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Utopianism and Environmentalism

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ABSTRACT  This paper examines the ways in which utopianism permeates both radical and reformist environmentalism. Utopianism has created ‘ecotopia’, the radical environmentalist’s utopia which has evolved from writing and action over the past half century. Ecotopianism’s ‘transgressive’ potential in assisting change towards an ecological society is examined, and judged to be limited by idealism and unrealistic assessments of existing socio-economic dynamics. Reformist environmentalism is also considered; it is argued that this, too, can rest on unrealistic premises, reflecting liberal-capitalist utopian fantasies.

Introduction
Greens versus space invaders! These are the two leading contemporary utopian ideals, according to John Carey (1999). In the former utopia, all people disappear and the planet takes over (presumably this would represent a dystopia to all but those Gaianists who see humans as a blemish on the planet). In the latter utopia, humans spread through the galaxy to people the universe. In his extensive compendium of fictional utopias, Carey (p.xxiv) observes that this discourse ‘promises to be one of the formative antagonisms of the 21st century...’.

In this paper, I intend to show how utopianism in various aspects permeates contemporary environmental discourses, and to make some assessment of the potential of ecotopianism to assist social change – that is, its ‘transgressiveness’. As well as the more radical ecotopianism, I will consider reformist environmetalism’s utopia of ‘ecological modernisation’ (EM).

Liberal reformists who champion EM might suggest that it is ‘utopian’ (i.e. ‘idealistic’ or ‘unrealistic’) to contemplate any society radically different from our own, as ecotopians do. And without doubt there is plenty of unrealistic utopianism in ecotopia. Elements of deep ecology and New Ageism, for instance, recall Mannheim’s (1936) ‘chiliast’ utopian mentality, which is less concerned with social processes than with sudden breakthrough into a dreamed-of paradise through quasi-mystical thinking and ecstatic experiences (see Ferguson, 1981 and Russell, 1991). But reformist environmentalism’s
penchant for either free market or ‘third way’ myths can suggest implicit idealisations of nature-society relationships that are equally fantastic – recalling for example, the myths of ‘Cockaygne’ or the ‘perfect moral commonwealth’.

Utopia and Ecotopia

Utopianism involves critical and creative thinking projecting alternative social worlds that would realise the best possible way of being, based on rational and moral principles, accounts of human nature and history, or imagined technological prospects. Utopian thinking invariably contains criticism of the status quo (Honderich, 1995, pp.892–3.)

Utopianism thus requires ‘vivid imagination’ of the norms, institutions and individual relationships of a qualitatively better (or worse, in the case of dystopian speculation) society than that in which the utopianist lives (Hansot, 1974). A critical division is commonly made between utopianism in the most constructive sense, which identifies the existing potential for major social change (the eu-topos or good place), and the mere building of fantasy worlds that don’t and could not exist (u-topos or no place) (Best, 2000). Hence many commentators follow Bloch’s (1986) distinction between abstract utopias – dreams and fantasies – and concrete ones that are derived from critical social theory, based on an understanding of current social processes and achievable by development from those processes. Here, Bloch draws on Marx and Engels, who criticised utopian socialism for failing to diagnose accurately the causes of the social evils their utopias aimed to eliminate, leading to strategies doomed to end up as counter-revolutionary.3

‘Utopianism’, from this particular socialist perspective, thus has pejorative connotations. However, many contemporary socialists do see utopianism as positive, and as a vital ‘expression of the desire to make history, and not to accept the present as given’ (Coleman, 2000). And if socialists nowadays need what Harvey (2000) calls an ‘optimism of the intellect’, so too do radical environmentalists need it.

Some consider utopia’s function as to test and clarify ideas by stimulating fairy tales and fantasies (Alexander, 1984). However, as Mannheim (1936) points out, the danger in not attempting to go beyond that point is that such a utopianism can be counter-revolutionary: indulging in escapist daydreams merely assists us to tolerate the existing society’s imperfections. Constructive utopianism must therefore sharpen our critique of existing society, and create ‘free spaces’ (Sargisson, 2000a and 2000b) in which we can carry out thought and practical experiments, working out the effects of enacting our utopian principles (Stillman, 2000). As such, utopias might catalyse social change, and
thus be *transgressive* across the boundaries delimiting ‘here’ and ‘there’: they might assist “...recognition that everything inside our heads and much outside, are human constructs and can be changed” (Carey, 1999, p.xi).

Thus conceived, there can be little doubt about utopianism’s potential benefits to environmentalism. And all of the different utopian forms – as described by Levitas (1990), for instance – occur in modern environmentalism. As well as the *myth* form (e.g. the Age of Aquarius, Gaia), utopianism occurs as radical green *lifestyle* experiments that often follow the communitarian tradition. It is also present in ecologically-inspired *political programmes* such as ‘Blueprint for survival’ (Goldsmith, 1972). And it occurs as *literary fiction*, including ecotopias and eco-dystopias.

