

Review of

# *The New Leviathans: Thoughts After Liberalism*

John Gray, London: Allen Lane, 2023

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John Gray's (2023) *The New Leviathans: Thoughts After Liberalism* [henceforth "Leviathans"] provides a nuanced perspective on contemporary society with direct implications on the state of education in the West. Gray, characteristically pessimistic, draws on Thomas Hobbes' depiction of Leviathan to analyze the resurgence of contemporary authoritarian states. Hobbes (1996) used Leviathan, the name taken from the sea monster in the Book of Job, to describe his concept of a sovereign government system that provides stability and security in exchange for citizens' surrender of individual freedoms. Gray (2023) dismisses the liberal belief that history inevitably leads toward progression of democratic freedom and instead views liberalism as a failed political experiment, asserting: "The seeming triumph of liberalism and the free market was not an evolutionary trend but a political experiment, which has run its course" (p. 21). Gray characterizes liberalism through four defining features: (1) *individualist* — the moral primacy of the individual usurps the collective social thought; (2) *egalitarian* — all people in a society are equal; (3) *universalist* — moral unity among citizens; and (4) *meliorist* — the social system can constantly improve given human effort. In what follows, I will summarize the three major parts of Gray's book and examine its educational implications while considering how philosophy of education can help us weigh the merit of his argument.

## Summary

### ***Part I: The Return of Leviathan***

According to Hobbes (1996), language separates humans from other creatures in their ability to name and construct civil society. A consequence of language is the absurdity and confusion that can follow conflating descriptions and interpretations. While Hobbes believed this could be overcome by clear definitions, Gray (2023) disagrees and claims the consequence of language is the belief that words are more real than things. Therefore, words like "humanity" would take on an abstract meaning that "we"

must defend against the cultural “other.” This concept opens the door for some humans being identified as less human than others, making violence against the “other” more ideologically reasonable.

Gray (2023) analyzes two contemporary states that he considers new Leviathans: Russia and China. In Russia, religion (Russian Orthodoxy) has been appropriated by political ideology as an instrument of the state to achieve its aims. Intertwining religion and political strength legitimizes both domestic authority and foreign expansion when conquering other countries like Ukraine. In China, sovereignty justifies surveillance, discrimination against minorities, and social control as a means of maintaining national unity. Chinese leaders have argued that “the Chinese state must inject a definite set of values into the population. Otherwise, the country will undergo the decomposition that is underway in the US” (p. 46). The country’s surveillance system monitors citizen’s daily activities and deviation from prescribed conduct is punished. In both cases, Russia and China exemplify Gray’s modern Leviathan, contorting political power into social control.

### ***Part II: Artificial States of Nature***

Gray (2023) argues that conflicts between liberalism and its dissenters are complex. He provides a pessimistic take on the convoluted and contradictory nature of Western hyper-liberal ideologies stating,

Liberalism has once again become a creature eating its own tail. The current generation of liberals never tires of denouncing the West as the most destructive force in history – racist, imperialist and sexist. Education must be ‘decolonized’ in order to expose the West’s unique crimes... Yet these same liberals insist that Western values – human rights, personal autonomy and the like – must be projected to the last corners of the Earth. (p. 69)

Western hyper-liberalism is paradoxical in nature. It denies the historical culture that sprouted concepts like individual autonomy, human rights, and democracy, while exporting these ideas through moral absolutism and identity politics.

The Russian revolution is analogous to Western hyper-liberalism. Like Russian revolutionaries, hyper-liberals are “swollen lumpen-intelligensia” and powerful political forces, believing that humans possess powers originally vested in deities involved in God-building. Gray (2023) asserts, “twenty-first century liberals can no more renounce their faith than could interwar communists: it is necessary for their mental survival” (p. 108). Both ideological systems have attempted to recreate society to fit an artificial state of human nature where humans are molded to fit societal expectations — thus, impeding the freedom that Western hyper-liberalism claims. Hyper-liberalism is ideologically similar to Hobbes’ Leviathan, but it advances beyond his original idea of state control as a tool to regulate inherent human aggression. Instead, it attempts to erase human nature altogether and replace it with thoughts and beliefs deemed appropriate in society.

### ***Part III: Mortal Gods***

Liberalism sprouted from Western Christianity, creating civilizations built upon liberal freedoms, yet twenty-first century liberals reject this social framework and attempt to assert “the universal authority of a hollowed-out version of its values” (Gray, 2023, p. 109). All four defining ideas of liberal thought are continuations of Christian monotheism: (1) the primacy of the individual (a secular translation of the belief that all human beings were created by a Deity who rules over them); (2) egalitarian belief that all humans have equal moral status (a reproduction of the concept that all humans are equal in the sight of God); (3) liberal universalism (human attributes are more important than cultural identities reflecting the belief that all humans are made in God’s image); and (4) ameliorating through the belief human institutions are indefinitely improvable (replicating the belief in a moral narrative of sin followed by redemption). Gray posits that politics has replaced religion in modern society, enabling citizens to

leverage victimhood: “In woke movements, victimhood confers moral authority as does Christianity. The difference is that in the Christian myth divinity joins itself with broken humanity, while woke liberals use the groups they choose as victims to enhance their own self-esteem” (p. 120). In other words, Gray interrogates the coherence of hyper-liberal discourse that rejects its ideological ancestors while simultaneously claiming moral authority and promoting individual autonomy.

