

Utopia,  
Governance  
and the  
Commons  
Towards a New Story

by  
**Tom Wallace**

**To my father, Thomas Lawson Wallace.**

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## Preface

*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 1.) 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. As a future project, I may produce a further work, combining all of the memoir and narrative elements of Three Miles. The reader may wish to check my Amazon authors page for news of this.*

*Meanwhile, I hope you will enjoy this work. I regard it as a 'commons' and am happy for it to be shared, in any format, on any platform, provided that an acknowledgement is given to the author and links provided back to where I have posted the manuscript.*



## Introduction

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

*- Edwin Schlossberg*

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 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. 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 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*. 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

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