### Defining and Contextualising Ecotopia

Utopian theorists may differ in their view of the extent and importance of fictional ecotopianism. Kumar (1991) points out that the ecotopian form was only recently named (by Ernest Callenbach), and maintains that utopian social theory (Roszak, Schumacher, Illich, Gorz and Bahro, for example) is the most powerful expression of ecological ideas. His view (Kumar, 1987, p.408) that there are “few fictional ecotopias” contrasts markedly with the impression generated by writers such as Wall (1994) or de Geus (1999), who claim to identify green ideas and ecologically *inspired* utopian fiction stretching back to the Ancient Greeks. Hence utopians from More to Morris, Kropotkin to Howard, Thoreau to Skinner, are held to have written what were essentially ‘ecotopias’, containing evocative images of a sustainable society. De Geus argues that such writers were ‘ecologically inspired’ political utopians.

It is true, as Carey’s survey confirms, that many past fictional utopias, particularly from the nineteenth century, contain eco(dys)topian themes and sentiments. These range from envisioning biologically egalitarian societies achieving harmony with nature to registering fears about population-resource problems – indeed, Harry Harrison’s (1966) eco-dystopian New York of 2010AD, with its starving millions committing voluntary suicide to the accompaniment of nature films and pastoral music, seems to owe something to nineteenth-century works by Anthony Trollope (1882) and Ignatius Donnelly (1891).

However, it does not necessarily follow that such past utopias or dystopias can be described as ‘ecotopian’. Few of their authors started from the point of view that we now call ‘ecologism’ (Dobson, 2000). Ecological concerns in their work may have been marginal to their social concerns, and are unlikely to have arisen primarily from what we now regard as ‘green’ or ecocentric motivations.

It is particularly tempting to see utopian socialists as ‘proto-greens’, and there is undoubtedly much common ground between ecotopia and the utopian scenarios of, for instance, Charles Fourier (Roelofs, 1993, p.70) or William Morris (Wall, 1994). But whereas utopian socialists believed in social perfectibility and claimed that their approach to history was ‘scientific’
(Taylor, 1982), the empathies of today’s radical environmentalists are frequently somewhat different, quite often resonating with postmodern scepticism about such matters.

Given such difficulties in categorising together utopias born of very different reactions to very different societies, I will limit this discussion of ‘eco(dys)topianism’ largely to writing, thinking and action in which environmental problems and themes are central rather than incidental, and which largely reflect the concerns of society in the half-century since the worldwide environmental movement began.

The key fictional example is Callenbach’s *Ecotopia* (1975), which appears to draw heavily on Huxley’s *Island* (1962). Dauncey (1999) and Boyle (2000) offer more recent versions of ecotopianism and eco-dystopianism respectively; it seems that the latter has been more conspicuous in futuristic writing since the rise of modern environmentalism. Examples include Ballard’s (1962, 1966) apocalyptic and surreal dystopias, which often unfold in the shadow of ecological doom; Cooper’s (1973), Elton’s (1989) and Robinson’s (1996) visions of interplanetary escape from a dying Earth; Wright’s (1997) revisiting of the *Time Machine* in the context of global warming; the population dystopias of Brunner (1969, 1974), Harrison (1966) and Mitchison (1975), the genetic engineering dystopia of Silver (1998) and the social engineering utopia (or dystopia?) of Skinner’s *Walden II* (second edition 1976). Taken together, ecotopianism and eco-dystopianism represent ecologism’s ‘good cop/bad cop’ approach to admonishing us for our ecological transgressions: they are opposite sides of the same coin.

Eco(dys)topianism arises in the context of post-1950s utopian thought, where some, like Marcuse, sought utopia through radical movements based on socialism, anarchism and situationalism, and a synthesis of Marx and Freud. Others, however, perceiving a new age of consciousness, followed Aldous Huxley towards ‘eupsychia’ – a utopia of the mind free from the corporeal. Huxley’s *Island* might well fit into Manuel and Manuel’s (1979) category “specialist utopias of 1960s and ’70s counterculture”: writings that responded pessimistically to post-industrial apocalyptic visions of overpopulation, nuclear disaster or biological technology gone wrong. At that time, the material informing eco-dystopian visions typically came from Ehrlich’s (1970) *The Population Bomb*, the Club of Rome’s *Limits to Growth* (Meadows et al., 1972) and, later on, studies on global warming and genetic engineering. This current of technological and social pessimism has continued into the late twentieth century. Films like *Threads*, *the Truman Show*, *Pleasantville*, *Dark City*, *the Matrix* etc. mix millennialism and survivalism, reflecting contemporary fears of the panoptican and of risk society, including Frankenstein technology (Levitas, 2000).

This pessimism might be an aspect of a broader postmodern end-of-history mood, which Levitas (p.30) suggests may have produced an anti-utopianism: an ‘Active denial of the merits of imagining alternative ways of living, particularly if they constitute a serious attempt to argue that the world might
or should be otherwise’. Postmodernism is said to produce the view that ‘utopia’ is now everywhere, and is fragmented and polarised. It is seen in ubiquitous computer games, in cults and communities, and in lifestyle magazines. We all create and enjoy alternative realities by means of cyberspace, TV fantasy, tourist travel, alternative lifestyles and subcultures (Crook, 2000). This is the heterotopia: a utopia of otherness, relinquishing the ideal of synoptic perfection in a grand unifying theory and instead understanding the world as the overlapping spaces of a multiplicity of differences. Heterotopia encourages us to make our own individual ideal places, investing them with meanings that vary in spatial and social position (Jacques, 2002). Heterotopia constitutes the utopia of liberal individualism (Nozick, 1974).