## **Implications for Philosophy of Education**

### ***Implication A***

To Gray (2023), liberalism is dead and has been warped and contorted into hyper-liberalism in the West. If liberalism is dead, where does this leave higher education? In a recent podcast in response to *Leviathans*, Gray was asked what educators should teach young people now that liberalism in the traditional sense has ended. Gray answers this conundrum stating, “If I was asked to produce a curriculum for a young person [in higher education], I would include within it great dramatic works [by Aeschylus, Sophocles, Shakespeare, John Stuart Mill, and Samuel Beckett]” (Cowen, 2023, 00:05:52).

Interestingly, Gray mentions that he would not teach students a doctrine, ideology, or religion, but would lean on biblical works such as the Book of Job (Cowen, 2023). He views Job as the origin of skeptical thinking, as Job questioned the rationality and justice of the universe. These reflections align with the long-standing Western educational ideal of cultivating critical thinking. Yet, as Kieran Egan (1999) astutely observed, exposing the incompatibilities of competing education aims, “schools today are supposed to encourage conformity to specific norms and values while encouraging a way of thinking that leads to scepticism [sic] of them at the same time” (p. 261). Grays’ (2023) remarks help underscore the inherent tension institutions face when attempting to balance the conflicting principles of promoting ideological conformity and fostering critical thinking.

### ***Implication B***

At first glance, Gray’s (2023) framework on the future of education appears to align with aspects of critical theory, which Henry Giroux (2023) describes as, “the nature of self-conscious critique and ... the need to develop a discourse of social transformation and emancipation that does not cling dogmatically to its own doctrinal assumptions” (p. 80). Giroux argues that critical theory is essential for philosophy of education as it embodies a tradition of scholarship that, “demonstrates and simultaneously calls for the necessity of ongoing critique, one in which the claims of any theory must be confronted with the distinction between the world it examines and portrays, and the world as it actually exists” (p. 80). Thus, problems of society are more than isolated events of individuals or deficiencies in social structure. Instead, they help form part of the interactive context between individuals and society (McLaren, 2023). Yet, Gray might argue that critical theory itself has capitulated to the dogmatism that it attempts to resist leading to hyper-liberalism and moral absolutism. The question is whether critical theory has become too entangled with hyper-liberalism to be viable and needs to be replaced altogether.

### ***Implication C***

Gray’s (2023) assertion that China acts as a modern Leviathan provides a convenient lens to view contemporary issues in education. Social conformity promoted in China is akin to the hidden curriculum in education, which serves to “reinforce basic rules surrounding the nature of conflict and its uses” (Apple, 2023, p. 662). The hidden curriculum discretely enforces obedience and conformity within the broader student population in return for social security. The use of moral panic to induce social

conformity is not exclusive to authoritarian states. This type of fear mongering rhetoric has taken hold in American politics as well, under the Trump administration. Policies under Trump have targeted minorities, immigrants, and “wokeism” as threats to national unity, while using fear to manipulate society into eliciting “approved” values. These policies have impacted education, as the US government has withheld research grants for those pursuing topics such as diversity, equity, inclusion, gender, or race (Tanne, 2023).

## Discussion

Gray (2023) provides a strong, clear, and coherent analysis, synthesizing dense philosophical ideas, and he presents it in a manner that is easy to digest, barring religious references or allusions that might be alienating for the non-Christian reader. He provides a provocative and timely conversation considering the rise of “wokeism” in the West and the rise in global political tensions. This book is an extension of important groundwork already developed in his earlier work *Black Mass: Apocalyptic Religion and the Death of Utopia* (2007), where he observes that modern politics functions as religion once did. Although *Leviathans* provides informed commentary on current philosophical and political trends, it does not extend beyond commentary to provide steps for definitive solutions moving forward. Perhaps Gray can unravel this dense topic in future work – or perhaps his intension is to leave us to wade through the intellectual debris.

Furthermore, Gray’s overly fatalistic writing can lead to assumptions that there is no alternative but to succumb to the current political state. On the one hand, this may be controversial in education, and among students and educators, where the transformative potential of learning is often promoted. On the other hand, if Gray is correct that liberalism – the political philosophy that encouraged this potential in education – has indeed collapsed, this may undermine the promise of education as a vehicle for transformative learning. This calls into question whether educational institutions are still equipped to combat the current socio-cultural-political landscape. Despite the decline in philosophy of education courses in Faculties of Education and Teacher Education (Colgan & Maxell, 2020; Woodhouse, 2023), maintaining such courses can help provide discursive tools to evaluate current socio-cultural-political trends strengthening the intellectual rigor Gray’s conclusions demand.

## Conclusion

Government and education systems are intertwined. Unlike the Leviathan that Hobbes envisioned, Gray (2023) believes that Western societies face a Leviathan not from the state, but from civil society through technocracy, surveillance, and moral absolutism. Education not only acts to provide knowledge transmission to students, but it also shapes their behaviours, morals, beliefs, and values (Egan, 1999), with mixed results. While education can serve the Leviathan, it also has the potential to resist and question its authority. As Gray contends, “The university campus is the model for an inquisitorial regime that has extended its reach throughout society” (p. 112). If universities are indeed a microcosm of the new Leviathan, perhaps the task of educational philosophers is to move beyond complicity and reclaim the critical and imaginative potential of education (Greene, 1995). Under these circumstances, education does not need to escape the Leviathan but confront it honestly and critically in an arena that fosters ethical inquiry, critical engagement, and intellectual freedom.

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