

Book Review

Weak Utopianism in Education: From Political Theory to Pedagogical Practice
(By Michael P. A. Murphy)

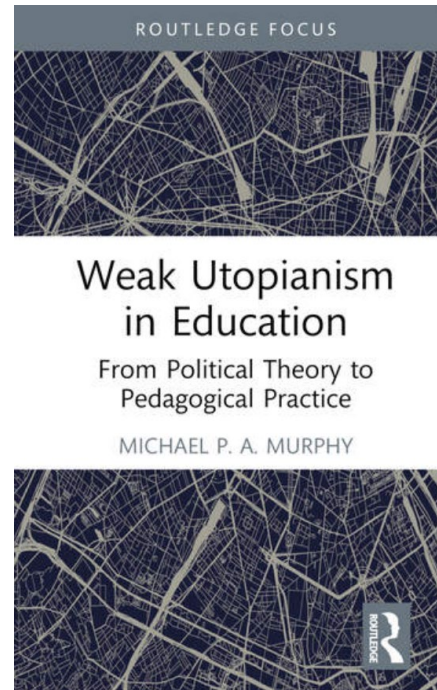
A Review by
Theptawee Chokvasin *

Department of Philosophy and Religion, Faculty of Humanities, Kasetsart University, Thailand

Title: Weak Utopianism in Education: From Political Theory to Pedagogical Practice
Series: Rethinking Education
Author: Michael P. A. Murphy
Publisher: Routledge
Year: 2024
No. of pages: 90 pages
ISBN: 9781032601625 Hardcover \$64.95.

Front Cover

Source: <https://www.routledge.com/Weak-Utopianism-in-Education-From-Political-Theory-to-Pedagogical-Practice/Murphy/p/book/9781032601625>



In the present publication, Michael P. A. Murphy endeavors to present a persuasive case for the incorporation of the political theory of "weak utopianism" into a methodological framework for teaching, with the aim of enhancing the field of education. The aforementioned political theory was initially formulated by Giorgio Agamben. The book generally asserts that there is a necessity for revisions in the manner in which instructional methodologies are implemented. Nevertheless, the notion of "small steps" further underscores their significance. The rationale behind the designation of weak utopianism to the concept of small steps lies in its capacity to facilitate gradual transformations that do not require immediate attention. The term "revolutionary utopianism" refers to transformative transformations that establish favorable conditions, yet are characterized by their revolutionary nature, therefore excluding the possibility of gradual or delayed progress. It is important for Murphy to elucidate the

* Corresponding Author +66 2579 6525 ext. 109
E-mail Address: fhumtwc@ku.ac.th

reasons behind the inherent plausibility and long-term effectiveness of “weak utopianism” (Murphy, 2024).

In the initial section of the book, Murphy articulates the necessity of incorporating the political theory concepts previously elucidated by Agamben into a novel theoretical framework for education. Murphy begins Part I, which consists of Chapters 1, 2, and 3, by outlining the fundamental idea of utopianism, which leads to an alternative application of weak utopianism. Chapter 1 indicates that utopianism has several meanings because it encompasses both revolutionary and weak utopianism (*p. 11*). Chapter 2 implies why Agamben's utopianism must be weak since essential concepts, such as the section on *Homo Sacer*, are tied to human impotence and destitute power (*pp. 16-21*). Chapter 3 demonstrates how varied interpretations of education policy, even the same version, affect applicability and appraisal in different communities. This reinforces the thesis that we should accept weak utopianism when describing the education sector (*pp. 31-36*).

In Part II, Murphy explains how accepting weak utopianism leads to its implementation in education policy. In Chapter 4, he addresses the design of the policy model of pedagogy, which stresses delivering feedback on how to fix errors in learning rather than preparing education to prepare for changing trends (*pp. 43-49*). In Chapter 5, he introduces a novel concept of verifying the direction and aim of education. While education currently focuses on creating a path to the goal of education and determining whether it is true, in the future we should shift to implementing a path of education that is believed to be consistent with the philosophy and objective by recognizing that the goal is present alongside the action. The objective is not a separate entity (*pp. 52-55*). In Chapter 6, the concept of "thinking methodologically" is introduced to help with the continual process of thinking in the form of thought experiments. If education progresses in this manner, it is assumed that implementing an experiment will result in something new, rather than emphasizing that the experiment must actively fulfill a specific aim (*pp. 62-63*).

Murphy highlights in Part III that a new "philosophy of teaching" that is compatible with weak utopianism should consider two key approaches. In Chapter 7, he describes teaching as a learning process in which the learner accumulates experience and makes mistakes, possibly by building a specific content of knowledge and then mending it over time. There is evidence that humans are slow learners who accumulate experiences to form a perspective from which to reflect on their knowledge. This support is based on "actor-network theory" (*pp. 70-76*). Chapter 8, the book's concluding chapter, proposes another crucial approach: optimism in taking small steps at a time. If the revolutionary utopian perspective were to come true, it

appears to rely on the notion that humans are powerful and capable of realizing it. But in reality, it is not. Therefore, taking small steps at a time can be appealing, especially if human nature is weak and destitute (*pp.* 81-86).