Transgressiveness

In as much as it is “...thoroughly detrimental to the political process” (Levitas, 1984, p.20), such escapist fantasy could be regarded as reactionary rather than transgressive. It does not encourage crossing the boundaries around the enclosed territory of ideas and social relationships in which we are situated, and entering heuristic spaces in which we would be encouraged to think in new paradigms. One defining characteristic of transgressive ecotopianism is that it would “ – as literary or physical spaces – represent an opportunity for thinking differently about something we might otherwise take for granted” (Sargisson, 2000b, p.104).

A second characteristic of transgressive ecotopianism would be to avoid seeing utopias as blueprints to which all should conform – a dangerous view that contains the seeds of repression. Transgressive ecotopianism therefore shuns naturalistic representations of the form of the ‘good society’: it says less about what will be in the ideal world, and more about the communicative process by which it may be negotiated. This, according to Sargisson, is Moylan’s (1986) critical utopia, which privileges the process of social change over a fixed, finite utopia of perfection. Levitas (1990, 2000) argues that the postmodern turn has led utopianism in this direction over the past 30 years: to become more about what we are against than what we are for. Contemporary utopian texts, she says, are “provisional, incomplete, flexible and reflexive”, displaying potentially dystopian as well as utopian features, with a fragmented narrative structure in which plot and character are foregrounded while social structure is decentralised, differentiated and in the background. She cites the imperfect feminist utopias of Le Guin (1975) and Piercy (1979) in this respect.

Harvey (2000) advances similar views. The transgressive potential of his own utopia lies less in its detailed lineaments (which are consonant with ecotopia, even looking to bioregionalism and self-sufficiency), and more in imperfections that reflect its grounding in present reality. Other contemporary socialists and anarchists who have incorporated substantial ecological concerns into their more traditional ones (e.g. Gorz, 1982; Fotopoulos, 1998b; O’Connor, 1998) also tend to root their utopian visions in the 'concrete' material contradictions
of existing states of affairs, and this is an important third characteristic of transgressiveness. This approach, rooted in the Marxist critique of utopian socialism, insists that transgressive ecotopianism should relate to the dynamics of the existing capitalist world, but then draw people towards what Cornelius Castoriadis calls the ‘radical imaginary’ (Clark, 2002). This is a realisation that it is we who create society, and can therefore change it into a post-revolutionary one that explicitly and continuously institutes itself by reclaiming creative activity. This is a utopia of process rather than form; of continuous self-transformation rather than static blueprint. In drawing on Bloch’s concept of abstract and concrete utopias, it derives from Marx’s formulation of immanent critique, i.e. clarification of that towards which the world is already striving: not the actual, but the objectively possible (Hayward, 1994).

Thus, according to transgressive ecotopianism, the alternative to capitalism needs to arise from the dynamics now making it fail. New processes may arise from this failure which are likely to be more resonant with an ecologically benign society. In Harvey’s (2000) utopia, the catalyst for the painful transition (via global unrest and military theocracies) is global warming – an element in what O’Connor (1998) more generally terms the ‘second’ or ecological contradiction of capitalism, which today threatens to undermine the system.

Sargisson argues strongly that radical ‘deep green’ thinking is transgressive in all of these important ways, and in going on to review ecotopianism I will consider this proposition.

Written ecotopias: provisional and concrete or abstract fantasy?

On provisionality and the avoidance of static blueprinting it has to be said, contra Levitas, that Callenbach’s Ecotopia itself presents a strong metanarrative founded on the imperatives of (ecological) science. These underwrite an exhaustively detailed account of form – of what will be in a ‘deep green’ society. Social structure is foregrounded, while it is plot and characterisation which remain secondary and superficial. And other ecotopians, sometimes writing from diverse positions, have much in common with Callenbach in describing what should be in this imagined land of strong sustainability. Relatively little is provisional or tentative about features consistently found in ecotopian fiction and non-fiction. They are widely known and do not need elaboration here. Their underpinning principles were laid out in The Ecologist’s radical essay4 ‘Blueprint for survival’ (Goldsmith, 1972):

- minimal disruption of ecological processes;
- maximum conservation of energy and materials;
- population recruitment must equal and not exceed loss;
- a social system in which people will accept the first three principles.

The early ecotopian political programme described in ‘Blueprint’ thus flagged a vital connection between ecological outcomes and the societal corollaries

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following from a green theory of value (Goodin, 1992): inclusive and associative democracy, decentralisation, local production for local need, etc. Subsequent ecotopias have tended to repeat this catechism – thus offering a consensual utopia of universals, not a fragmented or pluralist one. Though one of these universals is respect for otherness and the importance of diversity, ecotopianism does not strongly suggest a postmodern world with huge scope for the coexistence of radically differing beliefs and practices. “Of course the entire moral structure of an ecologically conscious society would rest on Gaian principles,” says Sale (1985, p.120), asserting that here it would be a ‘crime’ to be ignorant of the phrases ‘carrying capacity’ and ‘biotic community’. And ‘Blueprint’, noting that its envisaged changes would be unacceptable to people in their present mindset, concludes that they would have to be ‘restrained’ during the changes. As Prugh, Constanza and Daley (2000) observe, since “a lifelong global celery diet” is not nice to live on, perhaps the imagined sustainable world of radical environmentalists has ultimately to be based on restriction, prohibition, regulation and sacrifice.

