

Utopia,  
Governance  
and the  
Commons

THIRD EDITION

by  
Tom Wallace

Utopia Governance and the Commons

Other books by Tom Wallace:

*Conatus*

*Twenty-One Levels of Self-Deception*

*Three Miles of Rice Pudding*

*A Little Book about Climate Change*

*Wild Body Wild Nature*

*Tales from a Distant Shore*

*Dreamtree*

*Another Pudding is Possible*

*Stories of Place*

*Truth HQ*

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Utopia Governance and the Commons

To my father, Thomas Lawson Wallace.

## Utopia Governance and the Commons

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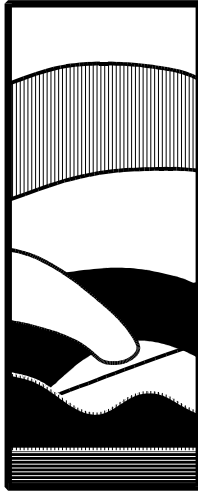
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## Preface to the Third Edition

*The main content of this book has been previously published, along with a series of memoirs, with the title Three Miles of Rice Pudding. (The origin of this phrase will become apparent in Chapter 2.) In Utopia, Governance and the Commons, I have stripped out a lot of the personal stories and focused on the more academic content. I hope, nonetheless, that the work will remain accessible. In this third edition I have simplified the text and added a few new thoughts and observations.*





## 1. Introduction

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

*Edwin Schlossberg*

*'Aut tace, aut loquere meliora silentio.'* (Do not speak unless you can improve upon the silence.)

*Variously attributed*

Do we dream of a 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, in the course of this book, that a revival and extension of what we mean by a commons is central to how societies may, in turn, be revived and how they might fare the future.

So utopia and the commons are problematic and our politics too is on very shaky ground. 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 works may leave us with a guilt complex. 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. I've also interviewed a number of folks — of all political stripes — in the hope of incorporating 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. 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 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 his *Utopia for Realists*. 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 naïve. 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 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. But I believe that the search for answers about how the world might be a better place is also a search for trust in others, in relationship and in community.

Why these particular concerns? Well, it strikes

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