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Tensions and Dilemmas of Ecotopianism

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines some of many tensions associated with the utopian propensity that underlies much thinking and action in radical environmentalism. They include the tensions inherent within ecotopianism's approach to social change, its desire to embrace ecological universals, its general propensity to face Janus-like in the direction of both modernity and post-modernity, and its tendency towards a polarised stance on scale, and local and global issues. These tensions create dilemmas that are not merely of academic interest: they have practical, tactical and strategic implications, affecting the environmental movement's 'transgressive' potential in the search for ecotopia.

KEYWORDS

Ecotopia, utopianism, social change, postmodernity, scale

INTRODUCTION

Environmentalism in the West is strongly permeated by utopian thinking. I have argued elsewhere (Pepper 2005) that this applies to both radical and reformist approaches to our environmental problems.[1] I wish here to examine this theme further, in relation to ecotopia – i.e. the utopia of radical environmentalism. I will explore some of the ways in which ecotopianism creates tensions leading to dilemmas – even involving contradictory positions – for thinkers and activists in and around the movement, and will discuss how this may impact on radical environmentalism's 'transgressive' potential, i.e. its conduciveness to crossing the boundaries of present society and moving closer to one which is ecologically and socially strongly sustainable.

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Utopianism (and dystopianism)[2] involves critical, creative thinking about alternative social worlds in response to dissatisfaction with the present one – with a view to defining and eventually enacting the best ways of being (Honderich 1995). An important distinction is usually made between utopianism that identifies and encourages existing potential for social change (Bloch's [1986] 'concrete' utopia), and that which ultimately undermines change by retreating into fantasy worlds that could never exist (Bloch's 'abstract' utopias). Concrete utopianism is perhaps essential to any revolutionary movement, because it encourages social change through exploitation of contradictions within present society and stimulates imagination of the society which should replace it. Abstract utopianism carries negative, pejorative connotations of fostering escapism rather than engagement, and 'idealism' in the sense of poor understanding of the structural dynamics of current society and what it will take to change them.

To be truly transgressive (Sargisson 2000, 2001), ecotopianism must first create 'free spaces' for thought (e.g. in written utopias), and practical experiments such as alternative communities and other social-economic forms (Coates 2001). Secondly, it must de-emphasise rigid and potentially repressive blueprints of a future ideal society in favour of exploring social processes conducive to moving *towards* that ideal – thus it must be rooted in processes and practices in the existing world i.e. where people are 'at'. But this means that the resulting 'utopias' will be imperfect and reflexive, and provisional rather than dogmatic in nature (Harvey 2000, Levitas, 2000).

However, attempts at transgressive and reflexive utopian thinking, and action based on it, frequently create sets of tensions and dilemmas that could militate against the desired objective. I explore four such sets here: to do with (i) social change, (ii) universal values, (iii) modernity and post-modernity, and (iv) geographical scale. In discussing them specifically in relation to ecological utopianism, I consider the latter as it is manifest in literary fiction, political programmes and lifestyle experiments.

Before doing this, however, I should acknowledge that precisely what ecotopia is and is not is a moot point. Some consider it a relatively recent, specialised utopian fictional form, named initially by Callenbach (1975), who appears to have drawn heavily on Huxley's (1962) *Island* in constructing his imaginary country of *Ecotopia*. Both these books appear to fit into Manuel and Manuel's (1979) category of 'specialist utopias of 1960s and '70s counterculture,' responding to post-industrial apocalyptic visions of overpopulation, nuclear disaster or Frankensteinian experiments gone wrong. As a recent genre, then, there are as yet few fictional ecotopias.

However other writers such as Wall (1994) or de Geus (1999) claim to identify green ideas and ecologically based utopian fiction stretching back to the Ancient Greeks. Thus utopians from More to Morris, Kropotkin to Howard, Thoreau to Skinner, are held to have written what were essentially 'ecotopias', evocatively painting images of an environmentally sustainable society. De Geus goes so far

as to say that such writers were 'ecologically inspired' political utopians. In this context it is particularly tempting to see 'proto greenness' in utopian socialism, as there is much communality between ecotopia and the utopian scenarios of, for instance, Fourier (Roelofs, 1993: 70) or Morris (Wall, 1994).

But it does not follow that such past utopias can accurately be described as 'ecotopian'. For few if any of their authors started from that particular point of view which we now call 'ecologism' (Dobson, 2000). Hence ecological concerns in their work have usually been marginal to social concerns, and are unlikely to have arisen primarily from what we now regard as 'green' or ecocentric motivations. And whereas utopian socialists believed in social perfectibility, and that their approach to history was 'scientific' (Taylor, 1982), the empathies of today's radical environmentalists are frequently quite different, often resonating with postmodern scepticism about such ideas.

Given such difficulties in classing together utopias born of very different reactions to very different societies in different times, here I limit discussion of 'eco(dys)topianism' largely to utopian 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 a world-wide environmental movement began.

The early ecotopianism of Callenbach and Huxley has been re-articulated more recently in fiction by writers such as Dauncey (1999) and Boyle (2000). The latter's vision is, strictly speaking, eco-dystopian, and it seems that pessimism is more conspicuous than optimism in most ecologically-themed fiction since the rise of the modern environmentalist movement. Examples are J.G. Ballard's (1962, 1966) apocalyptic and surreal dystopias which often unfold in the shadow of ecological doom; Cooper (1973), Elton (1989) and Robinson's (1996) visions of interplanetary escape from a dying earth; Wright's (1997) revisitation 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 dystopias of Silver (1998) and Atwood (2003); or the social engineering utopia (or dystopia?) of Skinner's *Walden Two* (second edition 1976).