Possibly in order to head off charges of abstract utopianism, not rooted in the present, ‘Blueprint’ itself presented a detailed timetable outlining the stages of a transitional programme from 1972 to a 21st-century ecotopia, while Callenbach (1981) devoted a whole novel to the transition. In *Ecotopia Emerging*, the internal contradictions of existing North American capitalism do feature strongly in creating the impetus for change. However, little account is offered of how such dynamics would surely also ensure stubborn resistance to such change (nuclear blackmail notwithstanding) – in this emerging ecotopia, big business’s capitulation to idealists seems abject and fairly complete.

Other ecotopias often treat the crucial issue of transition by pointing to already-existing ‘alternative’ social institutions and networks that seem to prefigure the desired society (see below). In a few cases, these may well constitute physical spaces providing opportunities (as Sargisson says) to act as well as think outside prevailing paradigms.

But in order to fully appraise this aspect of ecotopian transgressive potential, we also need to take into account how far the overall distance is from ‘here’ to ‘there’ for most people in contemporary society. This distance can be considerable; and indeed, for many the direction of envisaged change appears to constitute a *retreat* from modernity rather than a development upon it – what Merchant (1992) calls a ‘future primitivism’ that does not relate readily to present processes and conditions. The anarchism that strongly permeates ecotopianism can be ‘Luddite’ in character (e.g. Hunt, 1997; Smith, 2001).

Future primitivism is evident in Norberg-Hodge’s (1999) proposition that the Ladakh society can be seen as an ecotopian model, since this refers to Ladakhan life and traditions as they were before the 1970s, ‘untainted’ by Western development. Goldsmith’s (1996) ecotopianism also looks back to when pre-industrial extended families and communities produced for themselves. It rests on self-sufficiency and daily local participation in a
Jeffersonian town democracy. And Sale (1985, 1996) sees nature worship, small communities and non-hierarchical co-operation as innate, ‘natural’ behaviour for humans (see also Hunt, 1997). He admits that his ecotopian programme returns to premodernity – but insists (1985, p.478) that age-old cultures such as the Native American ‘know the way of nature best’. On similar lines, McGinnis (1999b) pleads for a bioregionalism to rekindle primal memories of an ‘earth existence’. Such sentiments are rooted less in present societies than in environmentalist myths about pre-Columbian America as Eden.

Again, while Ron Wright’s (1997) fictional time traveller picks amongst the future ruins of industrial modernity in a humanist dystopia, to deep-ecological Gaianists this is a utopia. For although destructiveness and greed have returned society to a primitive state, nature continues and thrives. Future primitivist ecotopians also inhabit Kim Stanley Robinson’s (1996) interplanetary utopian fiction, as the reactionary ‘Reds’ inhabiting the unterraformed Mars: a rock-worshipping, preservationist sect wanting to live in caves and keep the planet in its original state. Robinson appears to see some hope in such groups, who ‘live lightly off the earth’ (see also his Antarctica, 1998).

Future primitivism relates to ecotopianism’s (somewhat selective) mistrust of aspects of modernity. In 1962, while Rachel Carson challenged conventional faith in agricultural science, Huxley ranted in Island against heavy industry and called TV “bad and thin and boring” (1962, p.80). Roszak’s diatribe (1972) against the scientific worldview and urban industrialism also strongly influenced radical environmentalism. Thus the underlying ‘deep ecology’ philosophy of Boyle’s contemporary ecodystopia (2000) is riddled with a palpable hatred of development and modernity, which are blamed for the anticipated global ecological collapse in 2025.

Bioregionalists also tend to bemoan global modernisation – not least for destroying the uniqueness of place, on the grounds that it is largely through identification with place that we come to know and understand nature’s laws, and that a politically empowered community is possible only when people stay in the same place for an extended period of time (Berg and Dasmann, 1990; Snyder, 1990). Thus a central bioregional task is to understand and reinhabit place, coming to know the land and its ‘lore’.

A key related issue is scale. Following Schumacher (1973), who was influenced by Kohr (1957), ecotopianism sees beauty in smallness, and sees bigness as being socially harmful in itself. So whereas big corporation capitalism and economic development are offensive to bioregionalists (McGinnis, 1999b), small-scale capitalism is accepted because it is closer to communities (Mollison, 1990). Such sentiments, however, appear to ignore the expansionary imperative in capitalist dynamics and the inherent tendency towards the consolidation of small firms into larger ones. They could also be seen as reactionary in that they oppose the seemingly inexorable contemporary process of globalisation, instead favouring an ultimately oppressive autarchy (Frankel, 1987).
However, ecotopia is not that simple, and Mollison’s visions of how local communities (population 7–40k) would federate into global associations and multicultural alliances typify the ‘act locally, think globally’ approach by which radical environmentalists seek to remain internationalist while also embracing localism. In this way, bioregionalists might claim that their anti-globalism is a 
progressive reaction to contemporary social forces, localism here being an appropriate response to the risks created by globalisation. Equally, though, strong localism might reflect an older tradition that is conspicuous in North America: of mistrust of bigness in most forms, particularly the ‘oppression’ of citizens by federal government or big corporations. This libertarian anarchism reacts against political constraints on the freedom of the individual and of small communities. Callenbach (1999), whose ecotopia has a central government, nonetheless fulminates against federal government, unfettered markets, free trade and globalisation, big corporations and ‘obscene’ wealth inequality, displaying an ideological mix of American right-wing and liberal sentiments. This can become almost a persecution mentality against ‘them’ – for example, one of Dauncey’s (1999) characters, inhabiting a fictional ecotopia that has said ‘Farewell to toxics’, breaks down emotionally on learning that all toxic chemicals have been withdrawn from the market and exclaims: ‘We’re safe at last for all generations, at least until they dream up something else’.

