

Three
Miles
of
Rice
Pudding

Our Sticky Path to Utopia

by
Tom Wallace

THREE MILES OF RICE PUDDING

To my father, Thomas Lawson Wallace. Another pudding is possible.

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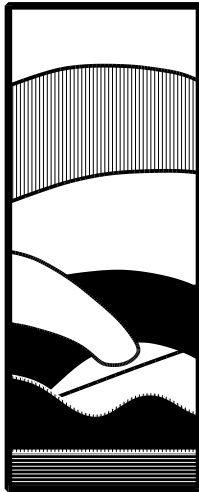
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Preface to the Revised Edition

I am indebted to Rutger Bregman, author of 'Utopia for Realists', for bringing us a reminder of the story of Cockaigne, a medieval version of utopia. Access to Cockaigne required would-be Utopians to eat their way through three miles of rice pudding. It seems that the rice pudding journey was an ordeal to be endured rather than a first taste of pleasures to come. Learning of this, I wondered if those journeying to Cockaigne opened tunnels in the pudding through which others might follow. Or did the pudding simply close up behind them as they journeyed through? If so, how did they breathe, or even see their way to the next meal of pudding that would bring them closer to their goal? The perils of the journey seem to be numerous, even for those who, like me, have a particular fondness for rice pudding. But the prize was great! So I invite you to take up your spoon with me and plunge in. We have three miles to travel. Whatever your taste in puddings, it's going to be sticky. But, as Rutger Bregman reminds us, we need our visions of Utopia so that we might face the future. The prize is indeed great as we set out on our own journey to a modern utopia. Let us eat pudding together!

There are only minor changes in this revised edition - correcting a few issues in the original text.



Introduction — Encounters with Pudding

'The skill of writing is to create a context in which other people can think.'
- Edwin Schlossberg

Utopia, the commons, community — these all had a muddled connection for me going back a good many years. I'm going to call this my commons journey — or, in the spirit of this book — my pudding journey. It started with a little group of artists in the small city of Dundee, on the East coast of Scotland. I was living with my Dad as his carer at the time. We were in our home town of Newport-on-Tay, which faces Dundee across the mouth of the River Tay.

The artists had started a monthly silent walk on a Saturday in Newport and I decided to join them. After one of the walks we are gathered at the home of two of the artists who also live in Newport. The menu for my meals with Dad was fairly consistent — both of us being creatures of habit. Saturday dinner's dessert course was always a rice pudding.

Back at the artists' house, someone has a guitar. There are a lot of postcards in the house where we have gathered. The guitarist and I set about making up songs — telling stories about what the postcards might be depicting. It is a happy time — someone even scribbles down the lyrics as we weave our songs.

Back at Dad's house, the rice pudding is in the oven. Eventually, fear for its fate overcomes the desire to stay on and continue with the song-making. I rush home. I catch the pudding just in time.

I had lived with my Dad for about three years by then and every Saturday delivered a rice pudding as the crowning glory of the week's menu. However, it was on that very Saturday of the silent walk and the singing and story-telling that my Dad explained he did not in fact like rice pudding. Communication had never been our strong point. I had subjected my father to — if not three miles of rice pudding — then certainly three years of weekly doses. Laid end to end, and with a seven-inch bowl, it comes to around thirty-five yards. It would have taken another 171 years of weekly puddings for my Dad to traverse the three miles to the mythical utopia of Cockaigne, and he was already 92. (If those last few sentences don't make sense to you, please see the Preface.)

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But I like to think that I am not a hard-hearted son. Rice pudding was replaced by trifle from then on. In truth though, Saturdays were never quite the same.

Do we dream of utopia? Utopias and dystopias are with us right now but I think we often do not acknowledge them. Our society is focused on good living and hopes for the future, perhaps as never before. At the same time though, the understanding and practice of a commons has greatly diminished — to such an extent that when I mention ‘the commons’ most people think I am referring to the House of Commons of the UK parliament. We will learn instead, I hope, that the commons is firstly about common goods. A lot of definitions stop with this. But in this book we will also think about the social relations around those goods — there is a ‘social commons’. And beyond that, we think about how our behaviour is affected by the social commons — so the book is also about ‘commoning’, or ‘doing in common’, as John Holloway would have it. But this is to get ahead of ourselves.

Our politics too is on very shaky ground and the root causes are complex. So we yearn for a happy life and many enjoy an abundance of good living — at least in the West. But our sharing of the Earth’s resources, our societies and our politics — these seem to be in disarray. We have utopias and dystopias.

