

The Unwritten Final Chapter of *Slouching Towards Utopia*

Brad DeLong
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My big 20th-century economic-history book of last fall *Slouching Towards Utopia* <<https://www.amazon.com/dp/0465019595>> did not have a "the future" or a "what we should do next" chapter. My frequent co-author Steve Cohen argued me out of having such a chapter: in history books, he wisely observed, such a chapter is always outdated and looks silly no more than six months after publication. Including it greatly erodes the credibility of the rest of the book.

But if I were to have written a last looking forward into the future chapter for my slouching towards utopia, what should have said?

The elevator-pitch version of "Slouching Towards Utopia" is this: Before 1870 humanity was too poor for governance to be anything but an élite running a force-and-fraud game so that its members, at least, could get enough for themselves. In 1870, the rocket of modern economic growth blasted off, thereafter doubling humanity's technological competence every generation. Baking a sufficiently large economic pie that everyone could potentially have enough wood soon come within our grasp. Utopia could then be built if we could only solve the second-order problems of figuring out the proper slicing and tasting of the economic pie—equitably distributing it, and then utilizing it wisely and well so that people felt safe and secure and we're healthy and happy.

But it went wrong. Between 1870 and 2010 humanity did not gallop, run, canter, trot, or even walk toward utopia. At best, we slouched. And were we even headed in the right direction? Come the first decade of the 2000s the engine of economic growth began to misfire, so we can no longer count on the assurance of rapid growth underpinning our utopia-seeking efforts, and we also face new civilization-shaking threats, chief among which is global warming. Hence the Grand Narrative of 1870-2010 is one of technological triumph but social-organizational failure. And the Grand Narrative of 2010-? is a new and different one that has not been written.

Since 2010 global society's energies as to what we should do next have taken hesitating steps in at least four different directions:

The first direction is back to the past of the post-WWII social-democratic "New Deal Order". That was the shotgun marriage of Friedrich von Hayek and his exultant confidence in the power of the market to create prosperity with Karl Polanyi and his call for a society of social justice that vindicated all those of humanity's rights that were not property rights. The shotgun was held by John Maynard Keynes, with his confidence in technocratic economic management to (i) maintain

full employment, (ii) make workers' time valuable and this give them social power, and (iii) euthanize the rentiers via low interest rates.

But that system had failed its own sustainability test in the late 1970s: It could not command the durable support of political majorities in democracies, and so global society took the neoliberal turn. Moreover, that system rested on the forces-of-production of Fordist mass-production. The world economy has moved on to the Global Value-Chain and now the Info-Biotech mode-of-production, and there is strong reason to believe that a revived "New Deal Order" would be less effective and less durable than an attempt to revive the Feudal Order of William the Conqueror would have been in 1690 in the Commercial Gunpowder-Empire Age, or than the High Order of 1690 was in the post-1870 Steampower Age.

The second direction is to double down on the Neoliberal Order that followed social democracy. Great Britain did this at the end of the decade of 2000s, when Nick Clegg decided that the purpose of the Liberal Democrats was to corral voters who could not stomach voting for Tories and get them to support Tory rule. The absolute economic growth- and political competence-free Britain produced by the restored and reinvigorated neoliberalism of Cameron and Osborne (and their even less worthy post-Brexit vote Tory successors) is a very strong warning against stepping in that direction.

The third direction is to summon the spirits of ethnonationalism from the vasty deep. Claim that the principal flaws in modern societies are not those of material want but of moral decay produced by the influence and impact of those who do not hold true to the blood-and-soil roots and moral values of the true community. One must fight against immigrants, moochers, slackers, deviants, rootless cosmopolites, sinister foreigners and others, with not so much victory over but the fight for the ethnonationalist community generating moral solidarity

And the fourth direction is one that had been absent since 1870. It is to give up on trying to build a utopia at all. It is to try to, once again orient society around an élite—of kleptocrats, plutocrats, party bosses, or some mélange—running a force-and-fraud game, in which the strong do what they wish and the weak suffer what they must, with the closest approach to a good society being one in which all the tools of the information age are used to accomplish this gently.

All four of these directions seem to me to be either unlikely to be any improvement over our current muddle, or unlikely to be workable. The root problem with neoliberalism was that it starved society of long-term investment, both in advancing technology and in empowering people not in the élite. The root problem of social democracy was that people did not want benefits distributed to them by government, but rather wanted social power to earn, and hence deserve, the wealth to buy the good things.

Is it a fantastic dream to think that a productive and effective synthesis is possible? Or is it just that I am an old ox, one that has been trying to work for such a productive synthesis my entire career, so that now I cannot do nothing but continue to go round and round, pushing the same burden around the same circle?

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