A further tendency towards reactionary, rather than revolutionary and transgressive, ecotopianism lies in its frequent rejection of anthropocentrism for an ecocentrism whereby, following Leopoldian ethics, humans participate in but do not dominate the biotic community. Conservation, stability, self-sufficiency and co-operation would be the founding principles of economy and society, for which nature would serve as the metaphor. Such overarching environmental determinism comes out specifically in the bioregionalist principle of defining political units on the basis of ‘natural’ regions and boundaries. Some bioregionalists recognise the reactionary dangers here – for instance, Dodge (1990) proposes not biocentrism but ‘anthropocentric bioregionalism’, which would acknowledge that the ‘natural’ self around which bioregionalism revolves is culturally mediated and constructed. Similarly, Flores (1999) argues for the continuing relevance of ‘possibilism’ in bioregionalism.

These arguments suggest that ecotopianism sometimes lacks a grounding in actual material socio-ecological conditions, and that this limitation detracts from its transgressive potential. In fact, ecotopia has a long-standing leaning towards idealist rather than materialist approaches, owing much to thinkers such as Teilhard de Chardin (1947). He proposed that a new stage of ‘psychosocial’ evolution was approaching whereby humans would constitute the earth’s consciousness, controlling matter through their minds. De Chardin’s ‘noosphere’ is a universal belt of psycho-social forces, consisting partly of a dense network of human communications. It is a realm of psychic energy, of pure consciousness, to be developed through the power of love. Eventually, at “point Omega”, evolution will leave us with only consciousness, dominated by reason.
Manuel and Manuel (1979) call this utopia the “dream of reason”. It pervades Huxley’s Island, where he proclaims that all of society’s problems would disappear if only reasonable and intelligent people controlled things. More generally, it underpins ecotopianism’s ‘New Age’ tendency (Russell, 1991). In one of Dauncey’s (1999) short stories, ‘Song of Syntropy’, which covers the transition to ectotopia between 2005 and 2050, consciousness is taken to be a fundamental force that pre-exists energy and matter. It is changes in consciousness, causing changes in practice, that bring about Dauncey’s ectotopia.

All of this meshes with the explanations frequently offered in ecotopianism for ecological destruction. It is held to be the consequence of inappropriate attitudes and ideas, held individually and collectively. Thus Wright’s ecodystopian vision of the aftermath of war, characterised by biodiversity loss, overpopulation, global warming and pollution, portrays these outcomes as being caused by human attitudes and values: envy, gluttony, anger, lust and sloth.

Such explanations may be imprecise and superficial, but this is often the nature of literary eco(dys)topias: the processes are not always thought through. Thus Norberg-Hodge (1999) tells us that the ecological future will be a matter of “slowing down… being really happy… being sad… gathering in circles to sing… dancing beneath the diamond sky with one hand waving free, silhouetted by the sea…”. The ‘spaces’ created in this kind of post-materialist vision do not seem designed for occupation by many of the groups (dispossessed peasants, victims of pollution or global warming) obviously alienated in the present ‘risk society’. Indeed, ecotopia does have exclusionary tendencies, symbolised in Spencer’s (1999) story about an ecotopian Oregon in 2023, which has closed borders with the US and maintains a border defence militia to keep out environmental refugees following a near-apocalypse in the rest of the world. Yet accessible spaces are surely what is necessary for a transgressive utopia (Moos and Brownstein, 1977).

**Ecotopian practice**

If written ecotopianism’s transgressive potential is questionable, what of practical experiments to establish elements of ecotopia in the here and now? Bioregionalist practice began in 1973 with the Planet Drum Foundation, located in the ‘Shasta Bioregion’ (parts of Oregon and North California, scene of Callenbach’s fictional utopia), and spreading through America and into Europe. Bioregional activists identify and map bioregional boundaries and natural corridors linking them. They form ‘watershed groups’, propagating knowledge of Native American culture, and take out lawsuits to defend environmental standards and endangered species (Sale, 1985; Andruss *et al*, 1990). The ‘Ecotopia Project’, in the Pacific Northwest ‘Cascadia’ bioregion, facilitates sustainability projects devised by people living in target communities. It forms a clearing house for ecological resources useful to urban neighbourhoods, and sets
up indicators by which to gauge a community’s ecological well-being. Citizens are encouraged to articulate their needs and desires by utopianising or ‘laying out their dreams’, ignoring economic and political constraints.