As Kumar (1987: 408) points out, there is also a substantial body of radical environmentalist social and political theory since the 1960s that has a strong utopian dimension; by authors such as Roszak, Bookchin, Schumacher, Illich, Gorz, Bahro and Goldsmith. Much of it can be categorised as deep ecology, which is strongly ecocentric, attributes intrinsic value to nature and tries to collapse the Western philosophical dualism between nature and society. It considers social change as driven by ideas and values, and strongly criticises the values of the 'Enlightenment Project'. By contrast, socialist-inclined radical environmentalism contains a more materialistic analysis of social change, emphasising themes of environmental justice.

Both deep and social(ist) ecologists present detailed pictures of an ecotopian world, and the generally anarchistic principles underlying it. The former stress

integration of mind and body around ecological philosophy, and environmentally benign technologies enabling people to 'live simply' in a material sense but to experience spiritual richness (Devall and Sessions 1985). Several utopian traits have been recognised in the social visions of deep green subcultures in north American environmental movements, including biocentric egalitarianism, nature worship, nonmaterialist communitarianism, nonhierarchical egalitarianism, the suppression of physical violence and the elimination of structural violence (Kassmann 1997). Sale (1985, 1996), Berg and Dasmann (1990) and Mollison (1990) are deep ecology writers who envisage 'bioregional' [3] utopias where people with strong commitment to locality and place and shared group ethics live in self-reliant communes, villages and small towns. Such envisioning, unrestrained by the political-economic constraints of present society, is an important practical tool in ecotopian-style neighbourhood planning, e.g. by the 'Ecotopia Project' in America's Pacific Northwest 'bioregion'. It also abounds in Bookchin's (1990a and b) seminal works of social ecology, which embody earlier utopias by Kropotkin and William Morris. Bookchin details a social and ecological utopia that has abolished capitalism and hierarchy and turned to ecology for principles of social organisation, based on decentralised face-to-face direct democracy (see also Fotopoulos 1998b), and featuring organic cultivation, soft energy, small scale living and collective transportation.

In what follows I shall refer not only to fictional ecotopianism, but also to some works of social/political theory, and to practical experiments. I structure the argument around the four sets of tensions and dilemmas mentioned above. Each of the four sections begins with a statement (in italics) summarising the particular dilemmas to be described and discussed in that section.

(I) THE DILEMMA OF THE DIRECTION OF SOCIAL CHANGE

In the name of creating a dynamic of social change, progressing towards a radically alternative future, Ecotopianism sometimes produces rigid social blueprints based on principles of 'equilibrium' and stasis. But since these implicitly call for no further evolution, such principles are ultimately regressive, especially when grounded in idealistic yearnings for an imagined past of society-nature harmony, rather than in present material realities. Ecotopians may respond to this dilemma by endeavouring to establish progressive, 'anticipatory' and transformative material practices in the here and now, but these are often prone to assimilation within existing social arrangements, so may lead us back to the status quo.

The problem of static perfection

A major problem of utopia as the 'perfect place' is that it leaves little room for innovation, change and evolution. Goodwin and Taylor (1982) suggest that pre-eighteenth century utopias were static because then there was no concept of progress. But in our age a society without developmental capacity is seen as undesirable, because, as Kumar (1987) says, 'There is no intelligence where there is no change and no need of change'. Kumar refers to how the Eloi of H.G. Wells's *Time Machine* live perfectly in harmony with their environment but have lost all intellectual endeavour. In similar vein, Cooper's (1973) fictional inhabitants of an ecotopia established on a 'tenth planet', escaping ecological disaster on earth, have successfully eliminated aggressive instincts, but only by creating a 'stable' society which is not evolving. This problem of utopias in general can be compounded in ecotopianism through a predilection for holism, where the 'view that everything is indissolubly connected has the unacceptably fatalistic consequence that nothing can ever be changed without changing the whole given universe' (Goodwin and Taylor 1982: 211).

Additionally, radical environmentalism abounds with problematical notions of human wellbeing founded on a natural order that has stabilised around an equilibrium state – a 'homeostasis', meaning to 'keep the same' (Russell 1991). From the *Blueprint for Survival* to Gaia theory, there is concern about important ecological 'laws' apparently requiring stability and steady state for ecosystems health (see Sale 1985, Devall and Sessions 1985), which by extension demand 'balance' and harmony with nature for social wellbeing (Bookchin 1990a). Milbrath et al. (1994: 425) epitomise the environmentalist view that it is 'perilous for us to perturb those systems', while Devall and Sessions infer that 'not do' should become a guiding social principle.

Unfortunately such sentiments can create what is, for a social change movement, the paradox of 'deep dislike of dynamism, uncertainty and change…' (Bramwell 1994: 177, 205). Indeed, Prugh et al. (2000), among others, have accused ecotopias of demonstrating static, frozen social structures, as well as lacking 'politics' and the emergent properties of real human societies. Associated with these accusations are fears of how blueprints of a 'perfect' steady state may encourage unhealthy totalitarian repression of deviation and dissent.[4]

Such criticisms are not always deserved, since at least some ecotopianism does admit a measure of dynamism, uncertainty, change and deviation from static perfection. Callenbach's (1975) *Ecotopia* itself contains political dissenters, some disturbingly aggressive war games, urban ghettoes and other 'imperfect' features. And Kirkpatrick Sale's work on bioregionalism does concede that *because* of the key biological principles of diversity and self-determination ecotopia would be a changing society, likely to contain imperfections. So some bioregions in his ecotopia might not heed values of democracy, equality, freedom, justice, and 'bioregional standards'. This being so, Sale seeks a system which will work even if not everyone in it is good (more on this problem below).

Again, Bernard and Young's (1997) review of actual community experiments in sustainable development emphasises the sustainability utopia as imperfect and dynamic. Sustainability in its fullest sense, they say, exists nowhere and may never exist: a destination not to be reached, but it is the journey itself which is important. When thus conceived, ecotopian visions veer away from highly-defined blueprints, towards constituting merely a 'navigational compass' (de Geus 1999). They jettison final and static spatiotemporal utopian forms as unachievable – or, if achieved, still unstable and transitional. This means that utopianism must concentrate on the underlying *processes* needed to move towards a final state which will remain hypothetical (Harvey 2000). Utopian works that focus on the dialectics of making a new socio-ecological future in worlds which are still 'messy' include those of LeGuin (1975), Piercy (1979) and Robinson (1996).

