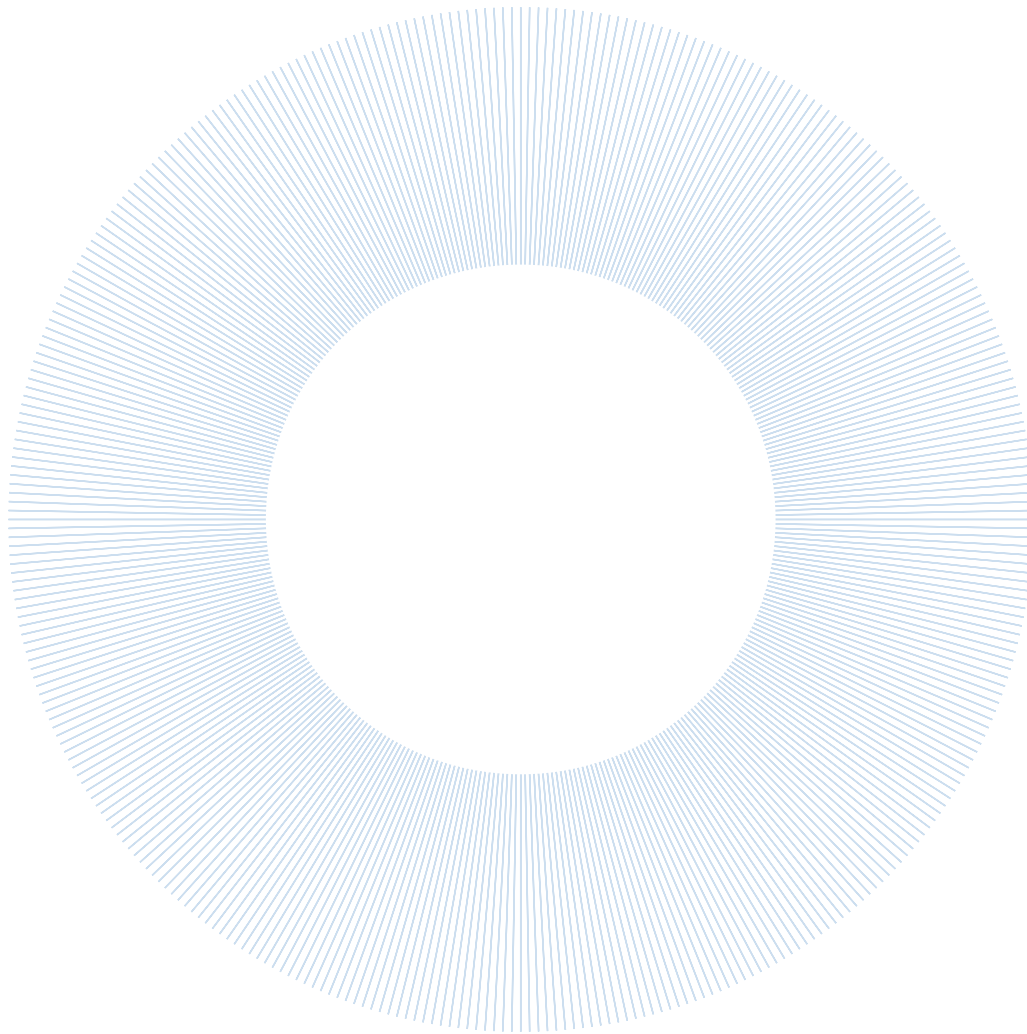


# Scarcity and Sustainability in Utopia



Jonathon Porritt

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## SCARCITY AND SUSTAINABILITY IN UTOPIA

*For 40 years, environmentalists have strained every sinew to persuade society 'to change its ways' to avoid the potentially fearsome consequences of accelerating climate change, resource depletion and pollution. 'Scarcity' has been one of the recurring themes of this critique of orthodox models of progress and economic growth: if we go on growing both the number of people and the overall size of the economy, it has been argued throughout that time that the natural systems on which we depend will simply not be able to cope.*

*Whilst hard to argue with from a scientific point of view, the cumulative impact of this alternative world view over forty years has been limited. 'Business as Usual,' with a few relative painless environmental trimmings, remains the order of the day.*

*So is it time for environmentalists to try a different tack: to seek to seduce society into 'changing its ways' rather than hectoring and dragooning it? Might we perhaps learn from the rich heritage of utopian writing, from Thomas More's original 'Utopia' to Ernest Callenbach's 'Ecotopia,' to develop a very different discourse based on aspiration, quality of life and a fairer, more efficient economy? The lessons are there to be learnt, but does utopian thinking have any part to play in the modern Green Movement?*