There is certainly a lot out there in books and blogs and Youtube clips. Hopes of green or high-tech futures. Fears of climate hells. Post-capitalist future economics. How do we make sense of all this? The planet-saving, eco-warrior stuff may leave us with a guilt complex, or in need of a hippy make-over, or just feeling like a guilty hippy. The technological, futurist books seem overly optimistic and dismissive of the world’s problems. The political books can be very obscure and often yearn for the overthrow of the monster of capitalism. They assure us that once the beast is slain, all will be well — but what might replace the beast can seem fanciful or unrealistic.

I’ve worked my way through many such writings and review several in the Bibliography. I’ve also interviewed a number of folks — of all political stripes — in the hope of stealing their ideas. There are thankfully some exceptional people and exceptional works that have helped out. And even in the most obscure and difficult texts explored in my research, there was much to be gleaned. So there are a lot of wisdom nuggets out there. I decided to appropriate these nuggets and put them into my own book. My first reason for writing then, is to collect up all the useful stuff that others have said and to try to present this coherently. Dipping into the utopian visions of ecological futures, high-tech futures and political change, I’m aiming to give a big picture that I hope will be food for thought for the ordinary person who may not have picked up a book on politics before.

But, whilst many books are excellent, and many conversations have been inspiring, there remain questions and concerns that do not seem to be fully addressed. That is my further reason for writing. It is to tackle those further questions, and try to give some simple and accessible explanations, from a layperson’s point of view.

All authors of political writing, of course, are seeking to deliver a message that sums up their view of how the world may be made better. I don’t feel that many deliver a balanced message. They are: Too eco. Too catastrophic. Too intent on wanting to overthrow capitalism. Too fixated on devising rules that will get people behaving in ways that fit in with their brand of utopia. Or, just too

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complicated. Or a combination of some or all of these. So my further aim is to get some balance, and provide a story that does not seem overwhelming or

polarised or excessively radical. That way, I hope, the ordinary person may feel they could participate in some way, without having to become a revolutionary.

Let me make a start then, by summarising the concerns that have led me to write and the questions that these concerns have raised, and which I hope to address in this work.

Three Concerns

There are three main concerns I'm looking to address. The first concern is the one that is raised by Rutger Bregman in *Utopia for Realists*, mentioned in the Preface, and from which I have taken the title of this book. The concern is, what has happened to our visions of utopia? We seem to have become a bit jaded, a bit cynical, a bit worldly-wise, such that dreams of paradise on Earth, or even good governance, appear to be hopelessly naive. Where is the vision? Where is the hope for joy and pleasure? Is life now reduced to just a scrabble to hang onto a job, get a house and a car, enjoy a few holidays and then retire on a reasonable pension? What about everyone else, who maybe cannot afford such things? Can the rich only prosper at the expense of the poor?

The second concern follows on from the first. Why is our view for a good life so premised on wealth and consumption? To address this, we might ask, how is it that we determine what makes for a 'good life' today? The answer we are offered by politicians is all about economic growth. If the economy is growing — or so we are assured — then there are better prospects for jobs, for higher salaries, and for all that follows from this. Growth, we are told, makes it easier to find a job, and then our salary gives us some spending power, to satisfy our basic needs. Perhaps after all that, we will have a bit of money left over; our 'disposable income'. (The name says it all.) Only then are we really into the realm of pleasure. Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is a simple concept, but not such an obvious measure of success when looked at more closely. The worrying thing is that GDP seems several steps removed from what might actually make us happy. Why don't we start instead with pleasure and celebration? And what about imagination, creativity, relationships, community, humour? There is no mention of these in the 'good life' promised to us by growing GDP. The 'good life' seems to just be premised on financial wealth and material possessions. But many people will challenge the idea that this is what is most important to them in life. So something is amiss.

The third concern: Why has politics become so polarised and why do politicians on both left and right not seem to be addressing the concerns of the people they claim to represent? We seem to be offered two radically different views of the way the world works by our rival political camps — and if anything, these two views are getting further apart rather than moving together into some kind of balance. This work is less about party politics and more about the values that underlie our societies. Nonetheless, the concern of polarised politics needs to be kept in mind.

Why these particular concerns? Well, it strikes me that we are short on vision, or shy of vision, as a society. Any visions we might have are mostly not coming to us through politics. Those offered to us by literature, film and television tend to be of the dystopian kind. Perhaps aspirations for a good life are very strong. This might not have been of any particular concern, but in the background of the book, and throughout all of the discussions, the climate emergency looms large. It is a contention of the book that the way we seek pleasure is a critical question to ask when trying to address the changing climate. And finally, because of the problems the world faces, good governance is an essential question. A divided

and polarised politics means that we face considerable obstacles, in many countries, to finding better government and therefore solving our problems.