Harvey opposes what he sees as traditional ecotopianism's tendency to romanticise an idealised nature, seeing 'natural laws' as overly restrictive of human activity. Harvey's perspective resonates with Marxism's critique of utopian socialism (Lukes 1984), insisting that ecological utopianism must reject idealism and concentrate instead on transforming into action the material forces working within *existing* society, if it is to be truly emancipatory. So ecotopia should reflect the dialectic between the existing and the desired socio-ecological conditions, seeking to subvert what exists and creating transgressive spaces and 'transitional forms'.

As I have suggested, the truth seems to be that ecotopianism swings from one side to another of this materialist-idealist duality. I have shown elsewhere (Pepper 2005) that bioregionalism, and deep ecology in particular, sometimes retreats from the material struggles of the modern world, instead falling back on a romantic future primitivism. Sale (1985: 478), for instance, urges a return to premodernity on grounds that old peoples 'know the way of nature best', while Bowers (2003) compiles a list of prerequisites for a sustainable future by looking at the 'morally coherent and ecologically responsible' communities of the Apache, Quechua, Inuit, Aboriginal etc. The Planet Drum Foundation, initiated in 1973, holds bioregional congresses featuring 'earth connecting native American ceremonies', echoing the tree worship and war game rituals in Callenbach's novel, and deep ecology invocations to 'seek inspiration from primal traditions' (Devall and Sessions 1985: 97) and 'dance … with the rhythms of our bodies, the rhythms of flowing water, changes in the weather and seasons and the overall processes of life on earth' (p. 7) needing fewer desires and simpler pleasures.

On the other hand there are examples of ecotopianism seemingly more engaged with the modern world. The seminal *Blueprint for Survival* (Goldsmith 1972), for instance, gave much space to detailing the transitional processes and forms thought necessary in the journey from what is recognisably today's world to the unfamiliar world of ecotopia. Indeed, Callenbach (1981) presents

a whole volume devoted to transition from the present to ecotopia, seeing this transition as triggered by *contemporary* processes of ecological degradation that, alongside economic globalisation, produce crises in human welfare. Callenbach draws on a pervasive theme of *contemporary* America when he suggests that the struggle of small communities against state control and the dislike of 'ordinary' people against 'bigness and greed' will be significant in provoking ecotopia's emergence. Sale (1985: 179), too, roots his bioregional vision in what he (like many anarchists) claims to be 'thoroughly expressive of the basic trends of the 20th century': that is, distrust of bigness, breakdown of the nation state and of the industrial economy. Bioregionalists, he asserts, call for nothing that is not already here today (though whether he or other ecotopians have accurately diagnosed contemporary 'basic trends' is of course arguable).

However, when ecotopianism does swing towards the 'concrete' and away from abstract fantasising, to engage with the contemporary world, it faces a different sort of dilemma, that of assimilation into the culture to which it is supposed to run counter. As such it may lose transgressive impetus because it no longer presents any serious challenge to the *status quo*.

Transitional forms and assimilation

This dilemma is of more than academic interest. It is germane to the active involvement of ecotopians in what they consider to be 'transformative practices' and 'transitional forms', i.e. anticipatory practices in the here and now, reflecting Marx's idea of 'immanent critique' (Hayward 1994). Such practices constitute a familiar liturgy – from local community initiatives for organic farming, micro credit and banking to city farms and neighbourhood schemes for recycling and energy conservation; from worker cooperatives to local employment and trading systems (LETS), from the Mondragon collectives in Spain[5] to the Second Economic Model in W. Massachusetts;[6] they have all been read, at one time or another, as moving us towards ecological utopia (see for example Douthwaite 1996, Dauncey 1999).

For in ecotopianism's characteristically anarchistic analysis, such institutions and practices *prefigure* the desired society. The analysis reflects Martin Buber's contentions that in utopian society there cannot be dissonance between means and ends (so violence or vanguardism, for instance, cannot be countenanced as means to secure a *non*-violent, *non*-elitist society), and there should be continuity within revolution . This implies that the method of revolution must be to set up features of the desired society in the here and now,

Ted Trainer (1998) typifies these arguments from a deep green perspective. He stresses how key ecotopian practices and institutions (self sufficiency, small-scale living, localised economies participatory democracy and alternative technologies) *already* exist in the 'global ecovillage movement', a network of intentional communities, city neighbourhoods, producer/community coops

and local currencies which constitutes part of the implicit transition strategy of building post-capitalist society in existing society. They are 'grassroots movements of hope' (Fournier 2002).

Socialists often reason similarly. Harvey (1996) for instance describes money as the most important expression of spatio-temporality in contemporary society: its social power currently depending on a hegemonic territorial configuration constituting a system of privilege and social control. From this he argues that because LETS have new spatial-temporal characteristics (currencies are invalid outside a local area for instance, see Meeker-Lowry 1996) their adoption enables alternative, non-hegemonic social practices to be established

However the dilemma of such 'transitional forms' is that in place of transgressive potential they could as easily become an accepted element of the status quo – for reasons detailed in the Marxian critique of utopian socialism. For inasmuch as their supporters often reject conventional politics – Trainer for instance approvingly describes the global village network as 'theoryless and apolitical' – and may underestimate the extent to which contemporary material forces set the terms of mainstream discourse, they often exhibit false consciousness. False consciousness imagines that (a) by appealing to reason and 'common sense' these transitional forms and practices set an example which the masses will want to follow, and (b) that if they in fact grew to challenge seriously existing power hegemonies, that challenge would not be ruthlessly suppressed.