*The majority of environmentalists remain suspicious of utopian 'visioning,' partly on account of their interpretation of the malign influence of utopian thinking on the events of the twentieth century, and partly (it is suggested) because of a natural predisposition on their part to dystopian mindsets and long-held scepticism about the role of technology in sorting out problems that are perceived to go a lot deeper than 'the next convenient techno-fix' would be able to reach.*

*But what is there to lose? With more and more entrepreneurs and wealth-creators aligning their own interests with prospects for a cleantech, sustainable economy, it is argued that the conditions for a fundamentally different approach to environmental advocacy are better now than any time over the last 40 years.*



**N**obody denies that there is an upper limit to the number of human beings that Planet Earth will be capable of supporting in the future. It might be nine billion, it might be 20 billion, it might be 100 billion. But it is not an infinite number. (It might also be one billion, by the way, or even less.)

So you might therefore imagine that encouraging debate about some kind of *general principle* of 'an upper limit' on the number of human beings would be self-evidently sensible and uncontroversial. Not a bit of it. From the publication of Paul Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb* in 1968, we have had 43 years of sustained controversy about the degree to which 'a limits thesis'

(as I shall refer to it from now on) is either intellectually robust or useful in terms of influencing the way policy is made and the way people choose to lead their lives.

Four years after *The Population Bomb*, The Club of Rome (a self-appointed group of illustrious environmentalists) commissioned the Massachusetts Institute of Technology to carry out some basic modelling looking at human numbers, resource availability and environmental pollution. The resulting 'Limits to Growth' report generated a huge controversy throughout the seventies and early eighties. It was instrumental in influencing a large number of people (including myself) to start thinking rather more seriously about the state of the physical environment.

There are strong grounds for hypothesising that much of this controversy around the limits thesis can be traced back to the importance of the concept of *scarcity* in the field of economics – pre-dating more modernist concerns about ecological scarcity. Back in 1932, Lionel Robbins defined economics as 'the science which studies human behaviour as a relationship between given ends and scarce means' (Robbins, 1932). This established the idea of market-based (or relative) scarcity as the essential tenet of economic thinking, with scarcity (from the French word 'escarceté') seen primarily in terms of an insufficiency of supply arising in proportion to the need or demand. As Simon Zadek says:

In modern economies, scarcity is presented as ubiquitous, all-encompassing. There are no circumstances, it is argued, where it is possible to free oneself of the condition of scarcity. Scarcity is essentially Reality, and any perception that appears to transcend scarcity is essentially Fiction, the world of the impossible, of Nowhere, of Utopia (Zadek, 1993).

From Thomas More onwards (as we will see later), Utopias have indeed set out to articulate a variety of worlds beyond scarcity, where the hopes and dreams of Western civilisations are manifested in people's more or less contented lives: 'The majority of utopias presuppose the elimination of the major premise of classical economics, namely scarcity' (More, 2004). And for most latter-day utopianists (including Saint-Simon, Fourier, Gorz and Marcuse), the relative abundance of such idealised models of social equilibrium would, it was assumed, be generated by *socialist* models of industrialisation.

As we now know, it is predominantly *capitalist* models of industrialisation that have seen off scarcity for very large numbers of people and, in the process, brought us hard up against some of the biophysical limits that cause contemporary ecologists such deep concern. This process is seen by many to have commenced in the nineteenth century (in an explosion of what has been called emulative consumption), but reached a completely different level of intensity in those 'never had it so good' decades after the Second World War. Overcoming scarcity (in proportion to need or demand) became a particularly powerful driver of economic growth in the USA in the 1950s:

Our enormously productive economy demands that we make consumption our way of life, that we convert the buying and use of goods into rituals, that we seek our spiritual satisfactions, our ego satisfactions, in consumption. The measure of social status, of social acceptance, of prestige, is now to be found in our consumptive patterns. The very meaning and significance of our lives today expressed in consumptive terms. The greater the pressures upon the individual to conform to safe and accepted social standards, the more does he tend to express his aspirations and his individuality in terms of what he wears, drives, eats—his home, his car, his pattern of food serving, his hobbies.

These commodities and services must be offered to the consumer with a special urgency. [...] We need things consumed, burned up, worn out, replaced, and



discarded at an ever increasing pace. We need to have people eat, drink, dress, ride, live, with ever more complicated and, therefore, constantly more expensive consumption (Lebow, 1955).