That such projects do positively affect specific communities is clear – for instance, from Imhoff’s (1996) description of US community agriculture schemes supplying as many as 80,000 people with food, or Bernard and Young’s (1997) account of sustainability experiments in various parts of the US. The latter’s agenda includes neighbourhood regeneration, land use zoning to restrict development, voluntary restraints by fishing communities on season length and catch, urban tree planting, cycle ways and so forth. Much of it, however, appears reformist, leaning on the EM proposition that environmental protection and profitability are mutually compatible, and thereby failing to stimulate fully the ‘radical imaginary’ – despite Bernard and Young’s insistence that practical bioregionalism is founded on radical deep ecological principles. Indeed, McGinnis’ *Bioregionalism* (1999a) has been criticised for lacking a ‘systematic casting of bioregionalism within ecophilosophy’, and for frequently using “technocratic language that seems anathema to the philosophy in question” (Laferrière, 2000).

All too often, bioregional strategies and programmes differ little from those in the mainstream. Berg’s (1990) ‘green city’ programme for San Francisco Bay, for instance, is mainly concerned to establish recycling, integrated coastal zone management, local food markets and the like. Of fundamental economic changes we hear little beyond a desire for small-scale, ‘responsible’ capitalism, funding non-profit activities for the wider community and ecology (Mollison 1990) where the owners of small stores ‘have found a way to integrate their spirit with their merchandise, where you know... you are in a special place beyond commercialism’ (Dauncey, 1999, p.96). Such hoped-for scenarios, fashionable as they are today, do not adequately problematise the ultimate priority of the financial ‘bottom line’ over social and ecological concerns in capitalism, thus echoing the mistakes of utopian socialism.

Some ostensibly ecotopian ways to register protest also seem set within an established, rather than a new, paradigmatic space – for example, Callenbach’s (1999) advocacy of letter-writing, peaceful demonstrations, ‘speaking to power’ (e.g. Congress members), organising green parties, and helping each other to ‘be joyful and live well’. An exception here is the *ecotage* advocated in fiction by Abbey (1975) and Boyle (2000), and translated into action by the American *Earth First!* movement.

However, there are some more radical quasi-ecotopian practices and institutions that, because they actually exist, appear to have the transgressive potential associated with concrete utopianism. Examples are local currencies, micro-credit and saving, local food distribution schemes, community-owned businesses, agricultural and energy co-operatives and intentional communities (Douthwaite, 1996). They satisfy ecotopianism’s anarchistic requirement that social change must come through people, practices and institutions *prefiguring* the desired society – that is, constituting elements of ecotopia in the here and now.
This runs us into some very old arguments about transition that utopian socialists and anarchists have had with Marxist socialists for years. In essence, the first two see these practices and institutions as genuine transgressive spaces, occupying niches provided by capitalism’s contradictions and tensions; they argue that through the practice afforded in this way, people will become progressively radicalised (in the manner of Martin Buber’s continuous revolution) towards further utopian solutions. As Gare (2000) puts it, capitalism is undermined by those able to develop new socio-economic forms within the environment it has created. Sargisson (2000b) views intentional communes that she has visited much in this light: as spaces for transgressive shifts in consciousness, spiritual awakening and alternative property and work arrangements.

However, some (perhaps unreconstructed) Marxists might argue that this is a form of false consciousness, since ‘alternative’ practices and institutions will inevitably be assimilated back into the mainstream society and economy (for instance, some LETS schemes have arrangements with Inland Revenue for paying tax on their transactions – see Fitzpatrick and Caldwell, 2001). People with this perspective are more likely to note how intentional communes tend to de-radicalise with time, and to follow attitudes and practices that mirror changes and fashions in the world outside (Pepper, 1991).

The long-standing debate continues, for instance between Trainer (1998) and Fotopoulos (1998a). The former champions a “global ecovillage movement” comprising intentional communities, co-operatives, local currencies etc., boasting of being ‘theoryless and apolitical’, and allowing room for small private businesses and market forces. Fotopoulos, however, counters with Marxist-style criticisms of utopian projects based on idealism which, like the heterogeneous anti-globalisation protestors, do not belong to a programmatic movement with clear anti-systemic goals (see also Callinicos, 2003).

However, idealism clouds the transgressive potential of not only ecotopianism: reformist environmentalism also incorporates utopian dreaming.

**Reformist environmentalism and utopianism**

It is a central contention of this paper that utopianism of one form or another, in the positive or the pejorative sense, permeates all environmentalism, whether radical and ecotopian or reformist. Reformist environmentalism abandons capitalism’s once-hoped-for unlimited expansion of “pseudorational” mastery over nature and humans (Clark, 2002). Instead it seeks ecological sustainability via major changes in liberal-capitalist attitudes and institutions, but not their replacement by something else. In the EM discourse that underlies sustainable development strategies at all levels in the West, environmental conservation and economic growth are held to be compatible, whereas radical environmentalists usually insist that they are incompatible.

Thus the EU’s Sixth Environmental Action Programme (2001–2010) seeks a market that will encourage green technological and management innovations,
in theory enabling growth, competitiveness, profitability and job creation to be ‘de-coupled’ from adverse environmental effects. This market would use such instruments as energy taxes and emissions trading, alongside voluntary efficiency agreements made with industry (e.g. on aviation-produced greenhouse gases), to achieve a 20–40% reduction in carbon emissions by 2020.