A potential danger of this lack of realism could be blindness to the risks of assimilation into the mainstream culture. Yet we often see how ostensibly 'transitional' practices and 'alternative 'arrangements can easily become institutionalised into the status quo: so that, for instance, some LETS schemes now pay national taxes (Fitzpatrick and Cauldwell 2001); local produce, 'farmers markets' and 'fair trade' now feature in many supermarkets; what was once regarded as radical technology (i.e. renewables, see Boyle and Harper 1976) becomes a major platform for continuing growth of the major oil companies, etc. Furthermore, inasmuch as they permit their members to survive financially in the context of conventional society, many such 'alternative' enterprises decrease the state's obligation to supply adequate social security arrangements – effectively, some might say, prolonging the legitimacy of an existing economics which inherently creates social exclusion. They become, then, counter-revolutionary.

An allied danger is that 'transitional' *form*, rather than process, becomes seen as most important. As Carter (1996) reminds us, most ecotopias presume that self-sufficient communes and worker cooperatives intrinsically benefit the environment because of their small scale, potential contribution to quality of life, and imagined concern about local community interaction with environment. Yet this is all highly questionable – small scale is not inherent to coops for instance, and neither do they necessarily exemplify democracy, inclusiveness or environmental concern. Frequently they are vehicles for alienation through *self*-exploitation as they strive to compete in a capitalist environment. The anarchist

cooperatives in Mondragon have experienced wage hierarchies, a management culture, downsizing and 'rationalisation' in order to become successful players in the global economy (Kasmir 1996). Carter insists that form of itself is not crucial, coops being a vessel into which almost any meaning can be poured.

In reality it is the *context* of potentially 'transitional' forms that may be key. As Gare (2000) argues, they must be set within a culture of non-capitalist values and a clearly radical social change agenda. This is why Fotopoulos (1998a), in arguing for transitional forms, nonetheless opposes Trainer's position for its lack of clear goals for systemic change. An unambiguous programme for such change – ultimately to a stateless moneyless economy, says Fotopoulos – is necessary if an ecotopian inclusive democracy is to be established.

The dilemma, then, is how to avoid radical ecotopian ideals and practices sliding towards counter-revolutionary pragmatism and reformism: not insisting on a new society but lamely content with epithets like 'rebuilding the ship while at sea', 'inspiring the making of more environmentally friendly choices' and providing a 'compass' towards working 'flexibly and subtly' towards a 'generally more ecologically sound society' (de Geus 2002). With such epithets, radical ends like eliminating consumerism can ultimately be distorted into reformist campaigns for 'green growth' and the like. Porritt (1992: 163) considers that such slippage constitutes the sort of 'basic dilemma which most environmentalists remain remarkably reluctant to confront'.

(II) THE DILEMMA OF UNIVERSAL VALUES

On the one hand ecotopianism uncompromisingly presses for universal observance of the ecological principles or 'laws' to which all other species conform, considering that for humans not to follow suit is hubristic, dangerous and subversive. Yet on the other hand one of these ecological principles celebrates the virtues of diversity. Applied to society, this implies respect for 'otherness' and the right to be culturally and socio-economically different; even to the extent of living ecologically-unfriendly lives.

Ecological absolutes and cultural relativities

In impossible, abstract utopias everyone is unproblematically good. But in transgressive, concrete utopias this may not be so: some clash between self interest and social good is likely. Since dissent from the universals on which society is based is fundamentally anti-utopian, repression of deviant behaviour is invited when these universals are infringed. With their desire for harmony, conflict avoidance, democracy and collectivism as *universal* principles, utopian socialists have long grappled with this dilemma (Taylor 1982).

Now ecotopians face it. Their imagined sustainable world certainly suggests repression to some: for instance Prugh et al. (2000), who consider it based on restriction, prohibition, regulation and sacrifice. Behind ecotopia's façade of democracy, they allege, in the closed and claustrophobic society of small communities, all will be regimentation and uniformity, with no free choice of work, no right to travel anywhere, strict social relations and public interest dominant over private concerns. Whether this is a very accurate impression of radical environmentalism's ideal world is arguable, but there is some evidence for it when ecotopians write of the perceived need to defer to universals.

'Of course the entire moral structure of an ecologically conscious society would rest on Gaean principles', Sale (1985: 120), for instance, asserts, adding that ignorance of the phrases 'carrying capacity' and 'biotic community' would be a crime in this society. In similar vein, Milbrath et al. (1994: 426, 428) want to 'forbid behaviour that may irreversibly injure natural systems, encouraging social freedom *so long as* it serves … ecological imperatives. Goldsmith's (1972) *Blueprint* darkly refers to the possible need to 'restrain' people during the transition to ecological society, if they do not show self-restraint. And while Callenbach's *Ecotopia* is seemingly committed to citizens' power and open discussion, at the same time potentially fascistic forces exist, such as powerful charismatic leaders, marginalisation of opposition, and a secret police force. Indeed, incipient totalitarianism can surface quite starkly in ecotopian thinking. For instance a long-established communard and Green Party activist asserts that in his ecotopia an absolute ecological code would be enforced by green police, with heavy restraints on what we now regard as rights and freedoms (Pepper 1991: 131).

Yet simultaneously what Levitas (2000) calls a 'pathological pluralism' also emerges. This is based on the principle, widely-held amongst radical environmentalists, that just as species diversity is essential for ecosystems resilience, social and cultural diversity are vital for societal health and strength. The radical green movement values and celebrates tolerance of diversity and democratic self determination (Kassman 1997, Milbrath et al. 1994, Bookchin 1990a). Hence we find that the same activist who wants a green police also proclaims that ecotopia will allow most things that do *not* infringe ecological imperatives. Where ecological principles are not threatened, there should be no *social* universals; hence if people choose to set up communities of deviant social behaviour this would be tolerated, on the grounds that 'you can't repress people on some beautiful idea of what morality happens to be'.

