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On Utopian Aspirations in the Climate Movement

It can be difficult to closely follow developments in climate science without simultaneously falling prey to a rather grim, even apocalyptic view of the future. Predictions of impending disaster look more severe with every new wave of extreme weather and each new study of the effects of the rising levels of greenhouse gases in the earth's atmosphere. Steadily rising levels of drought, wildfires and floods have been experienced on all the earth's inhabited continents, and people in the tropics and subtropics already face far more difficulty growing enough food due to increasingly unstable weather patterns. Studies predict increasing mass migrations of people desperate to escape the worst consequences of widespread climate disruptions. And persistent diplomatic gridlock and obstruction at the UN level has raised the possibility that

temperature increases could even exceed 10°C in the Arctic and in parts of Africa.¹

In this context, the utopian ecological visions that inspired earlier generations of environmental activists can seem quaint and out-of-date. The images of autonomous, self-reliant, solar-powered cities and towns that illuminated the first large wave of anti-nuclear activism in the 1970s and eighties sometimes feel more distant than ever. Since those years, we have seen an unprecedented flowering of local food systems, natural building, permaculture design, urban ecology, and other important innovations that first emerged from that earlier wave of activism. Yet today's advocates of local self reliance and ecological lifestyles seem to engage only on rare occasions in the political struggles that are necessary to advance their visions for a better future.

For social ecologists seeking to further the forward-looking, reconstructive dimensions of an ecological world view, this presents a serious dilemma. From the 1960s onward, Murray Bookchin, the founding theorist of social ecology, proposed that the critical, holistic outlook of ecological science was logically and historically linked to a radically transformative vision for society. A fundamental rethinking of human societies' relationship to the natural world, he proposed, is made imperative by the understandings of ecological science, furthering the potential for a revolutionary transformation of both our philosophical assumptions and our political and social institutions. Can this approach to ecology, politics and history be renewed for our time? What kinds of social movements have the potential to express these possibilities? Can we meaningfully address the simultaneous

threats of climate chaos and potential social breakdown while renewing and further developing the revolutionary outlook of social ecology?

Ecology and Capitalism

From the 1960s until his passing in 2006, Murray Bookchin insisted that the ecological crisis was a fundamental threat to capitalism, due to the system's built in necessity to continuously expand its scope and its spheres of control. In a 2001 reflection on the origins of social ecology, Bookchin wrote:

I was trying to provide a viable substitute for Marx's defunct economic imperative, namely an *ecological imperative* that, if thought out [...] would show that *capitalism stood in an irreconcilable contradiction with the natural world* [...]. In short, precisely because capitalism was, *by definition*, a competitive and commodity-based economy, it would be compelled to turn the complex into the simple and give rise to a planet that was incompatible environmentally with advanced life forms. The growth of capitalism was incompatible with the evolution of biotic complexity *as such*—and certainly, with the development of human life and the evolution of human society.² [emphasis in original]

For a couple of decades, however, it appeared to many that capitalism had found a way to accommodate non-human nature and perhaps to “green” itself. This notion can be traced to the period leading up to the 20th anniversary of the first Earth Day. By the spring of 1990, many of the largest, most

notoriously polluting corporations had begun to incorporate environmental messages into their advertising. By reducing waste, partially restoring damaged ecosystems, investing in renewable energy, and promoting an idealized environmental ethic, the oil, chemical, and other highly polluting industries would portray themselves as stewards of the environment. Prominent authors promised a “sustainable,” even “natural” capitalism, whereby production and consumption would continue to grow and large corporations could join with a new generation of “green” entrepreneurs to solve our environmental problems.³

As awareness of the climate crisis rose together with the cost of energy during 2006-7, the “green consumerism” that was promoted as a conscientious lifestyle choice in the 1990s became an all-encompassing mass culture phenomenon. Mainstream lifestyle and even fashion magazines featured special “green” issues, and the *New York Times* reported that 35 million Americans were regularly seeking out (often high-priced) “earth-friendly” products, “from organic beeswax lipstick from the west Zambian rain forest to Toyota Priuses.”⁴ But the *Times* acknowledged rising criticism of the trend as well, quoting the one-time “green business” pioneer Paul Hawken as saying, “Green consumerism is an oxymoronic phrase,” and acknowledging that truly green living might indeed require buying less. With rising awareness of the cost of manufacturing new “green” products, even the iconic Prius was criticized for the high energy costs embedded in its manufacture.

