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The Disappearance of Utopia?
An Interview with Ernest Callenbach on the Role and Function of Utopian Thought in Contemporary Society

Ernest Callenbach is the author of Ecotopia, one of the most influential and best known utopian novels of the second half of the twentieth century. As one of the first “incomplete” and –by implication– dynamic utopian visions (what Tom Moylan calls “critical utopias”) it is premised on a biocentric societal system and world view. The interview was conducted in the summer of 2006.

In light of the political, social, religious and economic developments around the world in the last decade (e.g. ‘new’ smaller-scale guerilla and civil wars with their propensity to ethnic ‘cleansing’, the ‘war’ on terror, rising religious and political fundamentalism on all sides, the devastating imbalance between rich and poor countries as well as the imbalance between rich and poor within countries) the meaning of utopia as ‘no place’ seems to predominate; it has become hard –some critics even claim questionable– to envision a ‘good place’ that could conceivably come true. It does not help that most utopian fiction after your Ecotopia seems to be what Ursula LeGuin in the subtitle to her The Dispossessed has famously called “ambiguous”. What would you say is the currency and necessity of utopian thought and fiction today?

Utopian thought and fiction has always arisen in times when ‘old paradigms’ are breaking down, and new information and new ideas have begun to appear. This process is increasingly visible in contemporary globalized consumer capitalism. Like revolutionary thinking and action generally, it probably happens more when something new is in prospect than at the depths of confusion and collapse. So I look forward to a new birth of utopianism as we stumble through the 21st century, and the old models seem less and less relevant. We will see, I imagine, more ‘partial’ utopias, of which Ecotopia could be considered a primarily ecological one; others might focus on social issues, gender issues (like Starhawk’s Fifth Sacred Thing), cultural issues, political issues.

It doesn’t matter whether utopias ‘come true.’ Neither do vast plans of any kind – globalization was supposed to produce universal prosperity, WW2 was supposed to end wars, the New Deal was supposed to end poverty in the US,
etc. Utopias function to raise the question of what general direction we want to move in: the details of an utopian vision are not items on a score-card. Also it is important to remember that feeling and emotions are critical. Aside from its ecological content, Ecotopia moves those readers who find it ‘feels like home.’

Technology, especially where it serves humanity and not vice versa, as one of your characters in Ecotopia puts it, has significantly developed and improved in the areas you describe: solar cells and other alternative sustainable sources of energy have become much more efficient, there is, though yet on a small scale, a notable increase of hybrid and electric cars and low energy houses. Yet despite this and the growing awareness of the nearing exhaustion of fossil energy resources, there seems to be little evidence that the new technology is seriously implemented. Would you say the world, and especially the U.S., today still are where you predicted them to be in your novel thirty years ago? Put more bluntly: thirty years after the publication of your novel, have we gotten any closer, anywhere, to the ideals you outlined?

Actually, we have in many areas backslid from where we were 30 years ago: most countries (including the terrain of Ecotopia) are more car-dominated, more petroleum-dependent, more net-negative-energy-agricultural, more debilitated ecologically, etc. The difference is that it is now very widely understood that (a) what we are doing is not sustainable, and (b) alternate technologies are readily available—more developed than they were in 1975. So there is the intellectual and scientific and technological potential for rapid and massive change. What is lacking is the political potential. And since, in the institutions of somewhat-democratic capitalism, change only happens when huge forces come to bear on power-holding groups, it is likely that only continued impoverishment of middle classes (a process advancing rapidly under the Bush regime, but which globalization is bringing to Europe too) will finally anger so many people that it will generate the basic political strength to have significant effects. In the US, we are seeing a turn toward public financing of election campaigns (Maine, Arizona, and now Connecticut have all adopted Clean Elections systems, and the California lower house has recently voted for it too) which should serve to break corporate control of our legislatures and make future change easier. Meanwhile, ordinary people learn valuable lessons. If gasoline prices rise sharply, people think about buses and bicycles. If they get fat or sick, they may reconsider their diets. If there is a crime in their neighborhood, they may band together with their neighbors. If their air or water are polluted, they put pressure on regulators and officials.

Sustainable development has to take into consideration the issue of population growth. In More’s Utopia, overpopulation is prevented by emigration and colonization; in Huxley’s Brave New World, population control is implemented on a world-wide level; in Atwood’s Oryx and Crake, Crake sees humanity as a species incapable of controlling its growth and decides to replace it with a new one. In Ecotopia, population growth is not controlled, it seems to fall into a sustainable
pattern more or less automatically – is this a vision you would still put forward, or would you say that active measures of population control will be a necessary feature of an ideal society?