The dilemma here is partly that a blanket acceptance of other positions and standpoints cannot but undermine the capacity to occupy one's own position in a committed way. But more than this, 'A pseudo toleration of all ideas, therapies, pedagogical principles, child raising practices, cultural messages, work practices, legal statutes etc., is both dangerous and naïve' (Frankel 1987: 192). Hayward (1994: 202) sums up the dilemma:

> … the attempt to pursue a unified conception of the good life, in a society where individuals have a plurality of conceptions of what is actually good, risks imposing on them moral values against their will … the dilemma is how to pursue pluralism but without relativism.

For liberals, of course, this is not a difficult problem: given the variety amongst people there can be no one kind of life best for all; so 'utopia' can only consist of different and divergent utopias, where nobody can impose their ideal on others. Nozick (1974) calls this 'meta-utopia': the environment in which people can try out utopian ideas but where tradeoffs must be made with people of very different ideals. Conceived thus, utopia is no more than a framework enabling people to experiment, and utopians with different visions would need to cooperate only to the extent of maintaining the libertarian framework. This reduces the need for totalising discourses – only the universal rights that would sustain the framework would be required, overseen by a minimal state.

But this is problematic for radical environmentalists, since it smacks of the kind of laissez-faire thinking that underpins economic and social behaviour of the type which causes the problems, rather than solving them. And ecotopians are likely to share Knights and Willmott's (2000) view that liberal notions of sovereignty and ownership over self in reality constitute illusory freedoms with dystopian potential. For in contemporary society these 'freedoms' are embedded in power discourses such that individuals are transformed, in the manner described by Foucault, into subjects whose sense of meaning, purpose and identity comes from participating in discursive practices reflecting *repressive* power relations. So, for example 'autonomy' at work becomes self policing with reference to management objectives rather than one's own. This is subtle (self-) regulation, and part of the same assimilation discourse in which, say, producer coops or 'alternative' communities become vehicles for self-exploitation (see above).

Resolving the dilemma

There are many attempts to resolve this dilemma, which has dogged radical social movements. Like many socialists, ecotopians claim that advancement of certain *particular* interests, for instance those of nature, is in the *general* interest, hence the need to assert universals. It may be that, as Harvey (2000) suggests, these universals are negotiable between place- and culture-specific demands. However, this negotiation should not go so far as to romanticise cultural differences as 'authentic otherness' and *just* cultural. For they are also part of political economy, often displaying common class content – hence what Harvey calls 'militant particularist' groups should and can combine over their commonalities. Harvey thus attempts to preserve respect for difference while not overlooking a core of similarities between societies. Yet while this strategy is theoretically accommodating, in practice it could still leave awkward questions, of the type Bramwell (1994: 177–179) poses:

> So given your viable local community, it decides democratically how it is to survive, without sustained material growth … But suppose the community decides otherwise? Ecologists do not address this problem. The prospect of ineradicable disagreement does not enter their model of community … [and] When it comes to restricting personal mobility to what is necessary, if market mechanisms are not to be used … then how would the model work? Would someone who wanted to move from the Highland eco-zone to the Chilterns bio-region have to ask another's permission? Who would police the comings and goings of these local communities and control the policies?

Milbrath et al. (1994) acknowledge that in the free society they want for their 'new environmental paradigm' people could choose to destroy their own ecosystem. This however cannot be allowed, for 'Much as we value democracy and autonomy, they do not outweigh the value of life and the ecosystems that support life' (p. 440). Such approaches to this dilemma verge upon 'repressive tolerance', a theme Marcuse explored. Being against totalitarianism and dogmatism, he nevertheless thought humanity should not be allowed to 'freely' descend into suicide. Lichtman (1988) explains that here Marcuse was concerned with the absence, again, of real freedom within apparent free choices in liberal society. For such choices are inevitably shaped by the false consciousness of assimilation into mass culture. Ecotopians face the same problem as socialist revolutionaries – without 'true' consciousness the masses will not spontaneously rebel, but without rebellion they cannot attain true consciousness. Hence Marcuse inexorably moves towards advocating an anti-democratic revolutionary elite as 'transitional' dictatorship, forcing society into freedom by breaking the hold of false consciousness on 'one-dimensional man'.

If this kind of value monism is to be rejected as potentially repressive, does this inevitably mean embracing relativism – even to the extent of *absence* of moral standards? We might yet be able to argue otherwise. For instance, nature can be valued in various ways, instrumental or intrinsic, that are irreducible to a common value, yet, as Brennan (1992) says, this does not stop us attributing *value* to nature. By extension, the fact that a plurality of moralities exists does not mean morality has to be regarded as absent. This position is not the same as moral liberalism, which conceives of *competing* moralities – rather, it concedes that different moral conditions apply in different cases and there is no single theoretical lens for viewing a situation. Hence the morality governing social relationships could be anthropocentric and utilitarian, while that governing relationships with nature could be ecocentric – this, says Brennan, is consistent and moral. Yet Brennan's interesting exercise in moral philosophy still does not say how, *practically*, we might treat 'democratic' communities of 'deviant' social behaviour – we still seem to be left with the problem that while we dismiss their position as abandoning morality, they can claim it as simply drawn from a different morality to ours.

Perhaps the resolution lies in Hayward's (1994: 205) position that although we might recognise this principle of pluralism, it is still open to us to try and *radicalise* it. Here the emphasis would be less on political compromise between private interests, and more on creating autonomous public spaces where 'collective interests can be dialogically defined'. Thus discursive democracy would become central to ecotopia – a democracy that would be communicative, participatory and ideally free from vested interests, strategy, deception, distortion and manipulation. In it, people would also understand how much individual identity is bound up with the nature of the group (Graham 1984).