Six Questions

The purpose of the book then is to answer the concerns raised above and along the way, to investigate what others have suggested and then arrive at a story that better fits with the world and the way we want to live. I'm approaching this by looking at current stories of how the world works and where it may be heading. I consider these to be utopian stories, even although the proponents of the various alternatives probably would not wish to be called utopian. Along the way, we'll be looking at the meaning of the commons, and how this fits, or does not fit, with the alternative narratives. And we'll also need to get into some politics. So the pudding journey ahead is a journey into governance systems, community and economics. All of that is a lead up to asking about what we really want from our lives and from society and what will make for a better world. The pudding journey is also one about nature, place, compassion and pleasure. I'll be taking these topics back to basics so as to get a handle on them. To do all this, I'm asking six main questions.

The six questions are: Who Decides? What do we own? What should we share? What should we make — or not make? How should we trade? Finally, and most important: How should we live? We will be referring back to the questions throughout the work, as the discussion progresses.

The first of these questions, of course, is the question of governance. To get the broadest possible view of politics I'm going right back to asking whether or not we should have a government at all, and then we explore the various forms of governance on offer. We look at two particular varieties of governance system — Sociocracy and Participatory Politics — or Parapolity.

What we own and what we share are questions that the commons addresses especially well. We will look at the meaning of the commons and we will look at sharing in more detail in the chapter on compassion.

Questions of work, labour, production and trade are addressed in the chapter on economics, but have a bearing on several other chapters in the work. In relation to labour, production and trade, I also discuss a further aspect of governance, called Participatory Economics — or Parecon.

Finally, and a key feature of this work, is the question of where the pleasure lies in our lives, in our communities and in our societies. In the concerns above, I've suggested that we are led along a path of assuming that pleasure only follows once we have solved the basic questions of governance and economics. I'd suggest instead that, at the very least, the two work hand-in-hand. And maybe sometimes we are neglecting where our real pleasures lie and it would help us all to think this through. Utopias are all about pleasure, so pleasure must be central to our discussions.

Four Applications

If we are to make pleasure our starting point and utopia our goal then we also need to look at reasons that we might be hopeful in setting out — reasons why it may be worth embarking on the three miles of pudding. Pleasure, people, places, creatures, nature, compassion, things to love — these, I suggest, should be our motivations. A hope for the future is essential. And we cannot leave all this to political leaders, or an intellectual elite or to activists. Each of us, I believe, no

matter how humble our place in life, can play a part in making a better world for ourselves and for others.

Once the basic questions are covered then, we will turn to look at how solutions might be applied to four particular areas of concern — nature, place, compassion and pleasure. In the process, we will be devising an alternative story of utopia. Along the way we will touch on such issues as freedom, equality and justice. But these ideals are abstract and notoriously difficult to pin down. Utopias, by contrast, offer us the potential of concrete solutions. There is always a play-off between these two — the abstract, and the concrete — and we will see this contrast turn up many times as the work progresses.

A More Personal Concern

At this point I have a confession to make. I have something of an affliction. It is about trust in people. The big question for me is this. If we ever achieved a world in which everyone has a say in how things are run, would we make sensible choices? Are most people okay — sensible and able to make reasonable decisions, given sufficient information? Are most people compassionate? Or are people reactive, making emotional responses without much thought, suspicious of others, suspicious of change, self-seeking, prejudiced, hostile to those who might seek more balanced and informed decision-making?

This is not necessarily a question about any particular class or demographic of people. People of all types might make bad choices — at least, that is my worry. Besides, who am I to set myself up to judge what is a good choice or a bad choice?

I am naming my fear, but I don't have an easy answer to the issue of trust. To try to address this, I am telling the personal story of how this book came about. This story sits alongside the theory and hopefully complements it. The search for answers about how the world might be a better place is also my search for trust in others, in relationship and in community.

So, those are my concerns and questions, and it's these that have prompted me to try to write something to find answers. We will be looking at the idea of utopia first, and then getting to grips with ownership and the commons. Then it will be time to sort through the political views that might help us to administer owning and 'commoning' successfully. I hope that you will stay with me through the pudding journey, explore the ideas proposed by the modern-day utopian stories and meet some of the folk who have sparked my interest in these matters — all to find our own cheeky Cockaigne at the end of the trip.

Gandhi's Social Sins

To guide us on our journey and to warn us of dangers, I am keeping in mind Gandhi's seven social sins:

Politics without principle.
Wealth without work.
Commerce without morality.
Pleasure without conscience.
Education without character.
Science without humanity.
Worship without sacrifice.

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We'll meet examples of each of these throughout the book and try to address them as they arise.

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