In general, the Ecotopian non-“control” approach to population is strongly borne out by the recent history of most industrial countries: native populations are declining in Japan, many Western European countries, Quebec, etc. (The US population is rising quite sharply, but predominantly through immigration.) Even in Asia, many countries are experiencing sharp drops in growth rates – not yet absolute drops, however. (In Africa, tragically, populations are dropping because of disease and starvation.) So I think the Ecotopian vision is sound. An odd phenomenon makes this less comforting in the US: authoritarian, fundamentalist families have more children than enlightened, democratic-minded ones (those in which wives have more power, probably) so we can anticipate, along with other processes of imperial decay, a slow trend toward authoritarianism. Mexican immigrant families are an exception, it appears. I don’t know whether this factor operates in Europe – whether immigrant families are more rightwing.

Discussion during the symposium has frequently centered on the positive depiction of fairly ‘traditional’ families as ‘utopian spaces’ in an environment seen as chaotic and threatening. In your outline of the stable-state, sustainable society of Ecotopia you markedly stress the importance of a re-conceptualized, more expansive notion of family that goes against traditional concepts. Would you still describe this as the ideal microstructure for a utopian society?

My ideas about family and other social structures were and remain quite anthropological – trying to imagine what structures really suit humans, considering our long species history. Expanded families have been the pattern through most of human history, so I imagine that they will return somehow, under the pressures of the dissolution of most other supportive institutions by the "cash nexus"—that ultimate corrosive identified by Karl Marx. In a bizarre way, our challenge here is to reinvent a way of life as supportive of each other as a ‘primitive’ Stone Age village. Or the poor Appalachian village that I grew up in!

Ecotopia is also based on an extensive public space and sphere, and distinct ethnic communities that are organized somewhere along the lines of ‘equal but mostly, and voluntarily, separate.’ What importance would you give these aspects today, thirty years later? Do you think contemporary American society has changed to the degree that you would re-formulate these ideas were you to write about them now?

Human beings are a very local species, even though now our technologies enable us to move over great distances. We identify with our places, and with the familiar people in them, so I think our neighborhoods and communities will always display uniformities – of race, class, linguistic practices, etc. What has changed
in America since 1975 is that we now have a slightly larger and much more visible black upper-middle class (who often prefer to live in white suburbs), that employment and education discrimination has been considerably reduced, and that white people in general, partly via TV, now have at least some idea of how black people live. Racism is not dead, of course, but in some ‘blue’ areas there is more intermarriage (especially among working people who meet their other-race spouses on the job), mixed children are not stigmatized, and cultures get mixed up. These developments are welcome in my eyes, of course. But whether, looking at the future of American society, we could expect anything like full integration still seems doubtful, especially as social stratification becomes more marked and poverty impacts blacks and Hispanics differentially. In some ways we are moving, not in an equalitarian-though-separate Ecotopian direction, but toward the Alphas and Betas of Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*.

Taking the world as a whole, pressures toward ‘devolution’ are probably stronger than in 1975. Catalans, Scots and Welsh, Bretons, Quebecois, Basques, and the various former Soviet republics are not the only separatist stories. It seems probable that North America will evolve along lines traced by Joel Garreau in his *Nine Nations of North America*. A strong separatist movement is currently appearing in the state of Vermont (which some Vermonters call “Ecotopia East”). In a paradoxical way, economic globalization promotes cultural nationalism: as people everywhere find themselves drinking Coke or eating McDonald burgers, they also seem to prize their own individual cultural traits and strive to preserve them against international anonymity.

*Natural resources like oil and gas or important base metals like iron and copper are finite, but the ‘older’ industrial nations are still based on their rapid consumption. Competition for these resources is even heightened by the advent of newly industrialized nations with vast populations. Do you see this as a source of anxiety for wars being waged because of dwindling resources, or do you think the natural limits of resources will eventually force us to rethink our approach to growth, progress and technology and thus bring us closer to the society you describe?*

As far as materials are concerned, we will sooner or later be driven into a system of total recycling (metals, glass, plastics, paper, etc.) Already there is a vast trade in recyclable materials between China/India and the US. The price differential between virgin materials and recycled ones is dwindling, so I don’t see much possibility for international quarrels there.