More forward-looking capitalists have had to admit in recent years that an increasingly chaotic natural and social

environment will necessarily limit business opportunities.⁵ Some critics have suggested that this is one underlying reason for the increasing growth and influence of the financial sector:

In its disciplinary zeal, capitalism has so undermined the ecological conditions of so many people that a state of global ungovernability has developed, further forcing investors to escape into the mediated world of finance where they hope to make hefty returns without bodily confronting the people they need to exploit. But this exodus has merely deferred the crisis, since “ecological” struggles are being fought all over the planet and are forcing an inevitable increase in the cost of future constant capital.⁶

The result is an increasingly parasitic form of capitalism, featuring widening discrepancies in wealth, both worldwide and within most countries, and the outsourcing of production to the countries and regions where labor costs and environmental enforcement are at the lowest possible levels. As the profitability of socially useful production has fallen precipitously, we have seen the emergence of a casino-like “shadow” economy, in which a rising share of society’s material resources are squandered by elites in the pursuit of socially parasitic but highly lucrative profits from ever-more exotic financial manipulations.⁷

As we have seen, numerous questionable responses to the threat of climate change have emerged from this political and economic context. The previous chapter addressed the consequences of both technological false solutions and those derived from the machinations of financial markets. Different

sectors of industrial and finance capital favor differing variations on the general theme, but the overarching message is that solutions to global warming are at hand and everyone should simply go on consuming. More hopeful innovations in solar and wind technology, “smart” power grids, and even energy saving technologies are promoted by some “green” capitalists as well, but these technologies continue to be marginalized by the prevailing financial and political system, raising serious questions about how such alternatives can be implemented.

A Utopian Movement?

The last time a forward-looking popular movement in the US compelled widespread changes in environmental and energy policies was during the late 1970s. In the aftermath of the OPEC oil embargo, imposed during the 1973 Arab-Israeli war, the nuclear and utility industries adopted a plan to construct more than 300 nuclear power plants in the United States by the year 2000. Utility and state officials identified rural communities across the US as potential sites for new nuclear facilities, and the popular response was swift and unanticipated. A powerful grassroots antinuclear movement emerged, and in April of 1977, over 1400 people were arrested trying to nonviolently occupy a nuclear construction site in the coastal town of Seabrook, New Hampshire. That event helped inspire the emergence of decentralized, grassroots antinuclear alliances all across the country, committed to nonviolent direct action, horizontal forms of internal organization, and a sophisticated understanding of the relationship between

technological and social changes. Not only did these groups adopt an uncompromising call for “No Nukes,” but many promoted a vision of an entirely new social order, rooted in decentralized, solar-powered communities empowered to decide both their energy future and their political future. If the nuclear state almost inevitably leads to a police state—due to the massive security apparatus necessary to protect hundreds of nuclear plants and radioactive waste facilities all over the country—activists proposed that a solar-based energy system could provide the underpinning for a radically decentralized and directly democratic model for society.

This movement was so successful in raising the hazards of nuclear power as a matter of urgent public concern that nuclear power projects all across the US faced cancellation. When the nuclear reactor at Three Mile Island near Harrisburg, Pennsylvania partially melted down in March of 1979, it spelled the end of the nuclear expansion. No new nuclear plants were licensed or built in the United States for more than 30 years after Three Mile Island. The antinuclear movement of the late 1970s also helped spawn the first significant development of solar and wind technologies, aided by substantial but temporary tax benefits for solar installations, and helped launch a visionary “green cities” movement that captured the imaginations of architects, planners and ordinary citizens alike.

