

From Pastoral Arcadia to Stable-State Mini-Cities: Morris's *News from Nowhere* and Callenbach's *Ecotopia*

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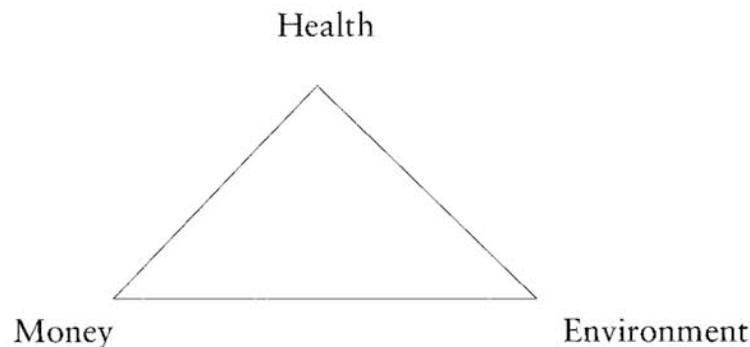
When Krishan Kumar defined William Morris's *News from Nowhere* as "in many ways an ecotopia before the name"¹, he might not have realised how clearly he demonstrated that Ernest Callenbach's *Ecotopia*, published in 1975, had helped create a name for a new sub-genre of utopias: the ecotopia. Apart from (unconsciously) highlighting the importance of *Ecotopia* in prompting the generic term, Kumar's statement also implies the close connection between *News from Nowhere* and *Ecotopia*. In his recent book *Pastoral*, Terry Gifford draws an appropriate comparison between *News from Nowhere* and *Ecotopia*, classifying Ursula Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* and Ernest Callenbach's *Ecotopia* as "two twentieth century parallels to Morris's utopian pastoral"². Indeed, there are very close parallels between Morris's and Callenbach's novels as far as the environment and society's attitudes towards nature are concerned.

In Callenbach's novel, *Ecotopia* is a federation of Northern California and the states of Washington and Oregon. In 1999 the American reporter William Weston makes the first official visit to *Ecotopia* since its separation from the United States in 1979, and only gradually comes to understand the value of traditional agriculture, mini-cities without cars, and the need for recycling and reforestation. It is through Marissa Brightcloud, who strongly reminds the reader of Morris's female hero Ellen in *News from Nowhere*, that Weston fully comes to understand the dehumanising aspects of capitalism he experienced in New York and finally resolves to stay in *Ecotopia*. Although Morris's protagonist returns to Victorian times at the end of *News from Nowhere*, while Weston stays in *Ecotopia*, there is a very similar contextual framework: in the two books the polluted countryside of Victorian England and the violent conditions of New York are directly contrasted with the utopian worlds of *Nowhere* and *Ecotopia*.

Apart from the similar construction of the two novels, there are many other similarities between *News from Nowhere* and *Ecotopia*. One of these is the recurrent theme of living in harmony with nature, which in both cases contributes to a pollution-free environment. In *Ecotopia* there are large forests, plenty of fish fill the clear water of San Francisco Bay, and animal life exists in the city centre with birds in the trees and minnows in the creeks, all contributing to the "bucolic atmosphere" (p.13). It is this bucolic atmosphere that reminds the reader of a pre-industrial era, and goes hand-in-hand with Morris's pastoral perspective on

the human relationship with nature in his “idealised Arcadia”³. The concept of the pastoral in the two novels is not just confined to the modern meaning of ‘anti-urban’, but also brings to mind the medieval meaning, i.e. shepherds giving idealised descriptions of the countryside⁴. Thus, the step into post-industrial times is only superficially at odds with returning to a pre-industrial era in *Ecotopia*; on second thoughts both concepts are inextricably intertwined. In taking some steps backwards towards nature the Ecotopians show an “almost medieval approach to things” (p. 122). They combine traditional agricultural practices and de-urbanisation/reforestation with modern, pollution-free use of science in transport, energy and telecommunication, revealing a hybridity between pre- and post-industrialism. The Ecotopians, like the inhabitants of Nowhere, do not feel superior to nature but rather part of it.