From a radical perspective, this kind of agenda is underpinned by premises which are ‘utopian’ in the pejorative, abstract, non-transgressive sense (Lukes, 1984). Realism is lost because these premises tend to ignore the dynamics of capitalist economics and the constraints of the forces of production within which they are set. The premises include:

- Western affluence levels can be universalised in environmentally sustainable ways. [In reality, this would require two to three more planets (Wackernagel and Rees, 1996).]
- Conventional economic growth and environmental protection are compatible. [Despite the actual ecological record – for example, the WWF living planet index (a measure of the Earth’s natural wealth) fell by a third between 1970 and 1999 (WWF, 1999).]
- Firms will embrace anticipatory environmental protection technologies as being profitable. [Whereas, in fact, many opt for the quicker profits offered by end-of-pipe technologies (Neale, 1997).]
- In growth economies, environmental degradation will be significantly lowered by anticipatory technologies such as the catalytic converter. [Whereas, in fact, the gains from these are often more than offset by growing consumption (for example, the worldwide increase in annual car miles).]
- Firms will voluntarily use holistic and long-term accounting appropriate for environmental protection. [Whereas, for example, in the EU “most political decisions are taken with a short-term and sector-specific perspective” to maximise immediate global competitiveness (Collier, 1997).]
- Capitalist institutions will reform themselves to give equal weight to economic, environmental and social justice goals. [Whereas civil politics are increasingly subordinated to the neoliberal economic agenda, which prioritises competitiveness and market deregulation.]

Underlying such premises – or hopes – it is not difficult to recognise persistent Western utopian fantasies such as the myth of Cockaygne and unlimited material abundance (Cockayne was a legendary country in medieval stories and poems where food and drink were available for taking without the need to work), or the perfect moral commonwealth in which self-restraint secures harmony between society and nature in a post-industrial arcadia (Davis, 1981).

But, in the real world the proposition that sustainability objectives (social and cultural as well as ecological) and the objectives of economic growth, global modernisation and Western materialist culture can become mutually reinforcing is highly problematic. A few laissez-faire cornucopians consider
that liberating market forces will best aid this desired symbiosis. Most others advocate manipulating and restraining the free market by combining regulation with voluntary restraints and agreements – all as part of some social-democratic or ‘third way’ agenda in between *laissez-faire* and *command and control*. Whatever the emphasis, essentially the hope is for a more humane, democratic and ecologically benign capitalism. Thus Elson (2000) wants to embed markets in ‘egalitarian social relations’ and to democratise the economy, while Soper (2000, p.121) argues that we will stave off ecological disaster “only if market forces are subject to much greater and more democratic political control”. The Worldwide Fund for Nature similarly appeals for reform of the World Trade Organisation to make it democratic and transparent, and to prioritise trade liberalisation measures that would deliver direct benefits to the environment, generating “win-win scenarios” (WWF, 1999).

Such appeals are founded on an ideal of *even* rather than uneven development within capitalism: diffusing wealth and power throughout global society, so that economic life is informed by bottom-up development strategies from communities with the *power* to make economic decisions affecting their lives. Sustainable development based on the popular democratic will (expressed through local democracy and through consumer preferences) can, it is argued, secure the prioritisation of social and ecological goals over those of profit maximisation in an ever more competitive environment. And once certain development and affluence levels have been achieved, ‘post-materialist’ aspirations will come to the fore globally. Human pleasures and modes of self-expression will then be uncoupled from reliance on social and environmental exploitation. This utopian ‘erotic’ of passion, dependency and conviviality (Soper, 2000) would reverse the nineteenth-century “great transformation” of which Polanyi (1941) wrote. In the latter process, economic markets previously constrained by the need to maintain social cohesion became separated from such social constraints and regulations by economic liberalism’s failed endeavour to set up a self-regulating market.

The utopian in the sense of idealistic nature of this theory can be seen in its denial of real processes in the world as it is. As Leach *et al* (1997) point out, for instance, the images of consensual communities that underlie reformist moves to diffuse power actually belong to policy *discourses* serving sectional interests. In the real world, communities are usually socially differentiated and diverse, with unequal power relations. Hence conflict, rather than consensus, often characterises the situations that development initiatives seek to address. Furthermore, despite the modishness of ‘bottom-up’ development initiatives, the dominant form of power in globalisation still marginalises grassroots communities: centres still economically subjugate peripheries.

Meanwhile, competing and footloose global corporations ensure that even in enlightened social democracies, where in prosperous times many businesses indeed wish to embrace sustainable development, such goals are relegated given threatened or actual downturns in the economic cycle. At such times in particular, environmental and social regulations, taxes on energy and employ-
ment and the welfare state in general are all undermined and resisted by business lobbies and many politicians for the sake of global competitiveness, productivity and ‘efficiency’ (see for example Flynn, 2003; also the publications of Corporate Europe Observer). This is essentially because the social-democratic utopian ideal of diffusing wealth and power via regulated market economies contradicts capitalism’s dynamic of concentrating wealth and power (Fotopoulos, 1998b).