That sounds somewhat shocking now, but the truth of it is that this particular blueprint for abundance has worked remarkably well for the richest one billion or so in the world today. For them, scarcity has indeed become largely 'Fiction' rather than 'Fact.' And at exactly that point where the dynamism of consumption-driven economic growth has become markedly more subdued in the Western world, the baton has been enthusiastically taken up by countries such as China, India, Brazil, Indonesia, and so on. It is estimated that there are already more than 500 million citizens in those countries for whom scarcity is still a far from distant memory, and who (with disposable incomes not so very different from those of most OECD citizens) are only too keen to take their rightful place on what economist Richard Easterlin described as 'The Hedonic Treadmill.'

500 million today – and with their economies growing at anywhere between 6% and 10% per annum, perhaps as many as two billion by 2020?

This tectonic shift in the balance of economic power (revealed both in patterns of production and, more recently, in patterns of consumption) has inevitably added an extra edge to the 'Limits to Growth' debate. Intriguingly, however, outside of the relevant scientific disciplines, we would appear to be no nearer to a settled consensus on the nature of these limits, let alone on what to do about them, than we were back in the 1970s.

This is completely mystifying to mainstream proponents of the 'limits thesis,' for whom it is literally 'self-evident' that there is already a fundamental mismatch between escalating human needs, wants and desires on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the biophysical capacity of the Earth's resources and eco-system services (such as fertility building in the soil, water purification, pollination, and so on) to meet those escalating needs, wants and desires.

That fundamental mismatch is compounded by a host of supplementary factors: an additional 75 million people every year; the so-called 'incumbency dilemma,' where both political and business elites fight harder and harder to defend their entrenched privileges; the systematised co-option of most mainstream media by these aforementioned elites; a woeful lack of scientific awareness amongst the vast majority of politicians in the West (though *not* in China and India); a growing and extremely disturbing hostility to science itself in the United States; and unfathomable reservoirs of inertia and indifference on the part of huge numbers of people.

To this disturbing compendium must be added an equally significant but rather more elusive factor: the continuing lack of any compelling narrative focusing on the *upside* of living within environmental limits rather than on the multiple *downsides* of exceeding those limits. Many more people count themselves as environmentalists out of a desire to avoid a potential ecological apocalypse rather than out of a belief in some 'Promised Land' flowing with organic milk and rainforest honey.

This lack of a compelling upside narrative exposes environmentalists to the rabble-rousing charge of being anti-progress and anti-aspiration – a charge that sounds more and more convincing as more and more environmentalists let it be known that they believe it is either 'already too late' to do anything about the gathering apocalypse, or, in order to avoid its being too late, that we need to go onto an instantaneous 'war footing' to combat accelerating climate change – whatever the consequences for democracy. For wholly understandable historical and intellectual reasons, today's environmental discourse is still shaped far more powerfully by the language of 'scarcity'

and 'limits' than it is by any compelling upside narrative. But fear of the future does not empower people; it debilitates and disempowers.

All of which points to the urgent need (in terms of 'winning hearts and minds') to change the 'mood music,' to identify and authoritatively promulgate a rationale for living within environmental limits based far more on the upside (prosperity, innovation, jobs, smart living, aspirational lifestyles, etc) than on the downside (threats to human health, impact on biodiversity and ecosystem services, runaway climate change and, eventually, ecological Armageddon!). That is exactly what a handful of NGOs (including Forum for the Future) has been intent on doing for the last ten years or more – but still with relatively little net impact on the overall 'tone' surrounding media coverage of environmental issues.

Which brings us back to the potential role of Utopia in helping people to envision a future unconstrained by the scourge of scarcity. Personally, I have always been an instinctive utopian, partly to defy the stereotype of 'the grumpy greenie' and partly to stand up against the fundamental pessimism about human nature that lies at the heart of so many eco-dystopias – a point to which I will return later.

This instinct is now more pronounced than it has ever been. I cannot help but see it as a sign of personal and collective failure that it is no easier for people today to envisage what a 'genuinely sustainable society' might look like than it was back in 1975 – when Ernest Callenbach's slightly pious novel *Ecotopia* mapped out what the essential contours of living within environmental limits might look like. And where there is no positive vision, I would indeed contend that the imagination of people inevitably perishes.

There have been no further ecotopias of any merit since 1975, although some would claim that the dystopian novels of Kim Stanley Robinson are as much about the invocation of utopian thinking and action as about surviving in a world ravaged by accelerating climate change. That dearth of ecotopian fiction may be explained in part by the psychological predisposition of the majority of environmentalists to predominantly dystopian world views – if Utopia is 'a natural propensity of the human mind,' as some have claimed, then most environmentalists would appear to see it as an aberrant propensity! But there is clearly rather more to it than that.