Both Morris and Callenbach, according to David Worster’s definition of Arcadia in ecology⁵, clearly take an Arcadian stance towards nature. This view is in opposition to the imperialistic stance, which emphasises mankind’s superiority over, and its need to control, it with a science-based technology. Both authors advocate a simple and humble rural life in close harmony with nature. Although *Ecotopia* is pervaded with scientific explanations (e.g. of a solar plant, a magnetic railway and a thermal sea power station) and the use of science is praised as a means to cope with environmental problems, Ecotopians do not feel superior to nature but live according to the principle of ‘The Green Triangle’⁶:



Improvements in one area of the triangle automatically trigger improvements in other areas. For example, the decision to use a bicycle instead of the bus or train – bicycles are available free to everyone in Ecotopia – is healthier, saves money and puts less pressure on environmental resources. Likewise, the reduced consumption of meat helps save money and agricultural resources, and also improves health.

The idea of living in balance with nature combined with a “passionate love of the earth” in *News from Nowhere* (p. 179) is equalled by the Ecotopians’ personal relationship with nature. This is a world picture that can be defined as ‘ecocentric’ rather than ‘anthropocentric’; the Ecotopians address trees as their “brother” (p.63) and “treat earth as a mother” (p.32). They do not disturb their stable-state cycle, which can be regarded as a foundation of their life. Consequently, after cutting a tree they immediately plant a new one during their reforestation service. Whatever is taken from the cycle has to be added afterwards, and nothing is produced unless it is entirely biodegradable; waste as a remnant of capitalist

overproduction has ceased to exist. Again, the parallels to *News from Nowhere* are striking: as Old Hammond explains (p. 61), the inhabitants of Nowhere produce for needs rather than wants, and have succeeded in eliminating waste. As in Ecotopia, production does not mean earning one's living but rather fulfilling one's own individual work potential.

Thus, both utopias conform to Richard Saage's definition of a post-material utopia⁷, in which work is seen as the reverse of the Puritan concept of labour. Happiness is not defined along materialistic lines but in relation to the harmonious creation of artistic products. Science and technology have been severed from economic growth, bodily work gains equal respect with mental work, and the emancipation of women is more important than in any other non-feminist utopia. The linchpin of the new, post-material utopian society, according to Saage, is a decentralised political and economic system, and it is obvious that Ecotopia, like Nowhere, follows this pattern of decentralisation. As the Ecotopians take the view that the stable-state system can only work on a small scale, it is hardly surprising that Ecotopia itself is a relatively small country – with, according to my calculations, about 15 million inhabitants – and that the maximum size of a firm is 300 people – “beyond that they tend to break into bureaucratic, inflexible forms and lose their profitability and their members” (p.101). ‘Small is beautiful’ is not just the title of E.F. Schumacher's influential book, but also one of the Ecotopian mottoes, which accounts for the fact that in a process of “decentralisation” (68) and “a continued dispersion into the countryside” (69), large metropolitan cities have vanished and been replaced by mini-cities. As these mini-cities are pervaded by an “almost sinister quiet” (p.12) to a newcomer from busy New York and the aforementioned bucolic atmosphere, one can see an analogy to Morris's re-defined Arcadia, where pastoral values are compatible with city life. Despite the fact that the Ecotopian mini-cities bear some resemblance to Ebenezer Howard's 'garden city' projects in early twentieth-century America (e.g. in regard to size, idyllic atmosphere and food self-sufficiency), the comparison does not seem to be appropriate. Callenbach points out that the garden cities, unlike the mini-cities in Ecotopia, were a good place for serious gardening but suffered from a lack of ecological understanding⁸. The Ecotopians, on the other hand, have transformed their mini-cities, and on the major boulevard “you may see a charming series of little falls, with water gurgling and splashing, and channels lined with rocks, trees, bamboos, ferns.” (p.13).