On the energy and water fronts, however, it is quite a different situation. Because of the domination of US life and politics by the oil industry, a transition to renewables will be slow (too slow to avert many disruptions, I think). Even if nuclear is exploited again, thanks to its greenhouse-gas innocence, and our vehicles become considerably more efficient, we will not be able to fill the gap we will face after Peak Oil. But American experience in trying to gain control of Iraq oil has been so unsuccessful that I suspect we will not undertake further
outright wars over oil. It must be kept in mind that some people believe the Iraq war was partly for the purpose of keeping Iraq oil OFF the market (and certainly to prevent it being traded in euros) – in which case it has been quite successful, as well as immensely profitable to large US corporations.

The Israeli-Palestinian war is actually the first modern war that is basically for the control of water; most of the West Bank settlements are situated on wells, and Israel proper derives 30% of its water from Palestinian areas. Unfortunately, we can expect many more wars over water in the developing world. Here in California, with our wet North and dry south, we will have exacerbated conflict over water which could conceivably have some striking consequences politically as global heating produces more coastal rainfall and less inland precipitation (dividing the state?). Ecotopia is luckily a well-watered bioregion!

In the long run, it is Ecotopia Or Bust: either we develop a renewable-energy society with universal recycling of materials, or we will face chaos. Water in advanced places like California is already being used much more sparingly (and large amounts are actually re-used); natural purification technologies exist that can treat even sewage water for re-use. Subsidy policies are being reconsidered, so that huge agricultural water use does not destroy salmon fisheries and dry out lands used by waterfowl, etc.

After the last elections, the U.S. have repeatedly been called a ‘fifty-fifty’ nation: the ideological split in national politics also seems to lead to a political regionalization. What do you think are the consequences of this trend for the possibility of a regional politics in the utopian sense, or more precisely: in the way you depict in your novel(s)?

The red-blue split is easy to over-emphasize, but it is real, and probably growing. Nonetheless, the coastal blue states will remain richer, more progressive, more dynamic, and more attractive than the inland red states or the South. Through national taxation, they heavily subsidize the more backward red states—a situation that, because of the peculiarities of the American political system (with the Senate having two members even from tiny states) cannot be directly remedied. However, I would imagine that, somewhat as Joel Garreau imagined, there will be relatively liberal regions (Ecotopia, New England and New York, perhaps Florida) which will in time have quite advanced Ecotopian arrangements. Already, under Bush, we have state governments (even some Republican-led ones) that are fiercely angry at the federal government over environmental and social issues. So here too we see a kind of localization in self-defense. And if the rightists succeed in their ostensible aim of weakening the federal government (after they have looted it), local governments will step in to do what needs to be done.

Everybody’s utopia is someone else’s dystopia: the current government of the U.S. officially advocates its foreign politics as aimed at spreading the peace and democracy of a liberal society modeled on itself, echoing tenets of Hegel and what
Charles Krauthammer in a recent debate with Francis Fukuyama has called “democratic idealism”, as opposed to the “democratic realism” he himself proposes. What role do this distinctly utopian aim and utopian thought in general play in current American politics?

I get very impatient with debates on this level: almost everything that is said is hypocritical or lunatic. People who think the US has such a splendid record of democracy to sell to the world, either as idealism or realism, simply do not know the brutal realities of American history. The vocabulary is misused to the extent that it is utterly pointless to argue in such terms. In fact, what American power is used for has almost nothing to do with peace or democracy, although to be sure it possesses a brutal kind of ‘realism.’ As far as real American democracy goes, as Gandhi said when asked what he thought about Western Civilization, ‘It would be good idea.’ The origins of American political thought are now so lost in the mists of time that a president (and not only this one) can act more like an emperor than somebody operating in the Constitution’s system of checks and balances. We are in a very perilous period now; the Supreme Court is probably captured by the right for the next 20 years, and if Congress does not reassert itself, its role in our society will be diminished perhaps beyond repair. (And the likelihood of the Democrats recapturing even the House is tiny, unless there is a giant anti-Bush revolt in the Republican Party – not that the Democrats would necessarily be an effective opposition even if they succeeded.) So discussions of future rebirth of democracy, Ecotopian or otherwise, seem moot at the present. Nonetheless, history is always more chaotic and surprising than we expect. If post-Peak Oil produces a serious recession, and if the Bush regime remains as incompetent as it has proved so far, something dramatic may happen. I just hope that things don’t go in a fascist direction – always a possibility when a superficially liberal middle class is economically threatened and politically frightened. And the one thing the Busheviks are good at it scaring people.