The 1970s and early eighties were relatively hopeful times, and utopian thinking was far more widespread than it is today. This was prior to the “Reagan revolution” in US politics and the rise of neoliberalism worldwide. The political right had not quite begun its crusade to depict the former Soviet Union

as the apotheosis of utopian social engineering gone awry. Many antinuclear activists looked to the emerging outlook of social ecology and the writings of its founding theorist, Murray Bookchin, as a source of theoretical grounding for a revolutionary ecological politics. Social ecology challenged activists by overturning prevailing views about the evolution of social and cultural relationships to non-human nature and examining the roots of domination in the earliest emergence of human social hierarchies. For the activists of that period, Bookchin’s insistence that environmental problems are fundamentally social and political in origin encouraged forward-looking responses to ecological concerns and reconstructive visions of a fundamentally transformed society. Social ecology’s emphasis on popular power and direct democracy continued to inspire activists in the global justice movement of the 1990s and early 2000s, as well as the Occupy movement more recently.

While radically reconstructive social visions are far less prevalent in today’s social and political climate, dissatisfaction with the status quo is wide-reaching throughout many sectors of the population. The more people consume, and the deeper they fall into debt, the less satisfied they are with the world of business-as-usual. Though elite discourse and the corporate media continue to be confined by a narrowly circumscribed status-quo, there is also the potential for a new opening, reaching far beyond the narrow limits of what is now deemed politically “acceptable.”

Activists hesitant to question the underlying assumptions of capitalism tend to focus on various techno-fixes. While these are generally far more benign than the false solutions

proposed by the coal, nuclear and agrofuel industries, they are inherently limited in the absence of broader, systemic changes. Clearly, such proposals are often compelling on their own terms. For example, the acclaimed advocate Van Jones, who advised the Obama White House on green jobs policies before he fell victim to a vicious attack from right wing media apparatus in the US, suggests that:

Hundreds of thousands of green-collar jobs will be weatherizing and energy-retrofitting every building in the United States. Buildings with leaky windows, ill-fitting doors, poor insulation and old appliances can gobble up 30 percent more energy [...] Drafty buildings create broke, chilly people—and an overheated planet.⁸

Clearly, practical measures to address these problems will offer an important benefit for those most in need, and are an essential step toward a greener future. But can such near-term measures be sufficient? In technical terms, there is no shortage of feasible solutions to ending excessive energy consumption and rapidly curtailing the use of fossil fuels. For example since the 1970s, Rocky Mountain Institute founder Amory Lovins has been a tireless advocate for dramatically increased energy efficiency throughout the US and global economies. He has demonstrated in exhaustive detail how we can feasibly reduce energy consumption by at least 40 percent, and how many promising changes in technology will result in an unambiguous economic gain. In a recent book, he projected that the US can reduce CO₂ emissions by 85 percent over 40 years with a \$4.5 trillion total investment and

achieve net savings of \$5 trillion in energy costs.⁹ Lovins' pitch is unapologetically aimed at believers in the "free market" and those whose primary concern is market profitability, yet the market's adoption of his ideas has been spotty at best. Mark Jacobson's research group at Stanford University has developed detailed proposals for replacing all new energy with wind, water and solar power by 2030 and the world's entire energy supply by 2050.¹⁰

A central problem, however, is that capitalism aims to maximize profits, not efficiency. Indeed, economists since the 19th century have suggested that improvements in the efficiency of resource consumption often tend to *increase* demand as capitalists learn how to do more with less, while continuing to grow the economy.¹¹ Richard York from the University of Oregon has calculated that just a quarter of non-fossil energy currently replaces fossil fuels, and only a tenth of non-fossil electricity; the rest is simply adding more new capacity to the system.¹² While efficiency improvements can significantly reduce the costs of production, corporations will generally accept the added cost of sustaining existing methods that have proven to keep profits growing. Corporations almost invariably prefer to lay off workers, outsource production, or move factories overseas than to invest in environmentally meaningful improvements in production methods. The *New York Times* reported that corporations are hesitant to invest in measures to save energy and make their operations more efficient unless they can demonstrate a two year payback—a constraint rarely imposed on other forms of investment.¹³ Lovins' focus on efficiency runs counter to the inclinations

of a business world aggressively oriented toward growth, capital mobility and accumulation. While important innovations in solar technology, for example, are announced almost daily, its acceptance in the capitalist marketplace still falls far behind many other, far more speculative and hazardous alternatives.

