

Who needs Utopia?

A dialogue with my utopian self

(With apologies, and thanks, to H. G. Wells)

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Prologue

Readers will be familiar with the device used by H.G. Wells in *A Modern Utopia* (1905) to describe the relationship between the narrator (Wells himself) and his "utopian self", an improved version of his personality, who inhabits the better world.

What follows is a brief *jeux d'esprit* adapting the theme to still more modern conditions. "R.S." is my "real self" (with no philosophic explanation as to what constitutes this "real" "self". "U.S." is its utopian alternative.

Dialogue

R.S. Now you are going to bore us again by prating on about utopia. Don't you know that we are tired of this theme, that we distrust your use of the word, and are suspicious of your motives and occasionally even your sanity?

U.S. Not to pre-empt your objections unduly: but, consider going on holiday in a foreign country without a map.

R.S. A recipe for disaster – unless you are a risk-loving devotee of spontaneity and adventure.

U.S. Just so. I want to defend the concept of utopia by introducing the classical Wellsian theme, then: the century of thought which preceded the ending of the Victorian age, and the horrors of the First World War, was dominated overwhelmingly

by a Providentialist conception of history. In Liberalism, this took the form of a theory of progress by which it was assumed that things were getting steadily better through science and technological invention, and the gradual "civilisation" of the world. But even in Marxism, the presumption existed that history could be trusted – once it had been correctly interpreted – to "deliver the goods" – that the proletariat, in particular, would create the new world out of the ashes of the old, without the need for a careful assessment of what was required and how it was to be achieved.

R.S. Just what this has to do with me is uncertain.

U.S. Let me explain. The Liberal conception of progress, undefeated by socialism, continued to dominate modern thought in the fifty years after Wells's death. It was usually couched in terms of "growth", which meant an expansion of consumption, production, and demand. By the end of the twentieth century, spurred in particular by the extraordinary consumption of the United States, this had resulted in nearly as much consumption of the earth's resources – one third – as had been consumed in the preceding ten thousand years of human history. And now two-thirds, approximately, have been consumed. You know about global warming?

R.S. Obviously; but how does it relate to "utopia"? Surely a realistic assessment of our plight is what is called for? And in any case, persuade me that we are not too selfish, stupid and greedy to abstain from the course of conduct we have adopted. We love consumption far too much ever to part from it.

U.S. I return to my mentor. The great Wellsian theme – the greatest of modern themes for Wells – was that of world government. Wells believed that the problems of the world were global in nature, hence that a solution must be global in nature. Wells had some insight into the potential for ecological debacle, but not that which we do. We can be relatively certain that we are destroying the planet. And as certain that a global solution, commencing but very tenderly with the Kyoto agreement, implies a degree of collective control and responsibility far beyond what we have previously envisioned.

R.S. Surely you don't mean the United Nations? What use is it?

U.S. It deserves our full support, and an extension of its powers and scope of responsibility.

R.S. Not if the United States has anything to do with it.

U.S. We need to animate all nations both with a sense of our global plight, and of the duty of those who possess such awareness to act immediately and directly to support such measures as are likely to minimise the damage we are doing to the environment.

R.S. I return to my objection: who wants to give up their BMW's? Have I made the point clear enough?

U.S. The riposte is that an example must be set. If SUV's are selling well and increasing fuel consumption, governments need to point this out. And then tax them more heavily. And increase spending on public transportation. And tax consumption more heavily. This is the essence of any sane "green" politics. But it does require leadership – Wells's greatest worry.

R.S. At least you're not prating on about "utopia".

U.S. The first stage of the very modern utopia is the avoidance of dystopia. If we are able to collaborate in avoiding ecological catastrophe, we may see the merits of collaborating further in the cause of world peace. And the spectre of ecological catastrophe implies an extended collision of many powers in competition over scarce resources like water and agricultural land.

R.S. Then what we really need is rearmament.

U.S. You are really a closet supporter of Mr. Bush, aren't you?

R.S. No, I am only extending the logic of your own argument. And remember, I am you anyway.

U.S. You are my worse self, not my better self. That much you should remember. You are a part of me, but even you are capable of a more sane course of action, if you can be persuaded of the consequences of your current course.

R.S. You're going to tell me we're all in the same boat.

U.S. You guessed it: we will sink or swim together.

R.S. And utopia is the shore we will swim towards?

U.S. Not perhaps Crusoe's distant island of palm trees and verdant nature: but a land where life can continue for the entire species. A land where survival is possible: the alternative is too bleak to contemplate.

R.S. How can we reach it?

U.S. Reduce population growth by stringent birth control; reduce consumption by the measures I have suggested, and more; equalise the standard of living between the developed and less developed worlds to prevent overly great population growth in the latter.

R.S. Good luck! Who's going to agree with any of that?

U.S. Eventually we may persuade the world to act in this way. It doesn't matter. There is no choice in our course of action. My final word: it is the duty of the educated to promote this programme. Others have less understanding of the stark realities we face. We are privileged enough to be able to stand back from immediate self-interest.

R.S. Good luck! *Intellectuals!* Saving the world! Feathering their own nests like the rest of them, more likely.

U.S. You're an irritating sod sometimes.

R.S. Ditto.

U.S. But I won't give up. And admittedly, you have a point.

R.S. Good luck again! You'll need plenty of it.