These tendencies have become more overt since the 1970s, and economies have become less regulated – so that, as George Soros (1998) reminds us, in a world dominated by unstable financial markets there is inevitably a failure of politics as collective decision-making towards moral standards and social justice — these are superseded by the individualism of market fundamentalism. To fantasise that it will be otherwise under capitalism is abstract utopianism. Indeed, John Gray (1998, p.2) maintains that attempts to produce “democratic capitalism” in a single global free market are oxymoronic: “this is a utopia that can never be realised”. But neither, he asserts, can we return to Keynesian post-war social-democratic economic management policies. These are also delusional, since power has leaked from nations and corporations into the hands of speculative financial markets. Faced with this, “corporations cannot willingly bear the social and environmental costs of their activities” (p.75). There is now a competitive downgrading of regulatory and welfare systems by sovereign states in order to remain cost-competitive, and thus “Global regulation of environmental standards, though an inspiring ideal, is a utopian prospect. It is not enforceable where it is most needed” (p.80).

Such sentiments echo left-inspired criticisms of ‘third way’ social-democratic solutions. Panitch and Girdin (2000), for instance, see these as attempts to harmonise social contradictions within the confines of existing social relations, and thus as pure ideology. These solutions constitute abstract fantasy, shrinking the meaning of social change to fit capital’s agenda of finding a “negotiated path to austerity” (Zuege, 2000, p.106).

As Gray puts it, a managed regime for the world economy “could be established only by the world’s economic powers acting in concert, and conflicts of interest make co-operation for anything more ambitious than crisis management almost impossibly difficult...” (p.200). Clearly this is not always true, and some international environmental agreements are meaningful. Nevertheless, the highly significant failure of Kyoto to gain universal assent – on essentially economic grounds – reminds us of the potency of Gray’s analysis.

Conclusion

Ecotopianism – the utopia of radical environmentalism – is restricted as a fictional form, though it is pervasive in political ecology in general and may be considered to underpin ‘green’ experiments in both individual and communal
living. Ecotopia’s contemporary context is frequently one of public scepticism about science, modernity and ‘risk society’. Indeed, some claim that utopia itself is nowadays a lost endeavour, having been replaced by a ‘heterotopia’ in which utopias as fantasy are part of everyone’s lives and are devoid of social change potential.

Academic and activist opinion nonetheless frequently argues that utopian endeavour is necessary for radical environmentalism and for related movements such as feminism, anarchism and socialism. Utopianism is important within these movements to inspire hope and provide ‘transgressive’ spaces, conceptual and real, in which to experiment within alternative paradigms. To be truly transgressive, rather than lapsing into reactionary fantasy, ecotopias need to emphasise heuristic spaces and processes rather than laying down blueprints, and must be rooted in existing social and economic relations rather than being merely a form of abstraction unrelated to the processes and situations operating in today’s ‘real’ world.

This paper suggests that by these criteria, the transgressiveness of ecotopianism is ambiguous and limited. Deep ecological and bioregional literature, for instance, can seem regressively removed from today’s world. Anti-modernism is evident, for instance, in the form of future primitivism and the predilection for small-scale ‘re-embedded’ societies echoing ‘traditional cultures’. Blueprinting is also suggested by the strong metanarratives driven by (ecological) science. There is a remarkable consensus amongst ideologically diverse ecotopian perspectives about what should be in ecotopia, leaving relatively little as provisional and reflexive. Additionally, idealism in the negative sense is often rife in ecotopianism.

However, idealism pervades reformist as well as radical environmentalism, and the principles behind ecological modernisation – the much-favoured mainstream policy discourse about the environment – are founded on premises that can be described as ‘utopian’ in the pejorative sense used by Marxists. That is, they do not adequately and accurately take into account the socio-economic dynamics of the capitalist system they are meant to reform. Thus they fail to recognise that social-democratic and ‘third way’ attempts to realise an environmentally sound, humane, inclusive and egalitarian capitalism are ultimately headed for failure.

Notwithstanding these limitations of ecotopianism, given that the environmental problems featured in dystopian fiction for over a century seem increasingly to be materialising, it may be that we will soon be clutching at ecotopias as beacons affirming Bloch’s ‘principle of hope’ (1986).

And what of those who, despite these deepening environmental problems, still maintain that ‘ecotopia’ is utopian fantasy in the worst sense, while considering their reformist visions to be pragmatic and attainable? These ‘hard-nosed realists’, as Terry Eagleton (2000, p.33) ironically calls them, “who behave as though chocolate chip cookies and the IMF will be with us in another 3000 years time”, should realise that although the future may or may not be pleasant:
to deny that it will be quite different in the manner of post-histoire philosophising, is to offend against the very realism on which such theorists usually pride themselves. To claim that human affairs might feasibly be much improved is an eminently realistic proposition.

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Endnotes
1 In this paper I will regard dystopias as part of what Manuel and Manuel (1979) call “the utopian propensity”. For as they say (p.6), “If in the background of every utopia there is an anti-utopia, the existing world seen through the critical eyes of the utopian composer, one might say conversely that in the background of many a dystopia there is a secret utopia.”
2 I take radical environmentalism to be that which advocates profound, fundamental changes in economics, societies and individuals in order to create an environmentally sustainable future. Reformism may also seek far-reaching social and attitudinal changes, but these would be based on similar foundations to those of the existing (Western) liberal-capitalist society.
3 Goodwin and Taylor (1982) point out that while attacking ‘utopianism’ as conceived by the utopian socialists, Marx and Engels were themselves utopian in ascribing an apocalyptic role to revolution, and in their idealistic account of the “higher stages” of communism.
4 More reformist programmes embracing ecological modernisation principles also appear fundamentally to be striving towards these conditions.

References