Hope and Despair

If technological fixes are insufficient to usher in an age of renewable technologies, is the situation hopeless? Is a nihilistic response, anticipating a cataclysmic “end of civilization” as suggested by several popular authors today, the only viable alternative? Are we limited to a future of defensive battles against an increasingly authoritarian world of scarcity and climate chaos? Or can the prefigurative, forward-looking dimensions of earlier, more hopeful radical ecological movements be renewed in our time?

Dystopian outlooks are clearly on the rise in popular culture, among environmentally-minded radicals, and in much of the anti-authoritarian left today. “Anarchists and their allies are now required to project themselves into a future of growing instability and deterioration,” writes Israeli activist and scholar Uri Gordon. He acknowledges the current flowering of permaculture and other sustainable technologies as a central aspect of today’s experiments toward “community self-sufficiency,” but views these as “rear guard” actions, best aimed to “encourage and protect the autonomy and grassroots orientation of emergent resistances” in a fundamentally deteriorating social and political climate.¹⁴

Derrick Jensen, one of the most prolific and popular anti-authoritarian writers in recent years, insists that a rational transition to an ecologically sustainable society is impossible, and that the only sensible role for ecologically aware activists is to help bring on the collapse of Western civilization. Hope itself, for Jensen, is “a curse and a bane,” an acceptance of powerlessness, and ultimately “what keeps us chained to the system.” Well before Barack Obama adopted a vaguely defined “Hope” as a theme of his first presidential campaign, Jensen argued that hope “serves the needs of those in power as surely as belief in a distant heaven; that hope is really nothing more than a secular way of keeping us in line.”¹⁵

This view is considerably at odds with many decades of historical scholarship and activist praxis. Radical despair may be sufficient to motivate some young activists to confront authorities when necessary, but it seems unlikely to be able to sustain the lifetimes of radical thought and action that are necessary if we are to create a different world. As social movement historian Richard Flacks has shown, most people are only willing to disrupt the patterns of their daily lives to engage in the project he terms “making history” when social grievances become personal, and they have a tangible sense that a better way is possible. This, for Flacks, is among the historic roles of democratic popular movements, to further the idea “that people are capable of and ought to be making their own history, that the making of history ought to be integrated with everyday life, that [prevailing] social arrangements [...] can and must be replaced by frameworks that permit routine access and participation by all in the decisions that affect their lives.”¹⁶

Flacks' expansive view of democracy resonates well with social ecology's long-range, community-centered vision (see Chapter 6). Bookchin's reconstructive outlook is rooted in direct democracy, in confederations of empowered communities challenging the hegemony of capital and the state, and in restoring a sense of reciprocity to economic relationships, which are ultimately subordinated to the needs of the community. His view resonates with economic historian Karl Polanyi's piercing analysis of the origins of the mythical "self-regulating" market and its imposed separation of economics from society.¹⁷ Bookchin viewed the subordination of economics as an essential step toward restoring harmony to human relations, and to the reharmonization of our communities with non-human nature.

Further, in his 1970s and eighties' anthropological studies, Bookchin sought to draw out a number of ethical principles common to preliterate, or "organic" societies, that could further illuminate the path toward such a reharmonization. These include anthropologist Paul Radin's concept of the irreducible minimum—the idea that communities are responsible for satisfying their members' most basic human needs—and an expanded view of social complementarity, where communities accept responsibility to compensate for differences among individuals, helping assure that variations in skill or ability in particular areas will not serve to rationalize the emergence of new forms of hierarchy.¹⁸

Rather than prescribing blueprints for a future society, Bookchin sought to educe principles from the broad scope of human history that he saw as expressing potentialities for further human development. His outlook on social change is

resonant with the best of the utopian tradition, as described in a recent essay by Randall Amster, who describes utopia as

a dynamic *process* and not a static *place* [...] attaining a harmonious exchange with nature and an open, participatory process among community members are central features of these [utopian] endeavors; that resistance to dominant cultures of repression and authoritarianism is a common impetus for anarcho-utopian undertakings; and that communities embodying these principles are properly viewed as ongoing experiments and not finished products.¹⁹

While people of different material circumstances and cultural backgrounds would surely emphasize differing needs and inclinations in their search for a better society, such a long-range utopian outlook can help us comprehend the fullest scope of human possibilities.