These similarities between the two books show why Gifford sees in *Ecotopia* a twentieth-century parallel to *News from Nowhere* and why Degering explains that Callenbach basically continues where William Morris had stopped with *News from Nowhere*⁹. However, some qualifications need to be made about the way some of the parallels between the two novels are achieved. While both novels portray economic and socio-political changes as vital preconditions for a new, environmentally-friendly society, Ecotopia (unlike Nowhere) has kept the concept of money and clings to a competitive, capitalist economic system. Although the exploitation of the labour force has ceased to exist, and the workers of a factory own the means of production, the factory is still owned by a limited number of people (i.e. the workers) and does not, as in Nowhere, belong to the whole society. In spite of the fact that the Ecotopians have isolated their economy from

competition with more industrious nations, corporations within Ecotopia still compete with each other, trying to increase sales and maximise profits (p.101). This is a sharp contrast to the economic system in *News from Nowhere*. Thus, the environmentally-friendly economic policy in Ecotopia is not an achievement of the political system itself, but the result of numerous laws made by the government. The reader learns that all corporations are controlled by “a variety of ecological regulations” (p.101) and that “deliberate pollution of water and air is punished by severe jail sentences” (p.93). As William reports, the governing party (the Survivalists) has introduced a whole “package of laws” (p.94) that prohibit pollution. These regulations apply not only to companies but also to individuals, as “every Ecotopian household is required to compulsively sort all its garbage into compostable and recyclable categories” (p. 93). It is apparent that the achievement of an environmentally-friendly country is underpinned by strong governmental control.

From a political point of view, these regulations/laws are made in a highly undemocratic way, which is a reversal of the democratic policy-making of the ‘mote’ in *News from Nowhere*. In *Ecotopia*, a special party militia calls on members of other political parties and potential political dissenters during the night (p.65), securing their one-party system. Pepper points out that this repressive apparatus is part of “a superficially liberal state in which [. . .] the opposition party offers no real opposition.”¹⁰ The narrator himself is intimidated into not sending one of his messages to the United States (pp. 65/66). In addition, the government had engineered a political and economic crisis after Independence that enabled it to expropriate corporations and landowners (pp. 48/49). It also nationalised agriculture, introduced price control on all food and other basic necessities, and prohibited any contact with America, underlining the fact that the government has a strong grip on the population. It therefore does not come as a surprise that Ecotopia has decreased production of food while, at the same time, the US seriously lacks this commodity. The aggressive way in which the government rules the allegedly peaceful Ecotopia also becomes obvious by the fact that the government has installed nuclear bombs under Washington and New York in order to prevent an American invasion. O’Flinn sums up the absurdity of Ecotopia’s desire to save its domestic environment on the one hand, and its aggressive foreign environmental policy on the other, as “a kind of freedom that within its own boundaries is deeply sensitive but is quite ready to secure itself by turning the rest of the continent into a nuclear desert”¹¹. Thus, I would call into question the idea that Ecotopia is a democratic utopia and, as far as environmental management is concerned, confirm Pepper’s doubt that *Ecotopia* has elements of, at least in its initial stages, an ecofascist dystopia.

This ecofascist attitude also becomes evident in the ‘war games’, an Ecotopian ritual where two groups of Ecotopians meet up in the woods and fight against each other. The basically positive objective of the game (i.e. to vent their aggression), however, is underpinned by an eminently competitive approach reminding the reader of a ‘survival-of-the-fittest-attitude’ that can be seen as anathema to Morris’s society in *News from Nowhere*. Participants of the war game meet up in one of the large woods, paint themselves with colours, take a spear and drink a stimulant to “anesthetize [sic] themselves against the terrors to

come” (p.78). They try to “combat the others, to charge and flee, to test their comradeship, [. . .] to be brave and fearful” because it is “essential to develop some kind of open civic expression for the physical competitiveness that seems to be inherent in man’s biological programming” (pp.80/81).

