

# Evaluate the Role of Utopian Thinking in Green Political Thought

Written by Lucile Cremier

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LUCILE CREMIER, NOV 10 2014

For the past half century, Green political thought has developed perspectives on the concepts of humanity, politics, and society that are in many regards new and innovative. Its critical outlook towards and reconceptualization of traditional systems of thought have shaped its vision of an ideal society founded on “the principles of nonviolence, social justice and grassroots democracy” (Rüdig 2002:20). The importance of that specifically utopian impulse has often been taken for granted.

This essay problematizes the role of utopian thinking in the development of Green political thought, as a methodology in political speech, but also at a deeper level, in the elaboration of a radical new politics. The essay argues that utopia as a mode of thinking is a crucial part of Green political thought and a mark of its distinctiveness. After explaining the concepts of ecologism, utopia, and politics, it will analyse the role of utopia as a rhetorical tool in Green political philosophy and green political speech. However, the essay also presents objections against the argument, in terms of both the form and content of utopian thinking in “ecosophy” (Naess 1973:95) and ecopolitics, in order to highlight the specific role of catalyst it can play in the articulation of a radical Green political thought.

### Ecologism, Utopia, and Politics

This essay focuses on the relation between utopian thinking and ecologism rather than environmentalism. There is a multiplicity of positions within radical ecological thinking. For instance, Murray Bookchin develops an ecological politics and philosophy that opposes and contrasts with Arne Naess’s “deep ecology” (Bookchin 1989:11-12). However, one can distinguish between “*ecologism*”, a “deep”, radical stream of political thought (Naess 1973:100), and a more “shallow” approach – environmentalism (Naess 1973:95). While the approach of environmentalism is limited to technical concerns and to the adjustment of current modes of production to ecological issues, it can easily be integrated into the capitalist economic system and lose its progressive purpose (Gorz 1987:3). Environmentalism is thus counter-productive because it does not break from the ideology of growth, which is at the origin of the systemic problems that created the need for Green political thought (Dobson 2007:201-202). In contrast, ecologism elaborates a critique of the current system with appeal to philosophical and political principles, and formulates “strategies” to reach a new political, social, and economic paradigm that is envisioned (Carter 2007:353). Most importantly, it develops the “limits to growth” thesis against the present economic and financial paradigm, and prescribes a departure from current “anthropocentrism”, from the centrality of humanity in political thought and action (Carter 2007:66; Dobson 2007:3). Ecologism thus fulfils the “*explanatory*”, “*evaluative*”, “*orientative*”, and “*programmatic* functions of an ideology” (Ball and Dagger 2011:4-5).

While Terence Ball and Richard Dagger do not consider the necessity of a preliminary vision of systemic stability or perfection, one may follow Marius de Geus and argue that a utopian impulse is crucial in the articulation of an ideology, and in our case, in “the search for an ecologically responsible society” (1999:5). The fundamental question: “what are we really after?” (Gorz 1987:4) requires an exercise in utopian thinking.

‘Utopia’, from the Greek ὑ/οὐ (negation) and τόπος (‘place’), literally means “no-place” or “nowhere”. Thomas More’s *Utopia* (1516) introduced the notion of eutopia (εὖ-τόπος, ‘good place’) and the practice of “*utopianism*”, that

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is, the spatialization of desire in “social dreaming” (Claeys and Tower Sargent 1999:1). Utopias are found in modern as well as ancient texts, as Hesiod and Ovid already evoked in their poems, visions of an effortless, ideal lifestyle in a generous nature (Claeys and Tower Sargent 1999:7-8). William Morris’s *News from Nowhere* similarly represents “utopian England” as “an oasis” of life (Berneri 1982:255), albeit more sober than the pictures of abundance given in other texts.

While “premodern” utopian thinking postulated an absolute order of nature and society, modern utopias and, especially, eutopias consider human agency and critical abilities as the catalysts of social change (Bauman 2007:98). Indeed, modern utopias have “critical”, “creative”, and “subversive” potentials (Sargisson 2000:12) that are immanent to the thought process itself, and do not necessarily rely on a transcendental order. Utopias are critical exercises, because they trigger and account for “a process of critical reflection” (Stillman 2001:11) about the present. They function as “instantiated principles” of the possible, allowing one to examine different political alternatives in a situated way (Stillman 2001:12).