Many environmentalists are deeply suspicious of utopian thinking from an ideological perspective, concurring for the most part with those who argue that the horrors of the twentieth century (two World Wars, Nazism, Stalinism, Communism, and so on) were both attributable in some way to utopian thinking and signalled its death. The failed socialism of Eastern Europe (the Utopia of choice throughout most of the twentieth century) is now seen by many as a standing reminder that all Utopias must eventually betray their ideals when put into practice, as is argued by the Czech philosopher Milan Simecka:

All the indications are that Utopias are nothing but the instrument of historical deception, the bait set out for the desperate, a false rainbow beneath which the people are easily led into a new slavery (Simecka, 1984).

History is certainly littered with failed utopian experiments, many of them highly authoritarian. And a number of well-known literary Utopias still stand accused of providing the impulse for those authoritarian or even fascist tendencies, including B. F. Skinner's *Walden Two* in 1948 and *Looking Backward* by Edward Bellamy back in 1888. Bellamy took the ringing words in the US Declaration of Independence (that 'all men are born equal') at their face value, and created out of them a 'fanciful, socialist romance' in which strict equality is achieved though an 'industrial army' into which every able-bodied citizen between the ages of 21 and 45 is

conscripted and paid exactly the same wage without exception. Bellamy's answer to scarcity was a simple one: crush demand in the economy by controlling per capita income.

Libertarians were of course outraged. William Morris found Bellamy's Utopia so utterly abhorrent that he wrote his own *News From Nowhere* in 1890 (two years after *Looking Backward*) as a direct riposte to it – and it certainly could not be more different in its evocation of a post-industrial, radically decentralised twenty-first-century idyll, resonating much more powerfully with today's environmental world views.

But *News From Nowhere* was little more than the amuse-bouche for the great utopian repast laid in front of his readers by H. G. Wells, spreading out expansively between *A Modern Utopia* in 1905 through to *The Shape of Things to Come* in 1933. He never actually wrote a formal fictional Utopia, but the eloquence and persistence of his utopian advocacy puts H. G. Wells in a league of his own. His vision of a better world was unapologetically socialist, surprisingly global (as we would describe it now), and hugely dynamic in terms of its approach to science and innovation.

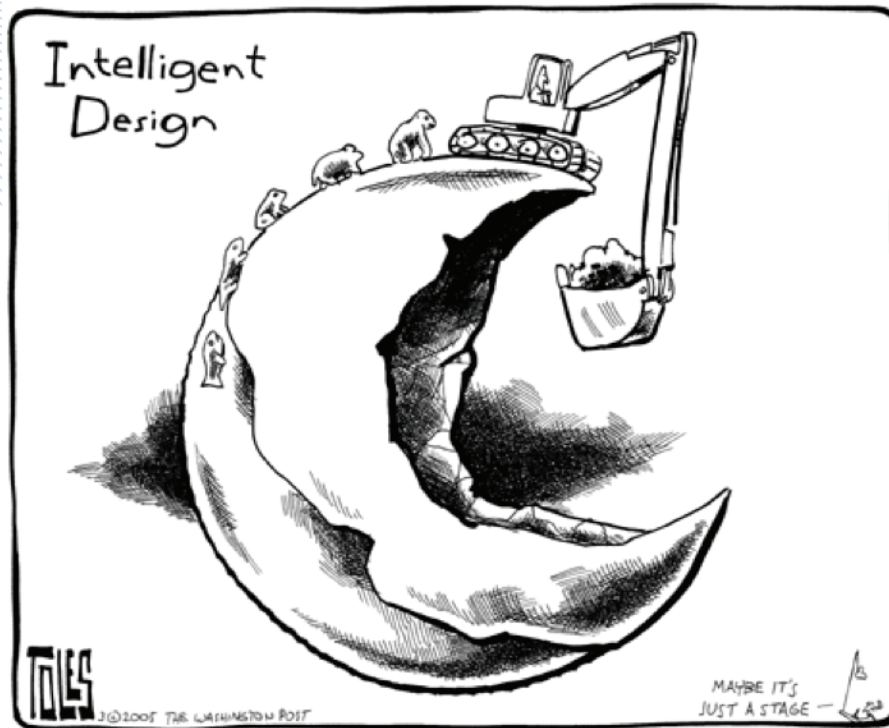
The Utopia of a modern dreamer must needs differ in one fundamental aspect from the Nowheres and Utopias men planned before Darwin quickened the thought of the world. Those were all perfect and static States [...]the modern Utopia must not be static but kinetic, must shape not as a permanent state but as a hopeful stage [...]. We build now not citadels, but ships of state (Wells, 1905).