Apart from the ecofascist attitude in the war games, the reader also realises its subliminal eugenic impact. This impression is highlighted by the facts that all “ordinary Ecotopian citizens are remarkably healthy looking” and that “the women, especially, look marvellously healthy” (p.37). Although William learns that Ecotopian scientists and citizens are reluctant to talk about eugenics and seem to show their disapproval (p.71), the question remains why “the fat and broken-down people [. . .] are absent here” and why “oldsters seem surprisingly fit and hearty” (p.37). Considering the physical fitness of the Ecotopian people and the government’s strong grip on the population, the employment of a eugenic policy in Ecotopia would not come as a surprise. Although it has been suggested that there might be an inadvertent eugenic policy¹² in *News from Nowhere*, its employment seems to be more compatible with Ecotopia’s ecofascist regime than with the democratic policy-making of the ‘mote’ in *Nowhere*.

When asked whether technology could be used for the benefit of humanity rather than for exploitation and destruction, Ernest Callenbach remarked in an interview that “the answers lie in the social institutions of control – in power relationships, not in technology itself”¹³. In *Ecotopia*, therefore, Callenbach tries to create “technology with a human face”¹⁴ and thus clearly aims at a harmony between technological and socio-political progress. However, what Callenbach overlooks is that although technology is used for the sake of nature and humanity in Ecotopia, the claimed simultaneous socio-political progress is more than debatable. With its strong governmental control over the population, the sexism shown in the exclusion of women from the war games, and its inherent survival-of-the-fittest attitude, Ecotopia is liberal on the surface only and does not bear such a strong resemblance to *News from Nowhere* as may appear at first glance. Although the societies in both *News from Nowhere* and *Ecotopia* adopt an environmentally-friendly attitude, and both take an Arcadian stance towards nature within their communal ecocentric world view, there are too many social, political and economic dissimilarities that prevent a close convergence between the two novels. It cannot be denied that Ecotopia is an ecologically sustainable world, but this virtue has been achieved at the expense of other socio-political factors that differ sharply from conditions in Morris’s utopia. Although both novels are deeply rooted in the traditions and conventions of the Green Utopia, the claim that *Ecotopia* can be regarded as a sequel to *News from Nowhere* is dubious to say the least.

NOTES

Page numbers in brackets refer to the following editions of *News from Nowhere* and *Ecotopia*:

Ernest Callenbach, *Ecotopia*. London: Bantam Books, 1975.

William Morris, *News from Nowhere*. Ed. James Redmond. London & New York: Routledge, 1970.

- ¹ Krisham Kumar, *Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modern Times*. Oxford & New York: Blackwell, 1987, p.408.
- ² Terry Gifford, *Pastoral*. London & New York: Routledge, 1999, p.39.
- ³ *ibid.*, p.37.
- ⁴ *ibid.*, pp.1–2.
- ⁵ David Worster, *Nature's Economy. A History of Ecological Ideas*. Cambridge: University Press, 1999, pp.378/379.
- ⁶ Ernest Callenbach, *Ectopia*. Ed. Klaus Degering. Stuttgart: Reclam, 1996, p. 358. I have changed the original '\$' sign to 'Money'.
- ⁷ Richard Saage, *Politische Utopien der Neuzeit*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1991, p.340.
- ⁸ An interview with Ernest Callenbach on the role of technology in an Ectopian world. In *Amerikastudien/American Studies*, 41 (1996), p.387.
- ⁹ Ernest Callenbach, *op. cit.*, p.351.
- ¹⁰ David Pepper, *The Roots of Modern Environmentalism*. London: Croom Helm, 1984, p.207.
- ¹¹ *ibid.*, p.208.
- ¹² Patrick Parrinder, 'Eugenics and Utopia. Sexual Selection from Galton to Morris'. In *Utopian Studies*, 1997, vol. 8, no. 2, pp.2–12.
- ¹³ An interview with Ernest Callenbach on the role of technology in an Ectopian world. In *Amerikastudien/American Studies*, 41 (1996), p.384.
- ¹⁴ *idem.*