This is a 'compromise' position much favoured by academics and middle-class intelligentsia (e.g. Graham 1984, Fotopoulos 1998b, Mason 1998). It seems, unsurprisingly, to rely on a degree of faith in the power of rational argument, free from 'false consciousness'. Such pre-eminence for rationality as a governance principle does in fact obtain on Huxley's (1962) ecotopian *Island*, but it seldom obtains in real life outside the academy. For in response to Bramwell's awkward questions, it implies that while people would be free to embrace any position, in a truly discursive, inclusive democracy, they would of their own volition *probably* reach the 'right' solutions – a view which Hayward himself admits is somewhat 'utopian' in the pejorative sense of idealistic and unrealistic.

(III) TENSIONS BETWEEN MODERNITY AND POST-MODERNITY

This ecotopian dilemma, of prescribing universal values while celebrating diversity, is but one symptom of a more general tendency – a propensity for ecotopia to face, Janus-like, in the direction of both modernity and post-modernity.[7]

The discussion so far shows how ecotopianism partly does, and partly does not, lend itself to the postmodern conception of utopia as fragmented, pluralistic, provisional and reflexive. Some postmodernists, like Baudrillard, argue that there are no more utopias because everywhere in current society is 'utopia' achieved, albeit simulated, virtual and a dream (Smith 1997). Thus we all create and enjoy alternative realities in cyberspace, TV fantasy, tourism to exotic places, ostensibly 'alternative' lifestyles etc (Crook 2000). This utopia of otherness relinquishes the ideal of synoptic perfection in the postmodern belief that the components of reality cannot be placed into a coherent whole. Postmodernism's 'heterotopia' understands the world as overlapping spaces of a multiplicity of differences (Jacques 2002). Levitas (1984, 2000) suggests that in keeping with this perspective, contemporary fictional utopias are heuristic and exploratory, provisional and tentative, reflexive and pluralist, saying less about the nature of utopia itself, and more about the communicative processes by which it may be negotiated. Hence, she says, from a modernist outlining of desirable social blueprints as a goal, utopia in general has moved to a critique of present society – from what we are *for* to what we are *against*. In all this,

collectivities are disintegrated, moral and ethical absolutes are impossible and perfection, metanarrative and grand unifying theory are relinquished. Levitas sees this as a depoliticisation of utopia, a fate with which ecotopia's 'pathological pluralism' is consonant.

Other aspects of ecotopianism, however, suggest it still has roots in modernity. For instance most accounts of ecotopia, even if approached from diverse positions, agree substantially on the litany of details, mentioned above, of what *should* be in this imagined land of strong sustainability. They paint, in essence, a grand narrative of ecotopia's form. And relatively little is provisional or tentative about the features and principles consistently found in ecotopian fiction and political economy. The underpinning universal principles for attaining and maintaining ecotopian society were laid out in the *Blueprint for Survival*, and 40 years on most varieties of radical 'green' politics still insist on them:

- Minimal disruption of ecological processes;
- Maximum conservation of energy and materials;
- Population recruitment must equal and not exceed loss;
- There must be a social system where people will accept the first three.

And explanations of the cause of our ecological plight may equally be presented as unambiguous meta-narratives. Human greed, selfishness and hubris, the large-scale nature of modern development, or the universal tendency for globalisation to rob communities of their autonomy and capacity for self determination – these kinds of essentialist explanations for our ecological plight persist throughout the ecotopian literature (e.g. Callenbach 1975, Abbey 1975, Dauncey 1999, Boyle 2000). They constitute in fact 'crypto-utopias' (Jaques 2002) – generalised, sometimes simplistic, quasi-religious imagined 'truths' which may mask cultural and ideological differences and other complexities – and, says Jacques, these crypto-utopias constitute the 'dominant topia of *modernity*' (emphasis added).

Ecotopianism also tends to present nature itself as a metanarrative – often as an antidote to the postmodernism of the contemporary city. In novels like *Make Room! Make Room! Earth Future,* or *A Friend of the Earth*, and in films such as *Emerald Forest, Blade Runner* or *Logan's Run* nature appears as opposition to and refuge from evil: the repository of sound, certain values at times of unrest, upheaval, risk and anxiety. The settings, whether in a primitive past world, the natural world of the present, or an unexplored future nature, present a nature idolatry predicated on utopian wish fulfillment, according to Brereton (2001). It is a Gaian, new age ecotopia where the nature metanarrative is a form of millenarianism (Harrison 1984) offering a second chance of establishing the ideal world, and, again, as such it is distinctly 'modern'.

Finally, the sometimes-uncomfortable 'straddling' of modernity and postmodernity is reflected in ecotopianism's 'ambivalent' (Yearley 1991) and potentially

contradictory stances on science and technology. On the one hand there is characteristically postmodern scepticism and pessimism about the so-called 'benefits' of technological development and 'progress'. Science and technology are seen as substantially responsible for contemporary ecological problems and risks, and scientific, technocratic elites are regarded as instrumental in perpetuating hegemony of scientific over other discourses, thus overemphasising rationality, reductionism, 'objectivity' etc. All this feeds upon anti-modern dystopian visions such as *Frankenstein*, *The Island of Dr Moreau*, *Brave New World* and *1984*.

On the other hand, the case for ecotopia substantially rests on an *authority* claimed for 'scientific' principles, derived particularly from biology, ecology, 'new' physics etc. Additionally, considerable faith may be invested in technological developments of the 'radical' type (Boyle and Harper 1976) to transform society. Hence ecotopianism calls not for the 'wholesale discarding of advanced technologies', but in particular for further development of technology compatible with ecological principles, which will contribute to harmonisation of society and the natural world.

Callenbach (interviewed in Putz 1996) locates ecotopianism's technological ambivalence within a wider dichotomy in the American utopian tradition. There is technophobia, which sees the arcadian aspect of America and its organic unity threatened by technological disturbers of the peace. And there is technophilia, regarding technology as a blessing, bringing progress, civilisation and ultimately utopia. Callenbach reserves technophilia for ecotopian society's technology, portrayed as the art of understanding nature, where human-technological systems are based on natural principles. Such 'soft' technologies are enthused over, inspiring awe and sublime thoughts. The technophobia is located in pre-*Ecotopia* technology – depicted as dark, separated from natural systems, and serving exploitative capitalism.