But even the redoubtable Wells became worn down by the events of the twentieth century, renouncing his utopian ideals at the end of his life. The harsh and brutal 'realpolitik' of those decades marooned utopian thinking in an enclave of self-indulgent escapism. It was not until 20 years after the end of the Second World War that the frenetically upbeat mood of the 1960s created the context for a resurgence in utopian thinking. Indeed, 1965 to 1975 was a great time to be a utopian, with the freewheeling lifestyle of the hippies forcing its way into the American psyche; with students not just rioting in France but very nearly bringing down their government; with the work of literary giants like Herbert Marcuse, Ivan Illich, Charles Reich, Paul Goodman, Ted Roszak and Daniel Bell widely and vibrantly debated in every part of the body politic. I only offer you this list to provide a little bit of my own back-story here. Along with a lot of rather more gloomy stuff – *The Population Bomb*, 'Blueprint for Survival,' 'The Limits to Growth' and so on – this was the reading list that shaped my formative years. And to round it out, two great ecotopian novels, Ursula le Guin's *The Dispossessed* in 1974 (my favourite) and Ernest Callenbach's *Ecotopia* in 1975.

Since then, it has been pretty thin pickings from an ecotopian perspective, which has left the debate about environmental limits and scarcity with few high notes to listen to and with little by way of 'a compelling upbeat narrative.' This is clearly a missed opportunity. Utopias allow their authors to cast aside both the iron-clad shackles of history and the deterministic treatment of the present – as le Corbusier put it, 'We are compelled to build on a clear site.' Our site (in terms of the contemporary political scene) has been far from clear, densely populated as it has been with legions of enthusiastic cornucopians promising us the world by enabling us ever more effectively to consume the world. No talk of environmental limits here, please, let alone of overshooting those environmental limits!

It has been a matter of continuing fascination to me that hostility to the 'limits thesis' comes both from a broadly left-wing (equity-based) perspective and from a broadly right-wing (market-based) perspective. Though the protagonists of these two positions would not find each other's company particularly congenial, they actually have much more in common than they might imagine.





Both parties will assert, for instance, that there need be *no* biophysical limits, along the lines of ‘there is plenty of food, water, land and energy for 7 billion people today and even for 9 billion people tomorrow’; that scarcity is a ‘socially generated construct,’ which has far more to do with relational, socio-economic factors than with any physical ‘insufficiency of supply’; that those who are most active in propounding that ‘limits thesis’ are, to a man and woman, misanthropic neo-Malthusians – even Mrs Brundtland had that charge levelled against her after the publication of the resolutely pro-growth, pro-poor ‘Our Common Future’ report in 1987; and, finally, that there is a hidden political agenda behind the ‘limits thesis,’ part of which is the attempt to ‘colonise the future’ by seeding scarcity-based scenarios of the future that are then used to justify particular courses of action in the present.

Those are some of the things both parties have in common, at which point the differences kick in. Those who see the world from a broadly leftist, equity-based perspective have a number of concerns, and an important part of the case they make against the ‘limits thesis’ is that the centrality of scarcity thinking within modern economics is in itself extremely problematic. For them, ‘a universal and aggregated portrayal of scarcity’ has been reinforced by the commercially convenient assumption that whilst human needs might be limited (if one can ever agree on an acceptable definition of need), human *wants* and human *desires* are definitely not limited. Scarcity inevitably comes into play if there are literally no limits on the demands that our economies continue to make on a finite resource base. Hence an often-heard view from protagonists of dematerialised lifestyles that needs, wants and desires do *not* have to be seen as endless and unlimited.

Beyond that, many people on the Left are persuaded that the ‘limits thesis’ is being used by its protagonists to obscure the need for greater fairness in the allocation of those ‘scarce’ natural resources. Scarcity is consistently used to ‘naturalise’ the failure of societies to deal with persistent inequity, and as a diversion from the reality that localised *scarcities* (rather than any generic portrayal of *scarcity*) are invariably the result of exclusion and unequal gender and power relations.



All manner of abhorrent political positions are therefore seen to be given shelter under scarcity's wing. Scarcity may be used to promote privatisation and the confiscation of resources held in common, on the grounds that dealing with scarcity requires the greater efficiency of market rules; it may be used to advance anti-immigration, xenophobic and even racist views, on the grounds that there is just not enough to go round; it may be used as a pretext to persuade gullible donors to fund illiberal and morally repugnant family planning programmes, on the grounds that there are insufficient resources to meet the needs of an ever-rising population; it may be used to justify increased levels of expenditure on a nation's armed forces, on the grounds that resource shortages may drive those countries which are worst affected by scarcity to seek 'lebensraum' elsewhere in the world; and it may be used to promote hugely damaging energy policies (such as further investment in fossil fuels or nuclear) on the grounds that the lights are going to go out, or equally damaging food policies (such as GM or further intensive monocultures) on the grounds that famine will shortly stalk the land again as the food runs out. Here is how Nicholas Hildyard, a former editor of *The Ecologist* magazine, puts it:

In agriculture, for example, the prospect of (primarily dark-skinned) babies yet to be born causing global famine is being used by a range of interests from biotech to water supply companies to colonise the future for their own particular interests. In Malthus's day, the resource that private interests sought to lay hold of was community land – the forests, fields and pastures that villagers held and managed in common – and the labour that survived on it. Two centuries later, the push is towards the privatisation of other publicly shared resources: seeds, water and air – resources that until recently have been taken for granted as common goods. And, just as Malthus justified the privatisation of communal land through dystopian predictions of population-induced scarcity, so the arguments for privatising seeds and water are being promoted through a similar scarcity discourse (Hildyard, 2010).

The 'mobilisation of scarcity' has therefore become a very serious business, put into play (as its left-wing critics would argue) both explicitly and implicitly by the very political and business elites who are never likely to have experienced *real* scarcity at any point in their lives.

On the ideological level, scarcity obfuscates and naturalises, masking real-world, real-time, real-place political economy and political ecology. It produces and reinforces racial, ethnic and gender stereotypes. It turns entire populations into dangerous enemies (Mehta, 2010).

It all looks very different to those who see the world from a broadly right-wing, market-based perspective. To them, the fear of prospective scarcity based on the 'limits thesis' ('the scare of scarcity') is being used by the global Green Movement to undermine the case for further economic growth; to derail well-established and 'universally popular' notions of progress achieved through constant increases in people's material standard of living; to protect the interests of those who have already achieved relative material success by preventing others from aspiring to do the same in the future – as in Anthony Crosland's accusations back in the 1960s that environmentalism could all too easily be used by privileged minorities 'to pull up the ladder of prosperity behind them'; to favour the interests of the non-human world (and even the so-called 'rights' of endangered species) over the interests of the poor and hungry.

For them, there are no limits that cannot be transcended through the use of market mechanisms. If a particular commodity or raw material is becoming scarce and harder to get to market, then prices should rise in such a way as to increase the incentive to source new supplies. And if something *is* actually 'running out,' then innovation will ensure that alternative materials can be substituted in its place. The answer to relative scarcity is the same answer to every other question: rely on the market. And absolute scarcity is, of course, seen as a fiction.

The concept of biophysical scarcity has therefore been consistently attacked from both ends of the political spectrum. We should hardly be surprised that the call to 'more' has invariably proved to be so much more seductive and compelling than the advocacy of 'enough.' The idea of 'needing to make sacrifices now to secure a better future for tomorrow' is, to say the least, a very hard sell after more than four decades of self-gratification based on that well-known song title: 'I want it all, and I want it now.' The Devil still has almost all the best tunes.

Whichever way you analyse the history of the last 40 years, since the publication of 'Limits to Growth' in 1972, environmentalists have found it very difficult to advance any convincing alternative to the cornucopian growthism of the post-Communist era. I have sought to demonstrate that part of the reason for this is the lack of what I have called a 'compelling upside narrative' of our own, compounded by our inability to challenge some of the dominant received opinions of our age regarding power, progress and human nature. Here again, it is worth considering the possibility that Utopia might come to our aid.

Imaginary Utopias provide great places to reflect on some of the key political and philosophical questions of the day. For instance, one cannot help but compare the predominance of egalitarian world views amongst the majority of utopian writers (Thomas More, Tommaso Campanella, Charles Fourier, Edward Bellamy, William Morris, Robert Owen, Saint Simon, H. G. Wells and many more have all favoured a broadly egalitarian approach to the distribution of wealth, work and private property) with the paucity of anything even vaguely resembling an egalitarian world view amongst contemporary political thinkers. Radical equality, let alone outright egalitarianism, has been all but air-brushed from the political scene, despite that scene being so dramatically disfigured by the growing influence of billionaire oligarchs continuing to enrich themselves at the expense of society at large.

Any worthwhile ecotopia for the twenty-first century would surely need to discover the radicalism of earlier utopian writers, including Thomas More himself, whose original *Utopia* in 1516 (the first and – for some – still the best 'political thought experiment' of this kind) was read even then as an attack on the Church's venality and elitism. For the truth of it is that there is no chance whatsoever of engineering a genuinely sustainable world for nine billion people without some pretty dramatic redistribution of wealth, work and entitlements along the way.