One may also highlight that utopian narratives establish a particular relation between the text and its reader because the reader’s historical context and positionality are crucial to understanding the purpose and critical intention of the text (Claeys and Tower Sargent 1999:1). This special feature of utopia reveals its creative potential. The personal dimension of the “literary crafting” (de Geus 1999:32) involved in writing and the perspectival choice of the author show that utopias are sites for the expression of “desire” and hope from a situated, subjective standpoint (Levitas 2001:27). As personal and collective “thought experiments”, utopias permit to reflect on current issues in the hypothetical mode, and thus creatively (Stillman 2001:13).

This fosters a particularly subversive relation to the present. It creates a space between the critical dimension – in which the object of examination is the present – and the teleological dimension – in which the possible and the desirable are (re-)invented. The notions of “transgression” (Sargisson 2000) and “transforma(tion)” (Webb 2007:81) may be most appropriate to describe this space in which political thought and the present are intentionally separated. In this sense, utopia and “*utopian hope*” go beyond “critical hope” (Webb 2007:80-81), that is beyond a critical negation of current (environmental, social or economic) conditions, in order to elaborate a possible political horizon. In other words, utopia can effectively be both “practical thinking and thinking practice” (Stillman 2001:21).

As such, utopia is inherently political, in the sense of a collective *praxis* of social action. One may highlight that political hope, and utopian thinking in its three dimensions explained above, are manifest in traditional political philosophy before and in parallel with Green political thought. For instance, while theorizing the core of politics as a *praxis* in *The Promise of Politics*, Hannah Arendt evokes as the mark of true political existence, “the courage that lies at the root of action, of becoming an active being” in a violent and atomized world (2005:202). If Arendt mentions the precious “oases” of imagination in which glimpses of life outside of the current world are caught, she urges her readers to retrieve action and transform this world into a free political space (Arendt 2005:202-4). This shows how the use of the utopian mode, of the spatialization of desire, helps to frame the “new politics” (Bookchin 1989:184) that an author envisions.

## A Rhetorical Tool?

Yet, in the case of Green political thought, the degree of interpenetration between utopian thinking and political thought is unclear. One may consider whether utopia is, first of all, a strategic tool in the articulation of ecologism.

Utopia differs from myth in that myths appeal to an abstracted, timeless truth about human or non-human nature and behaviour, while utopias are abstract, programmatic projections of an idealised reality (Tudor 1972:15). However, utopias often function as mythical narratives in their representation of a “Golden Age” or “lost Paradise” of nature and culture (Berneri 1982:2). Ideologues often appeal to narratives like “political myths” (Tudor 1972:17) of an ideal past or future in order to reinforce their contentions in political speeches (Tudor 1972:121). Indeed, narrativization is an aid to imagination (Gorz 1987:42), and potentially makes political discourse more emotionally relevant, and thus more appealing. For instance, the recurring “call for *growth* in itself” (Gorz 2010:140) in leaders’ political speeches in countries such as Britain and France, does not need to have meaning in order to trigger the sympathy of a given

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audience, because of the pre-existing value of the term in collective imagination.

Therefore, while developing their own political rhetoric, Green political thinkers elaborate a new finality or end (τέλος) to human politics and social life through the use of specific myths. For instance, the recurrent use of the apocalyptic register in ecologist writings (Dobson 2007:20) illustrates a form of eschatology, which is a form of utopia (or dystopia) and often constitutes the other end of the foundational myth of a civilization.

Also, a number of leitmotifs affect and structure Green political discourse. Decentralization is a common theme of ecologism, in bioregionalist theories or more generally programmatic works. Just as William Morris's utopian England was organized around "a federation of agrico-industrial communities working autonomously" (Berneri 1982:256), Ernst Schumacher's *Small is Beautiful* calls for a re-thinking of political organization in "a multiplicity of small-scale units" (1986:62) and *The Ecologist* advocates "decentralization" and "self-regulating communities" (Goldsmith et al. 1972:§211, §281). In other texts, this alternative political organisation is "humanly scaled" (Bookchin 1989:187), "frugal, self-sufficient and co-operative" (Trainer 1985:15) and "a precondition for a flourishing participatory democracy" (Carter 2007:58).