This view has far more to offer than a bleak "end of civilization" outlook, both for people in Northern countries facing increasingly chaotic weather and for people around the world who are experiencing more extreme consequences of climate disruptions. It is the hope for a better society, along with the determination and support necessary to intervene to challenge current inequities, that has inspired movements of land-based peoples around the world to refuse to accept an oppressive status quo and act to take the future into their hands.

Still, since the collapse of the authoritarian, nominally socialist bloc of countries that was dominated by the Soviet Union and spanned nearly all of eastern Europe, many authors

have cast doubt on all forms of radical speculation about the future. Utopian political thought—with its legacy reaching back to Plato and to the writings of Thomas More in the early 16th century—is now seen by many as thoroughly discredited. Liberal centrists, as well as ideologues of the political right tend to dismiss the pursuit of any comprehensive alternative political outlook as if it were merely a potential stepping stone to tyranny. Even forward-looking thinkers such as the literary critic Frederic Jameson suggest that utopia “had come to designate a program which neglected human frailty” implying “the ideal purity of a perfect system that always had to be imposed by force on its imperfect and reluctant subjects.”²⁰

This is in stark contrast to the view of Ernst Bloch, the mid-20th century chronicler of the utopian tradition who, instead, in Jameson’s words, “posits a Utopian impulse governing everything future-oriented in life and culture.”²¹ Bloch’s exhaustive and free-ranging three-volume work, *The Principle of Hope* begins with the simple act of daydreaming, and then embarks on an epic journey through the myriad expressions of the utopian impulse throughout Western history, spanning folktales, the arts and literature, along with the perennial search for a better world. “Fraudulent hope is one of the greatest malefactors, even enervators of the human race,” states Bloch, while “concretely genuine hope its most dedicated benefactor.”²²

Current scholarship on this tradition often views utopia as a central element in the emergence of a secular social order in the West, marking the decline of religion as the sole means for expressing people’s hopes for the future. French social critic Alain Touraine writes, “Utopia was born only when the political

order separated from the cosmological or religious order ... Utopia is one of the products of secularization.”²³ Utopian scholar Lyman Sargent quotes the Dutch future studies pioneer Frederick Polak, who wrote in 1961:

... if Western man now stops thinking and dreaming the materials of new images of the future and attempts to shut himself up in the present, out of longing for security and for fear of the future, his civilization will come to an end. He has no choice but to dream or to die, condemning the whole of Western society to die with him.²⁴

The pioneering German sociologist Karl Mannheim wrote that “The utopian mentality is at the base of all serious social change” and saw the integrity of human will as resting to a large part on “the reality-transcending power of utopia.”²⁵ While the popular literature of the century wavers continually between the poles of utopia and dystopia, even many intellectuals who lived through the nightmare of Stalinism and its decline warn against discarding utopia along with the baggage of the 20th century authoritarian left. For example the Czech dissident Milan Simecka, who experienced the repression of the Prague Spring of 1968, writes that “A world without utopias would be a world without social hope, a world of resignation to the status quo and the devalued slogans of everyday political life.”²⁶ Today, if we fail to sustain the legacy of utopia, not only will we miss the opportunity to envision and actualize a humane, post-capitalist, post-petroleum future, but we may inadvertently surrender humanity’s future to the false hopes of an ascendant religious fundamentalism.

The social critic Immanuel Wallerstein is one who has recently sought to rescue utopian thinking from its role as a breeder “of illusions, and therefore, inevitably, of disillusiones,” proposing a renewed “utopistics,” which broadly examines the alternatives and reveals “the substantive rationality of alternative possible historical systems.”²⁷ Wallerstein is one renowned contemporary social theorist who explicitly speaks to the likelihood of a difficult, contentious and unpredictable, but potentially rational and democratic long-term transition to a post-capitalist world. It is in this spirit of exploring rational, liberatory future possibilities that Murray Bookchin developed and elaborated his theory of social ecology, and today’s climate activists are seeking to define the terms of a world beyond petro-capitalism. In the next chapter, we will turn to elaborating the holistic revolutionary outlook of social ecology and its numerous contributions to recent movements.

