ‘Educational Losers’ (Bildungsverlierern) or the ‘Globalisation Losers’ (Globalisierungsverlierern). That is quite simple—on one side, good, my degree grade (Abschluss) will not be the best—simply because the system does not honour what I am doing—therefore, I am not putting effort into that. But maybe just because—maybe because—or certain values, that I am having or that I am saying quite clearly that I have no problem in leaving Germany. Or maybe because—I am saying this quite clearly: ‘I would like to become a cosmopolite later on.’ I have, I am thinking—large advantages and I would therefore belong to the first or the second squad (Riege). Let us say that!

Cecilia who wrote a dystopia on techno-capitalism is a bit more careful about her own changes in the future.

I am naturally hoping of course, (Cecilia then pauses and continues), that I someday—so that I definitely—so I am concentrating on that I could definitely study something that I could also later on definitely become, definitely, what is sought-after [qualifications on the labour market]. And not just anything, for example, that is only required one year but more for something that is desperately sought after. So I am concentrating on that already. [I would be interested to study] something like pedagogic for disabled or something like that. There are really very few people and—I mean, I am also having luck that I would have fun doing that—so therefore, I am hoping naturally, that my personal life will then be looking good. That my family at some point will be able to afford some things and, that I could offer some things to my children, I would say. And, that I am not just slipping into something. I mean, that I could of course have as much bad luck, but—one has also a bit of fear, that one will stand there and have nothing. [I] have fear of course. In any case. But maybe because I am aiming for something that has future prospects—it is, maybe, a bit encouraging, I would say.

These excerpts show a remarkable distance between, on one hand, the stark character of the dystopias and, on the other hand, their estimations of their own role within these dystopias. Looking at other interviews with far less stark dystopian visions, they all record fear and hope for their place in the labour market and the relationship between work and the private sphere. Still there is nothing in these narratives that is devoid of hope. First of all, most of the dystopian narratives have traces of hope (opening up for revisions or revolt) and, more interestingly, if you ask about the pupils’ own futures, these answers are more positive.

These added questions on their role within their narratives often surprised the pupils and many of them had difficulty in locating themselves within their own dystopias. The pupils seem to be engaged in a critical and creative process that goes beyond forecasting.

There has been a vigorous discussion about hope being a vital character of being human. Bauman (2004) argues that ‘to hope is to be human’. This study on future dystopias shows that the lack of utopia should not be seen as pure despair but rather as a way of how young people make sense of the world that they expect to encounter. There is something about dystopias that speaks to humans’ inner fear and this is perceived as being more authentic and tangible than a utopian narrative could be.

Gordin et al. (2010) argue that one is more likely to encounter dystopian elements of contemporary society than utopian elements:

And, crucially, dystopia—precisely because it is so much more common—bears the aspect of lived experience. People perceive their environments as dystopic, and alas they do so with depressing frequency. Whereas Utopia takes us into a future and serves to indict the present, dystopia places us directly in a dark and depressing reality, conjuring up a terrifying future if we do not recognize and treat its symptoms in the here and now (2010:2).

Very few people have experienced a utopian moment but most of us have felt a certain dystopian element in our life. Gordin et al. (2010) argue that dystopian elements are today more common than utopian elements: “In a universe subjected to increasing entropy, one finds that there are many more ways for planning to go wrong than to go right, more ways to generate dystopia than utopia. (2010:2)” Moreover, Gordin et al. link dystopia directly with the lived experience of people.

I argue even further that, by using the full palette of utopian, dystopian and disutopian concepts, progressive scholars and teachers can close the gap between pupils on one side and teachers and researchers on the other. It is possible to use future narratives of pupils and students as a way of closing the gap between the academic subject and how pupils perceive the world. Both the written narratives and interviews shows a way to engage with negative images of the future. Kellner highlights the importance of closing the gap between “experts’ conceptions and the life worlds of the pupils” and it could thereby take into account “the novel life conditions, subjectivities and identities of youth” in school curricula and teaching subjects (2003:58).

Letting teachers, researchers, and pupils create and analyze future narratives could be helpful in furthering critical understanding of hope and hopelessness. This article argues that dystopias could play just as important a role in educational change as utopian visions. Thomas More argued that his book *Utopia* was ‘a fiction whereby the truth, as if smeared by honey, might a little more pleasantly slip into men’s minds’ (More 1964:251). Dystopias could also have a positive effect if used to create critical discussions around values, social critique and social change.

Kristeva discusses that a transformative change “could be joyful revolt” (Kristeva 2002:64). Revolts can produce hope, joy and wholeness as a resolution of a catastrophic event. Kristeva links this to the “logic of symbolic change” (Kristeva

2002:75) which presupposes the “necessity of the symbolic deconstruction, the symbolic renewal, which comes from creation—psychic creation, aesthetic creation, rebirth of the individual” (Kristeva 2002:76). One could take this one step further and argue that the most pessimistic apocalyptic dystopia could actually carry the seeds of hope; that after death comes rebirth and renewal. In some way, apocalyptic dystopias could very much be a way to imagine how an old societal structure could fall apart and maybe this could be the starting point of something new. This study is an example of how writing, collecting and analysing pessimistic narratives could be one way of how teachers and researchers could engage with pupils around their hopes and fears for their futures.

Conclusions

The aim of this article was to argue that pupils’ dystopias do not have to correspond to a lack of hope or an overall pessimism in relation to their life chances. This article suggests that we need to discuss these negative and pessimistic future visions in a more profound and complex way since these contain both hope and hopelessness. During my 3-year-long research project, I collected and analysed data that examined how a sample of German pupils made sense of social change and what forces drive social change in society. This was confirmed by in-depth qualitative interviews. The different dystopias highlight that hope and transitions can appear in different forms: either as a crossroads, revolt or catastrophe. Even a dystopia that proposes the end of the world as we know it, might be the beginning of a world that we have not seen yet. More importantly, dystopias were perceived by many of the pupils to be a creative and a critical exercise more than an actual forecast of the future. This was shown when the students were asked to position themselves in their own future narratives. Then, the dystopias were either pushed ahead into the future or relativized. At the same time, one needs to acknowledge that these dystopias and disutopias are actually revealing the hopes and fears of young people. Disutopian elements are also aspects that progressive researchers and teachers should consider seriously as they do exhibit different degrees of hopelessness.

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