Another key pattern that runs through a number of ecologist speeches is the notion of 'Nature' as absolute moral referent. "Mother Nature" is glorified discursively (Reach 2003:12), especially through a Golden age narrative of the hospitable land, which is paralleled to a womb. For instance, the slogan "Love your Mother" that appears on activist bumper stickers, equates fertility and generosity with femininity and motherhood, which fosters an attitude of respect towards 'Nature' (Reach 2003:28). While such associations are taken for granted (Reach 2003:36), the use of such rhetorical techniques in certain ecologist discourses can significantly affect their impact in an audience.

Lastly, the ecologically sound society and the green political enterprise are often framed spatiotemporally, using the concept of journey. Indeed, Marius de Geus's *Ecological Utopias* take us on a "safari through the land of ecotopias" (1999:24). Marie-Louise Berneri as well as John Jordan and Isabelle Frémeaux's works express the idea of movement and drive in their titles, respectively *Journey Through Utopias* (1982) and *Paths Through Utopia* (2011). Murray Bookchin uses the terms "toward" and "pathways" in the titles of his works (1989, 1991) that develop a programmatic account of a way "from 'here to there'" (Bookchin 1989:189).

Green Parties in Europe make use of those devices in their speeches and publications. For instance, the words "change" and "alternative" are used frequently on the European Greens campaign website (European Green Party 2014), to convey a sense of direction and drive towards an horizon that defines itself critically and positively as different from the political majority. Their 2014 campaign slogan is indeed: "Change Europe, vote Green" and their latest manifesto calls for a "Green New Deal" (2014:12). The French Green Party Europe Écologie Les Verts (EELV) also exploits the lexical field of change in their online publications, especially using the ideas of "ecological transformation" and "ecological transition" (2013, translation mine).

## An Obstacle for Compelling Political Thought?

However, the use of utopian thinking has been criticized as an obstacle for Green political thought and politics rather than a helpful tool for its development. Three main arguments illustrate the criticisms raised against it.

Firstly, one may argue that the utopian mode is useless to political thinking, because it diverts attention from actual problems and creates illusory escapism. For instance, Björn Lomborg contends that "securing economic growth" (2001) should be the primary concern before, if not instead of, elaborating new ways to deal with the ecological crisis. But this defensive rather than progressive attitude might also be the sign of an impoverishment of our ability to think about alternatives (Rabhi 2010:39) rather than a helpful approach to problem solving. Indeed, one may reply that such arguments don't really undermine as much as highlight the rationale for utopian thinking, because the post-Cold War "lack of new ideas" (de Geus 1999:18) has trapped political thinking in conservative dogmas and limited political debate to corrective endeavours.

However, utopianism has also been blamed for its "totalitarian mindset", not only by liberal thinkers such as Isaiah

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Berlin, Friedrich Hayek and Karl Popper (Goodwin 2001:1), but also by utopists like Marie-Louise Berneri (1982:x). The utopian system supposedly stands for a model of “perfection”, which creates an imperative of “uniformity” (Levitas 2001:31-32). The frequent reference to an order of nature in ecologist core principles (Dobson 2007:33-34) is frequent. Pierre Rabhi’s agroecology aims to defend the understanding of “universal landmarks” and “eternal cosmic cycles” that regulate life on earth (2010:55-57, translation mine). While utopian narratives present “static” visions, often comprising a taxonomy of beings, its citizens cannot “dream of a better utopia” (Berneri 1982:7). Meanwhile, this ignores the distinction between pre-modern and modern utopian thinking made above, and the special centrality of human agency and freedom in modern Green political thought. The argument is in a sense quite marginal to ecologism because of its commitment to individual autonomy and participatory democracy (Carter 2007:69). For instance, William Morris understands his utopia to depend on the “people themselves” (Berneri 1982:259). Similarly, Bookchin insists on the undesirability of old rigid utopian models in a critique of the “myth” of “city planning” and “idealization of urbanity” (1989:133).

Nevertheless, the fact that Green political thought has produced a variety of diverging and sometimes contradictory theories, leading to an often “incoherent strategy” (Carter 2007:354), shows that the use of utopian thinking may only provide impractical idealist and radical tools. This objection can be used constructively. Impracticality highlights a need for more structural “coherence” in theorization (Bookchin 1989:18). This reframes utopian thought experiments as ‘raw material’ for practical political thought. That is, there needs to be interplay between utopian thinking and pragmatic considerations. “Pragmatic” Green measures focusing on solving particular present problems have limited chances of triggering large scale change without appeal to the overarching principles of Green political thought, if only because it “leaves little room for hope” (de Geus 1999:30). However, using utopias as fossil models would be equally unproductive. Therefore, one might want to rethink utopia as an open-ended process that participates to framing ecologism and ecopolitics.

