



Written by [James Heiser](#) on August 4, 2009

Thomas Sowell and the Choice Between Utopia and Freedom

In an article for [JewishWorldReview.com](#), Thomas Sowell establishes the proper context for the current debate over various schemes for nationalizing America's healthcare system: it is the latest playground of Utopian dreamers and schemers.

The problem, Sowell observes, rests in a fundamental unwillingness on the part of the Utopians to confront the reality of living in the real world; the Utopians are unwilling to live with the painful imperfections and limitations that are often simply unavoidable: "What is also the price of freedom is the toleration of imperfections. If everything that is wrong with the world becomes a reason to turn more power over to some political savior, then freedom is going to erode away, while we are mindlessly repeating the catchwords of the hour, whether 'change,' 'universal health care' or 'social justice.'"



There is a technological mentality at work among the social engineers; having been reared on a belief in an abstraction known as "Progress," they confuse technological and scientific accomplishments with an ability to fundamentally address the human condition. Thus, for example, as we have witnessed incredible medical breakthroughs (especially when the free-market forces have motivated medical research), the Utopians believe that the solution of the ultimate problems of the human condition can thus be address incrementally. In the end, they see each individual illness as simply a personal circumstance awaiting a universal solution — what they believe is lacking is a Central Authority capable of addressing every need with a solution. Thus, the public is bombarded by the media with specific situations (e.g., an individual who needs a cancer treatment, but cannot afford it), and the declaration that an omni-competent Central Authority could ameliorate all such needs on a case-by-case basis, with a wisdom capable of infallibly determining who will live and who will die.

Sowell also rightly declares, "Ultimately, our choice is to give up Utopian quests or give up our freedom. This has been recognized for centuries by some, but many others have not yet faced that reality, even today. If you think government should 'do something' about anything that ticks you off, or anything you want and don't have, then you have made your choice between Utopia and freedom."

The conflict between Utopian ideologists and people who live in the real world has truly gone on for generations. In fact, according to Igor Shafarevich's analysis in [The Socialist Phenomenon](#), the conflict



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goes back to the earliest days of human history. Utopianism is, as Thomas Molnar notably titled it, the “perennial heresy.”

Across the generations, Utopian schemes have played havoc with nations and civilizations, often despite the wisdom of those who speak out against the folly of the proposal of the hour. Thus, for example, Aristophanes’ stinging criticism of the Utopian mentality in the fifth century B.C. still lands home against the schemes of our late purveyors of “hope and change.” In *Ecclesiazusae*, the character Blepyros compels Praxagora to speak with an appeal to “principle”: “We’ve one steadfast principle, I have observed; New things are good, old things bad,” to which Praxagora, being sufficiently nerved, declares:

Briefly my scheme is: mankind should possess
In common the instruments of happiness.
Henceforth private property comes to an end —
It’s all wrong for a man to have too much to spend,
While others moan, starving; another we see
Has acres of land tilled prosperously,
While this man has not enough earth for his grave.
You’ll find men who haven’t a single lean slave
While others have hundreds to run at their call....
That’s over: all things are owned henceforth by all.

[Jack Lindsay translation, Bantam Books]

The experiences of the 20th century should have taught mankind against the folly of such schemes, but the mendacity of the Utopia-hustlers continues to beguile millions of men and women, and places our nation in danger of utter financial ruin and the tyranny which inevitably accompanies collectivism.

Eric Voegelin’s comments in 1952 about people who seek to “immanentize the eschaton” — that is, who want to bring about in the “here and now” a perfection that can only be known after the Lord’s Judgment of the world and establishment of His everlasting Kingdom — apply to the Utopian ideologists of each generation. Or, as Sowell has now so succinctly written it, “If you cannot tolerate imperfections, be prepared to kiss your freedom goodbye.” Politics remains the art of the possible; it cannot prescribe the impossible, and when it tries to do so, it ceases to serve the *polis*.



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