Latter-day ecotopians will also have a lot to learn from their predecessors' views on the role of science – and the impact this has had on what we have meant by *progress* over nearly 400 years. It is widely accepted by historians of science that the very concept of progress can be traced back to Francis Bacon's utopian masterpiece *New Atlantis* in 1627. This is a work of unapologetic propaganda, eulogising the power of benign rationalism to improve people's lives through the application of knowledge and science. Krishan Kumar, the great interpreter of all things utopian, explains the significance of this in his *Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modern Times*:

From the time of *New Atlantis*, it was clear that the modern utopia could scarcely deserve the name if it did not incorporate the fruits of the most novel and fundamental development of the modern world – the scientific revolution – and the effecting of all things possible (Kumar, 1987).

Nowhere was this seen more clearly than in the works of H. G. Wells, whose powers of imagination (some might even argue prescience) combined with a polymathic grasp of scientific principles and emerging technologies. Since the time of Wells, however, that kind of progressive scientific ebullience has been somewhat in abeyance other than in the realms of science fiction. Indeed, Ernest Callenbach's *Ecotopia* draws much more on the prevailing techno-scepticism of the hippy era, based as it is on the West Coast of the USA!

So is it perhaps time to pick up again that ‘technotopian’ thread, that vision of science-driven progress that linked Francis Bacon to H. G. Wells and played such a critical part in shaping people’s view of a better future through all those years? It has to be acknowledged, however, that this is very hotly disputed territory for contemporary environmentalists.

There has always been a strong streak of technophobia in the Green Movement. Jacques Ellul’s cautionary work, *The Technological Society*, started the trend in 1954, and there has been a continuing line of eloquent sceptics ever since. Teddy Goldsmith, one of the most commanding intellects in our world in recent times, devoted issue after issue of his magazine, *The Ecologist*, to highlighting one technological disaster/nightmare/pitfall after another. Vandana Shiva, a radical eco-activist in India, makes a worthy successor today.

But should we still be held back by this techno-scepticism? For the brilliant, breathtaking truth of it is that the pipeline of technology breakthroughs grows and grows all the time – in every field of human endeavour, but particularly in energy, transport, agriculture, engineering, waste management, smart materials and advanced manufacturing. One of Forum for the Future’s greatest delights lies in opening up that pipeline of innovation through our magazine *Green Futures*, homing in on the stories of individual entrepreneurs, companies and technology-related breakthroughs.

I have therefore come to the conclusion that what we need *in the first instance* is not so much another full-blown Ecotopia, but rather a partial *technotopia*, capturing all the astonishing solutions that are already available to us today, making it possible for people to see that a genuinely sustainable world really is available, liberating at least that part of their vision of a better world.

You may recall at this juncture an earlier quotation: ‘The majority of utopias presuppose the elimination of the major premise of classical economics, namely scarcity’ (More, 2004). Central to the revitalisation of utopian thinking for the modern age is the belief that technology provides the principal means by which we might hope to arrive at our goal of a *genuinely sustainable society for the twenty-first century both beyond scarcity and within environmental limits*.

There are many who would argue that this kind of technotopian endeavour would represent a devastating betrayal of the very essence of sustainability. Such a turbo-charged vision of the future would, after all, do little to heal our broken relationship with the natural world; indeed, it might even exacerbate it. It was Lewis Mumford who pointed out that ‘the first Utopia was the City itself’ – in other words, Utopia provided an escape from what was seen then as the privations and dangers of Nature as we withdrew within the city walls. Any twenty-first-century Utopia must surely be one where those walls are finally broken down as we learn to live by the art of cohabitation with Nature rather than the subjugation of Nature.

It also avoids all the hard questions about power, wealth, property, equity, justice and democracy itself – all the big issues that preoccupied utopians from Thomas More through to Edward Bellamy and H. G. Wells. Will it really be ‘utopian,’ after all, if the inherently unsustainable model of contemporary capitalism remains largely unchanged? As Krishan Kumar has demonstrated:

Even in the Utopias of abundance of the 19th Century, it was the transformation of human and social relationships and the quality of individual life that lay at the heart of the utopian vision. Ecotopia has restated that emphasis more powerfully than any other contemporary philosophy (Kumar, 1987).

Worse yet, ‘techno-fixing’ our way out of problems has had a pretty poor track record in modern times, a dilemma that would be exacerbated if we left unchanged today’s expansionist model of



consumption-driven economic growth stretching indefinitely into the future. Just think of the hundreds of millions of people even now clambering up onto that ‘Hedonic Treadmill’ with such purposeful and eager anticipation.

All of which explains why many people remain legitimately sceptical about the power of technotopian visions to help people understand the true nature of the required transition ahead of us. Which in turn is why we may also need to have recourse to utopian thinking in its fuller, deeper sense, engaging as much with the complexity of human nature as with the virtuosity of new technology.