Murray Bookchin, however, takes a slightly different stance, not only endorsing the postmodern utopianism of the radical technology movement, but also echoing the more positive associations of that brand of scientific utopianism which is associated with modernism, from Bacon to H.G. Wells (Nate 2000, Stableford 2000) – in a way melding the two. For he not only considers that advanced technology can free people from toil and scarcity, after the Enlightenment project: he also thinks that this technology can be environmentally benign and 'consciously promoting the integrity of the biosphere' (Bookchin 1980: 102).

(IV) SCALE, AND LOCAL-GLOBAL TENSIONS

Social reorganisation into networks of small, self reliant communities, is seen as fundamental to ecotopia, a place where localism forms the source of most appropriate values and behaviour, and giantism and globalisation are often regarded as enemies. Yet this stance could militate against the international

governance necessary to counter transboundary environmental problems. It could also be interpreted as a reactionary throwback to past consciousness, encouraging parochialism and contributing to simplistic, reductionist explanations of environmental problems.

In general, nineteenth and twentieth century utopianism 'reasserts the authority of small groups' against the forces of modernisation e.g. as corporate capitalism or 'state socialism' (Van der Weyer 1988). Ecotopia is no exception. Bioregionalism, for instance, talks of confronting the 'opponent' of 'insidiously powerful globalisation' (Aberley 1999) which homogenises space (McGinnis 1999). Instead bioregionalism offers, as all other forms of ecotopianism invariably do, small-scale social organisation as the *key* to achieving ecotopia:

> How slowly is it dawning that scale is the key! The key to that change in our habits of mind which all our reformers lamely end up calling for as a last resort to the mending of our self destructive ways. (Ash ND: 5).

Hence Sale (1985) reasons that only at the (bio)regional level can people see themselves as the causes of environmental effects, so selecting this level at which to live *of itself* solves many theoretical and practical problems. Moreover (p. 54)

> When [people] look with Gaean eyes and feel a Gaean consciousness, as they can do at the bioregional scale, there is no longer any need to worry about the abstruse effluvia of 'ethical responses' to the world around.

Here, Sale hopes to secure moral objectives by 'appealing to some specific spatial order' as Harvey (2000: 161) puts it. Ethics are dismissed in favour of scale, geography and the natural world as determinants of correct behaviour. Scale, as pre-given geographical configurations, is thus assigned motive, force and action and made the starting point for sociospatial theory – as when Kohr (1957), Sale's mentor, explains major historical and social change as caused by changes in population *size* and scales at which people live.

This 'reified' way of grappling with scale (Swyngedouw 1997) constitutes a form of disengagement from politics commonly encountered in America. Scale becomes effectively a crypto-utopia (see above), deployed in diatribes against big powerful government and greedy corporations, who stand accused of thwarting the honest intentions of simple, homespun individuals, small businesses and communities (e.g. Berry 1996, Dauncey 1999). Communism or capitalism, republicans or democrats – all are dismissed equally as creating a 'sheer scale of events … [which] has all but deprived us of the possibility of living any faith, living morally or meaningfully' (Ash ND: 14). Such diatribes also, perhaps, embody a wider postmodern nostalgia for 're-embedding' in the face of abstract and impersonal forces of global modernisation and the disappearance of small town home life (Putz 1996, Callenbach 1999) – creating what

Thomashow (1999) calls a 'yuppie utopian vision' of forging islands of diversity in a sea of homogeneity

One obvious dilemma of extreme regional identification is that of sliding into 'moral parochialism', where communities forsake any concern for the behaviour of people beyond their own localities, and isolationism tolerates the appearance of degenerating social conditions in other places (Smith 2001). There is further danger of idealisation of small communities, underplaying their 'capacity for mean spiritedness and conflict' which has been well documented by social scientists (Alexander 1990). Frankel's (1987) fears are that greater regional autonomy will of necessity create quasi-nationalism with social, economic and cultural quarrels, hence he insists on the need for mediating institutions between the local and global.

Such problems of applying small scale experiments to the large scale world should remind us not to think, simplistically, that the ecotopian world model will be the simple aggregate of innumerable small models. More broadly, we should remember that local, place-based, knowledge is not necessarily generalisable in the way of scientific knowledge (Goldstein1999), hence the former should not be over-privileged. As Lipschutz (1999) puts it, appropriate local knowledge has to interplay with the context of the global economy, and the level at which environmental problems are best managed is the outcome of this interplay, so whether units of governance are (bio)regional or larger is the outcome of contingency and context. Here is recognition of the issue discussed above, that simultaneously with their support for localism as the source of values of diversity and self sufficiency, ecotopians support 'global means to enforce ecological principles' (Bramwell 1994: 91).

Mindful of such issues, Thomashow advocates 'cosmopolitan bioregionalism', which would operate at various scales, including the global. What this would consist of is disappointingly vague,[8] but at least he, with a few other bioregionalists such as McGinnis (who proposes a 'relatively footloose bioregionalism rooted in global civil society), sees the need to make localisation *complementary* to globalisation rather than its polar antagonist. Hence some contemporary ecotopians call for localism *plus* stronger international governance (e.g. Woodin and Lucas 2004); culminating perhaps in Monbiot's (2003) revival of H.G. Wells's utopian proposal for a world parliament, or Mason's (2005) call for a 'non-territorial accountability', whereby inhabitants of one region could sue MNCs and states elsewhere for cross-border environmental damage inflicted on them.

