

The Challenge of Shrinking Futures for Democratic Education

Fragile Futures: Technology, Responsibility and the Idea of Education

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Future imaginaries: Today's learning materials



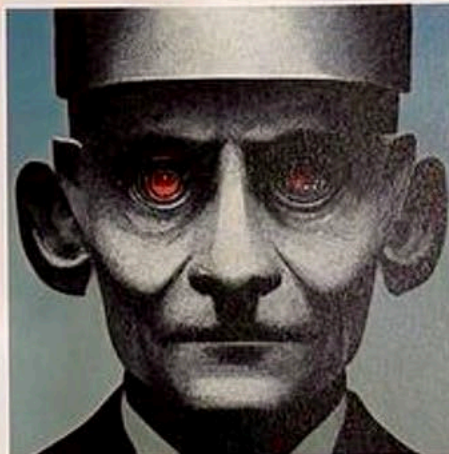
” Post-EU era

In the aftermath of the European Union, countries across the world are fighting hybrid wars.



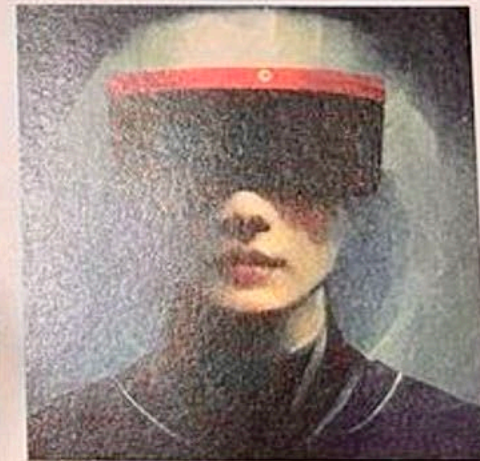
” Brave New Country

In this multiple-class system, individuals are constantly tracked and immigrants have a low socioeconomic status.



” Malice in Wonderland

Totalitarian regimes have been installed based on election hacking and advanced machine learning, shaping how voters behave and what they believe.



” Metaverse escapism

Climate change skepticism has created irreversible ecosystem changes. Many prefer to spend their life entirely in the digital world.

Diagnosis: shrinking futures?

- ▶▶ There are two dominant future-narratives in western societies
 - ▶▶ Techno solutionism: AI, Digitalization, Innovation as ‚the solution‘ (AGI)
 - ▶▶ Dystopian collapse: ecological, social, democratic breakdown
- ▶▶ While these narratives describe different futures, they have in common a marginalization of collective action and shared agency
 - ▶▶ „It’s not my job“, „it’s way too late to do anything“, „that’s not for me to decide“

Diagnosis: shrinking futures?

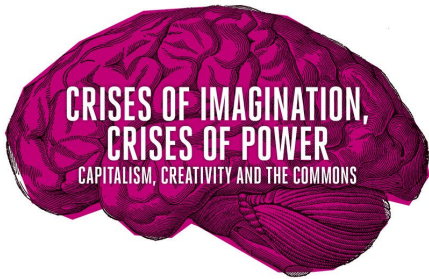
- ▶▶ In both scenarios: the future is already decided, for better or for worse
- ▶▶ Futures ‚shrink‘ to the extent that the discourse is narrowly organized around (tech-)utopias/dystopias
 - ▶▶ „futurecide“; „crisis of imagination“
- ▶▶ We are trying to address the crisis of imagination as a problem for democratic education

The Crisis of the Imagination and Narratives of Everyday Utopias

2024, Das Imaginative der Politischen Ökonomie

Last updated October 11, 2025

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"We are collectively suffering through a crisis of imagination"

Crisis of imagination: Integrating degrowth pedagogy for sustainability innovation in business schools

Carla Liuzzo ^a , Mimi Tsai ^b 

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PUBLICATION

The Imaginary Crisis (and how we might quicken social and public imagination)

April 8, 2020 GEOFF MULGAN

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Crisis of imagination/(re)imaginings for a (climate) crisis

[Ankit Kumar](#) , [Chandni Singh](#), [Lauren Hermanus](#), [Lalitha Kamath](#), [Wangui Kimari](#), [Mark Pelling](#), [Harriet Bulkeley](#)

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Why futures shrink: anticipatory regimes...

- ▶▶ Education policy frames the future as something to be anticipated and adapted to
- ▶▶ Students are positioned as investors in their own human capital, trained to optimize their learning for predefined outcomes
- ▶▶ The role of students as ‚worldmakers‘ is systemically marginalized

...and techno solutionism (again)

- ▶▶ AI is not a solution, but part of the problem
 - ▶▶ By design: AI in education naturalizes goals that are subject to democratic negotiation
 - ▶▶ In discourse: Tech solutionism does not ask „What is education for?“ but „how can we optimize education in ways machines can understand?“
 - ▶▶ For societies: acceleration, individualization, algorithmic discrimination undermines democratic principles

Shrinking futures: empirical data

- ▶▶ Young people are optimistic for themselves, but hopeless for us all
 - ▶▶ This ,optimism paradox‘ is the result of a neoliberal driven individualization of hope
 - ▶▶ The future is often thought of as a personal crisis to be managed or a personal gain to be won, but not as shared horizon

Jones (2023); Poletti et al. (2023); Keating & Melis (2022); Calmbach et al. (2024); Pimlott-Wilson (2017)

Shrinking futures and democratic education

- ▶▶ Shrinking futures are a challenge for democratic education
 - ▶▶ Techno solutionism encourages visions of programmable citizens
 - ▶▶ Crisis framings risk shifting attention from freedom and equality toward bare survival, making curtailment of rights easier to justify
 - ▶▶ Anticipatory regimes steer students toward adaption to fixed outcomes, producing a feeling of powerlessness

- ▶▶ The central question is: How can we contest shrinking futures?

Democratic education as imaginative practice

- ▶▶ Democratic education must reclaim future-making as a collective, open-ended practice
- ▶▶ This requires space for uncertainty, ambivalence, and plurality (not optimization)
- ▶▶ The focus is not „what will the future be?“ but „what futures do we want to pursue together as worth living in and fighting for?“

- ▶▶ Where and how can these capacities be exercised?

Imagination literacy as part of artistic citizenship

- ▶▶ Our framing concept: Artistic citizenship
 - ▶▶ Aesthetic-artistic practice as ethical practice
 - ▶▶ Artists and educators as agents for the common good
- ▶▶ Imagination not as a private, mental capacity but as a social, collective, learnable skill → literacy
- ▶▶ Arts Education in the sense of artistic citizenship fosters imagination of different, plural, marginalized futures

Campbell & Martin (2006); Elliott et al. (2016); Facer (2011) Gebhard & Hoppstock (2026)

Dear Future: Principles in practice



Summary

- ▶▶ The main challenge for democratic education is not technological, but imaginative. In order to align democratic education with contemporary challenges, we need to ask how we can foster potentials to (re)invent futures as ever-changing outcomes of collective-ethical practice.



just-shower-thoughts

When people talk about traveling to the past, they worry about radically changing the present by doing something small, but barely anyone in the present really thinks that they can radically change the future by doing something small.

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