One final question, therefore, on which to end: is it even in our basic human nature to learn to live compassionately, equitably and sustainably on this stressed-out planet of ours? Are we simply doomed by our genetic inheritance as we struggle in vain to overcome deep-seated behaviours based on greed and aggressive self-interest? Many people believe it to be so. It has become the last redoubt of today’s denialists and cornucopians that even if you can demonstrate that it is both *technically possible* for nine billion people to live well and sustainably on Planet Earth, and even *desirable* so to do (on the utilitarian premise of the greatest good for the greatest number), even then sustainability is still a non-starter for them on the grounds that ‘you’ll never change human nature.’

This clash goes back a very long way to the debate about original sin, represented, ab initio, by the debate between the flawed but fearsome Saint Augustine on the one hand and a fifth century British monk called Pelagius on the other. Pelagius had a simple conviction that people are not born either vicious or virtuous: they are given the gift of freewill to determine for themselves what course to follow. And since that gift comes from God, and God also enjoined us all to be ‘perfect,’ he clearly would not be asking people to do something they are incapable of doing. QED, you might think, but Pelagius argued in vain right up to the point where he was declared a heretic at the Council of Carthage in 418 AD. Augustine’s doctrine of original sin has had the upper hand ever since.

I only mention this because Thomas More was himself a most notable Pelagian dissenter! His Utopia is a place untroubled by original sin, characterised by a rather intriguing combination of cheerful utilitarianism, outright egalitarianism and something bordering on ecological hedonism. His utopians may not be perfect, but they were there to demonstrate (in Thomas More’s mind) that mankind is indeed perfectible under God’s benign tutelage.

This faith in humankind has been a constant for all utopians since then – and, I would argue, is still a constant for all those who are seeking today to build a genuinely sustainable world. It is a fault-line that cannot be fudged. Writing to H. G. Wells in 1908, Joseph Conrad nailed this one pretty succinctly: ‘The difference between us is fundamental. You don’t care for humanity, but think they are to be improved. I love humanity, but know they are not’ (Conrad, 1972).

Whilst it is true that dystopian thinking has been in the ascendancy since the horrors of the twentieth century collapsed the hopes of twentieth-century utopians, there is something of a rebalancing going on at the start of the twenty-first century. This is driven in part by evolutionary biologists giving us a very different understanding of evolution (based at least as much on the idea of symbiosis and inter-species cooperation as on standard ‘survival of the fittest’ tropes), and in part by a new generation of psychologists and political theorists inviting us to reconnect with the power of *empathy* when thinking about our prospects for the future.



*The Empathic Civilization*, Jeremy Rifkin's magisterial account both of the history and of the potential importance of empathy in the evolution of the human species, provides an extraordinarily powerful reminder of why we should not despair of human nature quite yet:

The question, then, is what does every human being share at this critical juncture that can unite the human race as a species? The answer is obvious, from a biological point of view, but far from fully acknowledged. We all share a common biosphere on which we are wholly dependent, along with all other forms of life. And the biosphere is now threatened with a change in temperature that potentially imperils our species and threatens our survival. In a world characterised by increasing individuation and made up of human beings at different stages of consciousness, the biosphere itself may be the only context encompassing enough to unite the human race as a species (Rifkin, 2009).

It is from this paradox (that it is the overwhelming severity, urgency and universality of accelerating climate change which will eventually induce the final 'coming together' of the human family in a genuinely sustainable and empathic civilisation) that I draw the deepest solace and hopefulness.

But that is unlikely to persuade me to give up the day job, waiting around patiently (if a little nervously) for the inevitable close encounter with apocalypse to persuade people to pull back – miraculously just in time – from the edge of the abyss. The day job entails speeding up the transition to a genuinely sustainable world even faster than the climate is changing – and that is why I would argue we need utopian thinking now more than ever before to counter the lethal genetic determinism of our age.

After the collapse of Communism in the last century, the monoculture of consumption-fuelled, debt-driven capitalism has swept all before it, shrinking our mind maps, obscuring our peripheral vision, dismantling the tools which would allow us to conceptualise a very different kind of future. We have quite simply lost the art of conducting really intelligent 'political thought experiments.'

Thomas More said of his Utopia that it was 'a fiction whereby the truth, as if smeared with honey, might a little more pleasantly slide into men's minds' (More, 2004). It is that honey-smeared effect which I believe a technotopia for the twenty-first century could achieve – providing if not a complete account of the Promised Land of Sustainability, then at least the productive foundations on which so much else could subsequently be built.



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*Insights*

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