The need, then, is to avoid environmental reductionism, in, for instance, bioregionalism's search for 'natural' regions, and a scale reductionism which explains root causes of, and solutions to, environmental problems directly as 'bigness' and 'smallness'. Geographers often remind us of how the region and its delimitation is not 'natural' but is a product of nature–culture dialectics, and always humanly redefined, contested and restructured. This suggests a need for

struggle at *all* scales based on a sophisticated analysis involving processes rather than merely form (see above). These processes include a continuing struggle between labour and capital, to change social relations which will not radically alter merely as a result of spatial reordering (Harvey 2000).

For scalar spatial configurations, says Swyngedow (1997), do not *determine* everyday life: they are, rather, the *outcome* of social contestation for power and control. Hence theoretical and political priority never resides in a particular geographical scale, but rather in the processes through which particular scales become reconstituted. As an example we now see capital 'jumping scale' as a result of its attempts to reassert political-economic hegemony after a post-war period of Keynesianism and intervention by the nation state. Hence capital increasingly organises production internationally, escaping national regulation (including environmental standards), and enhancing competitiveness. However this is part of a bigger set of processes, as Swyngedow sees it, involving recent parallel, simultaneous movement towards large and small scales – non is more valid than any other. Generally, the dominant try to confine the subordinate to a manageable scale, while the latter seek liberation by harnessing power at other scales. The contested restructuring of scale occurs, especially at institutional level, from national to supranational (e.g. EU) and/or global. But there is restructuring in the other direction – from national to regional, urban and local community, particularly for individual bodies. Swyngedow's analytical perspective requires eliminating specific scales, global and local, as conceptual tools, and concentrating instead on the *politics of scale*, and their metaphorical and material transformation.

CONCLUSION

The four sets of tensions and resultant dilemmas outlined above are not the only ones which might be explored within ecotopianism, if space allowed. There are, for instance, dilemmas arising from deep ecology's desire to collapse the philosophical self–nature dualism, by which Westerners see themselves as different from and superior to nature. Instead, deep ecologists argue that humans are but mirrors of nature, leading paradoxically to the 'Leibnitzian *conceit*' (Harvey 1996), where we reason that all we need in order to understand the universe is to contemplate our inner *selves*. Or, again, there may be tensions arising from ecotopianism's strong disposition towards environmental determinism, yet at the same time its necessary emphasis on freedom of human will to shape an entirely new society.

Enough has been said, however, to suggest that such tensions and dilemmas might blunt ecotopianism's transgressiveness. If ecotopia should become a static blueprint, or a mission to return modern societies to primitivism, it will not facilitate progressive social change. If it fails to tolerate competing discourses it

will likely encourage the oxymoron of 'green' dictatorships. Yet unconstrained moral relativism could undermine support for universally observed ecological principles. Again, if ecotopianism adopts a polarised stance on localism it could neglect the global institutions and technologies which may be vital in creating strong sustainability. And simplistic scalar explanations, such as those which attribute all ecological-social problems to 'bigness', can militate against transgressiveness by simply missing the point: neglecting the complex of social-economic processes that create planetary environmental risks.

Ecotopianism's ambivalent stance on modernity and post-modernity leads us to considerations of consistency – ideological, moral, epistemological etc. Does ambivalence and diversity in such respects signal weak transgressive potential? Social movements born of specific issues, like environment, peace or anti-globalisation, frequently do contain a spectrum of apparently incompatible world views. Yet many activists and commentators consider this a strength – strategically enabling such movements to appeal widely, and to benefit from continuous infusions of fresh ideas. Equally, however, as noted above, the failure to build 'transitional' forms and institutions on internally consistent and rigorous reasoning could be why such forms and institutions so often become assimilated into the society which they oppose.

Whether the dilemmas and tensions considered here can, or even should, be conclusively resolved is arguable. Most radical social change movements, like socialism or anarchism, have been living with them for years (see Reedy 2002). What does not seem in doubt, however, is that they are of more than academic, theoretical, interest. Most of the issues discussed above have clear and obvious practical, tactical and strategic implications for campaigning movements (see Kassman 1997). Consequently they should not be buried and forgotten for the sake of convenience: rather, they should be opened out, confronted and thoroughly aired. It is hoped that the foregoing discussion will contribute to that ongoing process.

NOTES

[1] Radical environmentalism advocates profound social change to create an environmentally sustainable future: reformist approaches also seek far-reaching change, but do not dispense with the underpinning foundations of Western, modern, liberal-capitalist society.

[2] For the purposes of this discussion I regard utopias and dystopias as complementary aspects of what Manuel and Manuel (1979) call 'the utopian propensity', arguing that anti-utopia lies in the background of every utopia and vice versa.

[3] A bioregion is a territory defined by a combination of biological, social, and geographic criteria, rather than geopolitical considerations; generally, a system of related, interconnected ecosystems. Bioregions are based on broad landscape patterns that reflect the major structural geologies and climate, as well as major changes in suites of plants and animals.

[4] For some, such failings suggest that ecotopianism paradoxically lacks appreciation of 'new ecology', where the classic deterministic view of natural systems as closed, self-regulating and in equilibrium has been replaced by ideas of the 'flux of nature'. This perspective, observing how open natural systems are constantly changed from beyond their boundaries by human or other influences (Bernard and Young 1997), no longer assumes long term 'equilibrium' as a natural state (for instance Gaia theory recounts how oxygen-breathing species were able to evolve and survive by virtue of permanent 'pollution' of the earth's original atmosphere).

[5] A successful association of over one hundred cooperatives engaged in manufacture and service industries and sustaining the community, based loosely on anarchist principles.

[6] An association of businesses, with 'triple bottom lines', or what they call 'Community Conscious Capitalism for Millennium 2000'.

[7] I have discussed this more fully elsewhere, see Pepper 2000.

[8] Thomashow sets out somewhat platitudinous 'guidelines' for achieving cosmopolitan bioregionalism, including the need to pay attention to sensory impressions, use different ways of thinking, have compassion for the chasms of despair, alleviate global suffering.

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