Looking Forward

From the Zapatistas of southeastern Mexico, who inspired global justice activists worldwide during the 1990s and beyond, to the landless workers of the MST in Brazil, and the scores of self-identified peasant organizations in some eighty countries that constitute the global network La Via Campesina, people’s movements in the global South in recent decades have challenged historical stereotypes and often transcended the limits of the possible. These grassroots efforts to reclaim the means of life, while articulating far-reaching demands for a different world, represent a starkly different relationship to both the present and the future than

is offered by affluent activists and writers in the global North who either contemplate a catastrophic end to civilization, or urge us to go on consuming in the pursuit of a mythical individualist paradise.

Here in the North, new reconstructive movements have helped make visions of an ecological future far more realizable. At the local level, people are working to regenerate local food systems and develop locally controlled, renewable energy sources, sometimes in active solidarity with kindred movements around the world. Campaigns to create urban gardens and farmers’ markets are among the most successful and well-organized efforts toward community-centered solutions to the climate crisis. In recent years, they have been joined in many areas by nonprofit networks aiming to more systematically raise the availability of healthy, local food for urban dwellers, especially those dependent on public assistance.²⁸ The local foods movement in the US, still significantly dominated by those affluent enough to seek out gourmet products, may be learning from Slow Food activists in Europe that it is necessary to directly support farmers and food producers, and aim to meet the needs of all members of their communities. As the food system is responsible for at least a quarter of all greenhouse gas emissions, such efforts are far more than symbolic in their importance.²⁹

Community-based efforts to reduce energy consumption and move toward carbon-free energy systems have seen some important successes as well. More than two hundred cities and towns throughout the English-speaking world have signed on as “transition towns,” initiating local efforts to address the parallel crises of climate chaos and peak oil. While

the transition town movement sometimes tends to focus narrowly on personal and domestic-scale transformations, even avoiding important local controversies, the effort is filling an important vacuum in social organization, and creating public dialogues that more politically engaged and forward-looking efforts can build upon as the tangible effects of the climate crisis strike closer to home.³⁰

Still, many chronically vexing questions remain. Can the potential for a more thoroughgoing transformation of society actually be realized? Is it possible for now-isolated local efforts to come together in a holistic manner and fulfill the old left-libertarian dream of a “movement of movements,” organized from the ground up to radically change the world? Can we envision a genuine synthesis of oppositional and alternative-building efforts able to challenge systems of deeply entrenched power, and transcend the dual challenges of political burn-out and the co-optation of aspiring alternative institutions? Can a new movement for social and ecological renewal emerge from the individual and community levels toward the radical re-envisioning of entire regions and a genuinely transformed social and political order?

In these often cynical times, with ever-increasing disparities in wealth and media-saturated cultures of conspicuous consumption in the North, together with increased dislocations and imminent climate crises in the South, it is sometimes difficult to imagine what a genuinely transformative movement would look like. In the US, right wing demagogues appear to be far more effective than progressive forces in channeling the resentments that have emerged from continuing economic stagnation toward

serving their regressive political agendas. But it is clear that when people have the opportunity to act on their deepest aspirations for a stronger sense of community, for the health of their families and neighbors, and for a more hopeful future, people’s better instincts can triumph over parochial interests. This is a feature of community life that illuminates the entire history of popular social movements. It offers an important kernel of hope for the kind of movement that can perhaps reinvigorate the long-range reconstructive potential of a social ecological outlook.

A 2009 poll commissioned by the BBC confirmed that people in a dozen key countries agree that capitalism has serious endemic problems, and that we may need a fundamentally different economic system. Only in Pakistan and the US did more than 20 percent of those interviewed express confidence in the present status quo.³¹ Perhaps this is the kind of sensibility that will reopen a broader popular discussion of the potential for a different kind of society. Maybe we don’t need to resign ourselves to apocalyptic visions of the end of the world. Perhaps the climate crisis, along with the continuing meltdown of the neoliberal economic order of recent decades, can indeed help us envision a transition toward a more harmonious, more humane and ecological way of life.