It is previously known from Agamben's examination of the idea of "Homo Sacer" in Roman law, which refers to a person who has been deprived of citizenship by some penalty but remains subject to the law. This conceptualization is viewed as a contradiction in terms of having the status of a live human person who is subject to a law that judges him to be outside the law (Agamben, 1998). However, this condition marks the start of a dialectical analysis that states that in order for something to be included in the category of not being granted a certain status, it must first be regarded in the operational notion of that object. Murphy believes that Agamben is referring to the state of possessing constituent power, the power that determines citizenship status, in which the individual is not actually free to choose whether or not to be something for herself. Thus, there is a state known as destituent potentiality (*pp.* 17-21). Murphy uses this trait to build a new paradigm in education, recognizing that the enthusiasm to conduct instruction by establishing a road to the educational aim may not be the solution (*pp.* 28-31). On the one hand, such positive activities are thought to be necessary to avoid inoperations that do not achieve the desired result. On the other hand, it is unclear where human freedom fits into such a strong determination. A dialectical evaluation can thus disclose a new style of thinking that takes a distinct perspective on education.

Murphy's interpretation approach is supported by the writings of other scholars who have also addressed the concept of weak utopianism. For instance, Tyson Edward Lewis's writing also explores the issue of interpreting Agamben's concept, which considers weak utopianism. Nevertheless, Lewis's concept is distinct in that it prioritizes the concepts of space and time in the context of education. Lewis emphasizes that the state of educational philosophy can be achieved in a weak utopian manner by allowing learners to concentrate on the action of education rather than emphasizing the desired end objective through education as a means. This is due to Agamben's perspective on potentiality (Lewis, 2012). The way of thinking that is derived from Agamben is quite evident in its position to help us in observing practice and questioning whether education should be merely a means to an end, or whether education needs to reexamine the relationship between means and ends.

A dialectical analysis of impotentiality and inoperativity developed from Agamben's approach offers a philosophical explanation that is interconnected with the Chinese concept of non-action. For example, in Ying Ma's work, the concept of impotence is connected with Lao Tzu's *Dao* and *Wu Wei*, or way of life and action without action (Ma, 2021). Another author,

Tyson Edward Lewis, believes that these ideas are consistent with Zhuangzi's Taoist philosophy (Lewis, 2024). These are some examples of how Agamben's new ideas have contributed significantly to the development of new works in comparative philosophy between Eastern and Western cultures. In another sense, Murphy's book is quite current and consistent with this comparative philosophy.

Another point that interested me in discussing the use of Agamben's theory in Murphy's book is Murphy's mention of the policymaking process in education, which should take a new form of gradual learning through trial and error. I have authored a research article elsewhere to argue against the belief of many people that the current formal education policy which is the form of education that allows students to complete the education program before going to work, is not compatible at all with lifelong education. However, from a logical diagnosis by considering the concept of the human condition from Hannah Arendt, I found that both things can go together (Chokvasin, 2019). Reading Murphy's work also gives rise to an exciting new idea that education, whether viewed as completing the curriculum fully before entering the workforce or as lifelong education, is compatible with the small-steps approach that Murphy proposes. This is because giving more time for trial-and-error learning reflects the students' efforts. Such novel approaches would not have been possible if we had assumed that the most skilled and capable human beings who built the ideal society would have learned quickly and reached educational success quickly and accurately.

When educators consider educational pedagogy to be appropriate for the formation of members of society who are known to have an education that leads to educational success, with the belief that this success will lead to a happy society for human coexistence, they frequently consider the goal of producing highly skilled, highly knowledgeable people. Such views are frequently utilized to shape state educational policy in terms of political ideology, as a state that embodies the ultimate values of human cohabitation. Of course, such beliefs are those in ultimate knowledge, which are thought to lead to utopian coexistence. Murphy's current work, on the other hand, suggests a new type of "weak utopianism" that instructs us to reassess how such utopian ideals might be achieved through "small steps" while keeping in mind that suitable education should be weak. Educational policies, both in terms of educational goals and educational evaluation, should convey reduced expectations for policy strengths as well as efficacy. However, what should be considered in the context of action is the weakness that appears in the vast majority of human people who are unable to rise to such heights as soon as education policy expects. The incremental, relentless, trial-and-error technique should be considered in education policy.

This book is extremely valuable to the contemporary academic field of education, both in terms of philosophy of education and sociology of education in connection with political ideas. The new idea of weak utopianism provides the academic field of education with fresh possibilities when it comes to considering systematic educational programs. Murphy's writing style and composition are direct and concise, making it a pleasurable read, which is remarkable for a book dealing with serious academic concerns.

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