

Ecotopia: From nowhere and back

Review

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a review of

Ecotopia, Ernest Callenbach, Bantam Books, \$1.95

Ernest Callenbach's *Ecotopia*, an underground novel for two years, recently released as a Bantam paperback, regrettably could become the fable of the age. And if it does it will duplicate *Looking Backwards*' performance of 80 years ago, ironically for the opposite reasons. Bellamy's story provided an outlet for a wave of discontent and despair following a series of working-class defeats and economic crises. It literally propelled thousands into the countryside to form communes with little more than a new shovel and an old hope.

But while *Looking Backward* fostered the vision of a streamlined, centralized age of large-scale production for mass satisfaction (including factory farms which the communes were to herald), *Ecotopia* rejects the dismal realization of this "utopian" desire of never-ending accumulation and, in contrast, nurtures the notion of a society dedicated to simple living.

Callenbach's vision takes the form of a diary written by an East Coast journalist sent, in the late 1990s, to the twenty-year-old secessionist state of Ecotopia (comprising Northern California, Oregon and Washington) as an unofficial emissary to explore the resumption of diplomatic relations. Ecotopia, we are informed, wrenched itself free of the U.S. during a global economic depression to establish a "stable-state" society under the enlightened leadership of its female politicians.

Washington (D.C.) imposed a total embargo but failed to launch a successful military campaign to recapture the breakaway states due to the ecotopian threat to detonate nuclear devices concealed in various Eastern cities, if attacked.

San Francisco Transformed

Aside from a few excursions, most of the action takes place in a completely transformed San Francisco. There the inhabitants, working only twenty hours a week, carry on a leisurely existence within a "de-concretized" cityscape that provides for pedestrian affairs, flowers, and creeks meandering down former streets. The tedium of survival that devoured the days of the pre-secessionist San Francisco is only faintly recalled amongst the older residents.

The cracks in time into which moments of conviviality formerly were squeezed are chasms for the Ecotopians. The abolition of barbaric schedules, accomplished during the revolutionary period, removed the major reason for pre-determined, superficial associations; each ecotopian day allows for a constant flow of spontaneous, in-depth involvement with others, who are no longer "others" but sisters and brothers.

Needless to say, communalism has been adopted by a large segment of the population. And the guilds, of course, have been re-established, but with a significant difference from their medieval models: nobody is expected to remain committed to one occupation beyond their interest or desire.

Though the hospitable surroundings and the relaxed pace of daily life in Ecotopia give us a hint of what a free society would be like, we are nevertheless left with a case of utopianus interruptus. The initial upheavals that created the basis of ecotopian society—the factory and land seizures, the spontaneous take-overs of local resources and services—the truly revolutionary changes that began the abolition of consumerist personalism to awaken a new, but natural, individuality, are inadequately understood and therefore, their implications unrealized by Callenbach. So what he rather casually outlines for us amounts to a maternalistic dictatorship.

To be more specific, ecotopian politics and economics are not explored to any depth, but what is revealed appears undeveloped if not retarded. We are told nothing about the mechanics of political participation. And what are the major issues here? We discover, for instance, that the “radicals” of the dominant Survivalist Party (!) demand free travel so that more people can become acquainted with the wilderness. Why? To better agitate for the re-tribalization of Ecotopia!

Familiar Economic Relationships

Barely discernible in the shadows of this banal fairy tale of reformist politics are certain familiar economic relationships that have been with us for so long that some take them to be natural. Money exists in Ecotopia, as do small businesses and so, of course, the market. While it seems that market relations have receded from their current function of consumer control, we aren't given a clear notion of how or in what manner these relationships function, nor how they are kept in check. Should we presume an Invisible Hand?

The one area where the market does dominate—the education system—is, one presumes, a Callenbachian joke. Any kid would consider it poetic justice if his teachers had to sell themselves to the students to earn a livelihood as they do in Ecotopia. But a moment's consideration of the implications leaves this joke flat.

It's obvious that there is by far more energy put into the stupid, macho, ritual war-games pitting male members of the communes against each other with clubs and swords, and more controversy revolving around a new synthetic body suit some communards have adopted as their dress, than in ecotopian social issues. In fact, we are led to believe that sharp lines are drawn between people over the issues of wood versus a biodegradable plastic recently developed and being introduced (marketed?) as a new building material! Tales of pollution evince a horror here that a previous generation reserved for reports of repression.

And where are the alchemical sects conducting bizarre public rituals? Or extreme fantasies of any sort? Certainly a lighter, more festive air pervades this society, despite the secret police, especially as our american journalist compares it to his own, but we are hardly introduced to the realm of the marvelous that seems to me to be the hallmark of true utopianism.

Ecological Ethic

In Callenbach's dream it's evident that political imperatives have been replaced by an ecological ethic which forms the fabric of ecotopian society. For example, mass recycling has reduced the need to carry on an extensive and exploitative foreign trade for raw materials, as if this isolated effort towards self-sufficiency solves the problem of world scarcities. And the introduction of small-scale (liberatory?) technology has removed the basis for bureaucracies, as if the scale of technology, not its control, can automatically have this effect. It's this bourgeois ethic which insinuates itself into the ecotopians, diluting their post-individualism of its revolutionary potential before it has a chance to develop.

The hegemony of this ethic in Ecotopia leads to several far-reaching consequences: libidinous, ludic impulses are discouraged (or institutionalized) as if they are anti-ecological; and politics is deprecated and technology elevated as the mode of problem solving. The first introduces a neo-Victorian view of uncontrolled Eros as a disruptive,

wasteful force and the second is precisely the orientation of a section of the current ecology movement that views all tendencies outside the narrow spectrum of reformist politics as a waste of time and becomes enamored, consequently, with the boring dribble of the new technologists. The lack of imaginative and critical thought (basically, the lack of vision!) applied to the former provides the vacuum that the illusions of the latter occupy.

The pages of *Co-evolutionary Quarterly*, for instance, have seen rapturous descriptions of space colonies, Timothy Leary's new trip. While this is the most flamboyant illustration of this tendency it is nonetheless more mundanely duplicated in alternative technology journals where the major emphasis is on the mechanics of experimental work in agriculture or simple energy systems and its "mail-order" house cataloging.

This group of "counter-cultural" technocrats enlisted themselves in the last effort to revitalize the decomposing institutions of capital by administering heavy doses of "ecologically sound" technology laced with a re-cycled Puritan ethic. This is the "wholistic consciousness" the ecology movement markets—its nothing more than a new specialization parading around as a re-furbished evangelism. Through their recuperative efforts, politics, as the bosses define it, is sustained with an infusion of ecological ideology. And technology, as an objectification of bourgeois control, is re-instated on a smaller, but still beautiful throne.

Having passed through "socialism or barbarism" into the age of "utopia or extinction," we must finally come to the realization that all efforts to resuscitate terminal illusions merely prolongs the agony. Instead of trying to wake-up america with half-assed utopian fantasies, "new age" writers like Callenbach would do better if they propelled themselves deeper into their nightmares. But then again with such a prosaic dream life, can we expect much from their nightmares?

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