## A Catalyst of Radical Green Political Thought?

Utopian thinking, conceived as a contingent practice of experimentation, defines ecologist thought as *radical* political thought, on philosophical as well as practical and political levels.

On the one hand, it highlights the post-modern character of many ‘deeper’ trends of ecologism that are driven towards a new paradigm of political thought. Alternative ecologist conceptions of human nature that are imaged and imagined through utopian narratives oppose the competitive, social Darwinian model and are closer to Kropotkin’s vision of human cooperation (Gorz 1987:48). Therefore, they contribute in decentering the self to incorporate it, physically, emotionally, politically, and morally, with the non-human. Such exploration, as seen in the works of Warwick Fox, invents new human “cosmolog(ies)” via a transgressive “process of identification” beyond the borders of the self (1995:249-252). This realization of the fundamental “interrelatedness” of beings (Naess 1989:161) can be defined as postmodern if one adopts François Lyotard’s definition of post-modernism. Post-modernism questions modern (Cartesian) philosophy’s paradigms and concepts while decentering the philosophical subject and deconstructing the systems of structural analysis. So, the “post-modern” is what is at the eve of modernity, what is not modern *yet* (1993:24-27), as it describes paradigms that are yet to be explored and recognized. Just as the geophilosophy of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (2013) and their idea of rhizomatic politics, ecologism offers “a different way of thinking about politics” (Gare 1995:95).

On the other hand, one may argue that the importance of utopian thinking is heightened in the contemporary globalized context. In the traditional, early modern sense of utopia, knowledge was “spatializ(ed)” geographically (Campbell 2006:117), as the world was not yet fully known. More’s *Utopia* (1516) represented an imagined space, a real place, out of our present world (Campbell 2006:118), and spatialization was key to the verisimilitude of the image. Yet, while the numeric age has “mapped” the globe entirely (Campbell 2006:118), the ‘nowhere’ represented by utopia takes new meaning. Indeed, one does not simply imagine *another space* but rather a transformed version of *our own space*, which politicizes the framing of utopia. Green political thought develops a multiplicity of society models for sustainability, between democracy and authoritarianism, technocracy, and sufficiency (Dobson 2007:64). This illustrates the evolution of utopian thinking from the teleological mode to a “heuristic” mode of theorization (Levitas 2001:36). While this does not suppress the utopian feature of political thinking, it nevertheless reframes it as

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a collective and social endeavour.

Instances of “intentional communit(ies)” (Sargisson 2000:31-33) reveal this crucial role of practice in ecologist political thought. Indeed, utopists may need the work of “those who are actually trying to *do it*” (Pepper 1991:2), especially in the Western world since the development of countercultural “communes” in the 1960s (Pepper 1991:31), as practices of ecological lifestyles to inform and enrich the development of Green theoretical frameworks.

Notwithstanding the marginality of such projects and communes (Bookchin 1989:183), these political and social experiments are effective ‘tests’ for the ecological principles articulated in theory. Works such as John Jordan and Isabelle Frémeaux’s book and road movie (2011), gather positive and negative elements from each one of the examined communes and ecovillages, and discuss these utopian and nowtopian assemblages as a multiplicity of possibilities. The Shareable network in the United States of America, also illustrates a green initiative of urban transformation, seeking to spread as a plural whole across different cities and settings (Luna 2014). These examples illustrate that utopia is not only related to the ideological and philosophical development of Green political thought, but is also crucial in its practical articulation.

## Conclusion

If “reformist” Green political theories tend to accept and work within the current structure of “capitalism and liberal democracy” (Carter 2007:353), the degree of radicalism of Green political thought and practice directly impacts the strength of reformist measures (Dobson 2007:201). Revolutionary and utopian imagination and practice can thus be seen as crucial exercises and a viable methodology for the elaboration of the “climate-resilient pathways” that the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) considers of the utmost importance in their latest report (2014:3). Even though it cannot constitute the sole strategy for the development of workable and adaptable programs, a *critical* and *transformative* use of utopian thinking is fundamental to the articulation of a radical and liberating ecopolitical thought.

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*Written by: Lucile Crémier*  
*Written at: University of York*  
*Written for: Professor Neil Carter*  
*Date written: April 2014*