

## Ecotopia

*Ecotopia*, published for the first time in 1975 with nearly three-quarters of a million sales in the next 20 years, is one of those stunning literary phenomena which begin with Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* and William Morris's *News From Nowhere* in redressing capitalism's assault upon nature as well as class society's inhumanity and stupidity. But *Ecotopia* (and its successor-prequel, *Utopia Emerging* [1981], published by the little Banyan Tree press in Berkeley and destined for the more modest sales of about 100,000) are definitely of our time. California secedes from an ecologically decadent U.S.; a matriarchy runs the dominant Survivalist Party; and our protagonist, unlike those past heroes of *Looking Backward* and *News from Nowhere*, has an active sex life among the utopians.

But let's start the subject with the author, an awfully interesting character. A film student in Paris and then Berkeley in the early phase of the Cold War era, he was part of a generic American intellectual Left that persisted after the Old Left faced massive repression, and collapsed under the additional weight of disillusionment with the Soviet Union. It was a lonely and endangered Left, all the more so in the California university system which had introduced loyalty oaths into higher education. But traces of radicalism or at least dissent remained in film studies.

Callenbach was a natural choice for editor in 1957 of the new *Film Quarterly*, the lineal successor to the badly flagging *Quarterly of Film, Radio and Television* (1951-57). *QFRT* itself had been successor to the *Hollywood Quarterly*, the short-lived (1946-51) journal edited by a combination of UCLA professors and soon-to-be blacklisted Hollywood Reds like John Lawson (*Blockade, Sahara*) and Abraham Polonsky (*Body and Soul, Tell Them Willie Boy Is Here*). If the *Hollywood Quarterly* was the first radically inclined journal of popular arts in the U.S. (arguably, in the world), destined inevitably to be purged and

uprooted by McCarthyism, *Film Quarterly* marked the quiet signs of revival as McCarthyism ebbed and prominent liberals such as Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., backed off a bit from their earlier energetic support of red scares, UnAmerican Activities Committee crusades, FBI harassment of entertainers, firings and blacklisting.

Callenbach and a small circle around him restored, then, a sort of anti-commercialist populism to the cultural discussion, and subtly began to recuperate the repressed past of the Hollywood Left. Callenbach himself was also film editor at the University of California Press, responsible for the series' progressive-leaning content.

Meanwhile, he was a science reader, no professional but seriously thinking about a contribution to environmental issues very much on the agenda by the early 1970s. Here was the making of the radical ecologist. He confesses never to have read Edward Bellamy, William Morris or any other utopian fiction before sitting down to write *Ecotopia* — except Austin Wright's medievalist *Islandia*, and the repellent anti-utopia of B.F. Skinner's *Walden II*, the most recently published volume on some kind of alternative society and the one most in need of "answering." He was also thinking, he says now, of *Robinson Crusoe*, the Defoe novel that Marx found such a fascinating exploration of the capitalist mentality (and of colonialism, as writers after Marx have often mentioned).

So what does the "visitor" from another time, or for that matter another galaxy, encounter in the ecotopia of the later 20th century? Lots of interesting things. Sent as an emissary (and posing as a reporter) from the U.S. government to the breakaway federation of the northern West Coast (Washington, Oregon and northern California) 19 years after its secession, he is to spend six weeks in what many Americans believe is a hell of formerly civilized peoples returning to low-tech society, cannibalism or worse.

He first comes across a sadly-reduced Reno, deprived of its Golden State gamblers, and finally persuades a reluctant taxi driver to take him to Lake Tahoe, across the mountains, in one of the few permitted internal combustion vehicles (airplane flights of all kinds are prohibited). From there he simply boarded one of the abundant high-speed trains, an eco-combination of high tech magnetic propulsion with big windows, lots of plants and recycle bins. How could such a system be built? Easily, with public money otherwise spent on military systems and airport maintenance. This is an early symbol of a different kind of society (rather more "sixties" than otherwise, with dope-smoking companions) with staggeringly different priorities.

San Francisco, reconstituted, has rivers running freely through it; electric taxis, mini-buses and delivery carts manage nicely on the two lanes still paved, and the rest of the space has been given over to bicycle lanes, fountains and lots of trees. Folks have a good time just hanging out on the public thoroughfare, obviously, wearing (just as predicted in earlier utopian novels) loose, colorful clothing. Those too much in a hurry to wait for buses simply grab one of the white bicycles freely available.

Social life at large has the same funky quality. People work to keep a sustaining eco-economy going, but they work less hectically, more in teams. In an especially lovely anecdote, he describes the transgression of familiar boundaries: an emotional outburst of a waitress subjected to a customer complaint, with all sides stated and the clientele offering to pitch in and lighten the work-load!

They go home afterward to mostly communal arrangements or live in family settings marked by old-fashioned toilets, but large, aromatic wooden bathtubs, and super-tech television/VCRs. These natives take plenty of time explaining to the visitor — as in other literary utopias — how the new system is superior, and these offer Callenbach the most didactic opportunities to argue for the end of herbicides, toxic dumping, the creation of biodegradable plastics through biological sources, the rise of solar energy, community-based medical care, and so on. Education offers one of the best cases for the replacement of compulsion by learning-by-doing with lots of field trips, and universities are reduced to people who really want to study rather than get a career advancement. Even book ownership is way down, through systems of bartering and interests in learning other (doubtless more practical) things in other ways — like how to repair instead of replace appliances. The *quietude* of the place, practically without the sound of mechanical creatures, is something to contemplate.

But many readers of *Ecotopia* must have been drawn to the sex-and-recreation angle. Our protagonist is, back home in Manhattan, separated from his former wife. He draws close to one Marissa Brightcloud, not classically beautiful and definitely the physical rather than the manicured type (“her sexual odors are powerful”) but immensely attractive because of her freedom of spirit. And no hippy-dippy dummy: she knows her botany and is very clear-headed about the kinds of labors and attitudes required to keep this society going. As he becomes more involved with her, he thus becomes more certain that Ecotopia is close to the opposite of everything he had been led to believe back in Empire City. These people are different, increasingly different as they refashion a civilization tenet by tenet; they aren’t crazy.

Readers will find even more strange the “Men’s Movement” war-games with males gearing up with spears for annual, ritualistic explosions of excitement, contest and occasional deaths among many non-lethal cuts, bruises and stabbing wounds. “Savagery Restored” is obviously an attempt to recover the spirit of ancient games, its heavily gendered nature answered by women dominating the major political party and the daily organizational efforts.

Nothing else in the book is so “seventies.” The idea that a section of the country *could* secede certainly seemed more real, with the dreams of the counter-culture close behind; but the diversion of U.S. energies to Latin America where a Vietnam-like engagement was underway (Brazil, in Ecotopia, not Colombia, as in turn-of-the-century real-life America) is easy to imagine.

How did Callenbach’s imaginary civilization get there? This he answers in *Ecotopia Emerging*, a rather more realistic and in that sense less ambitious effort which nevertheless attempts to get closer to where Americans (and humans) find themselves in the present day. This time it’s collective Bolinas that is heroic, the fiercely freedom-loving backwooders who learn to say No. One of the town’s daughters herself figures out how to build a solar cell, refuses to hand over the plans to a mega-corporation (with a Berkeley professor as its agent) for patenting, and in effect leads the town into a struggle for independence.

The economic premise of *Ecotopia Emerging* now seems shaky but must have seemed solid at the time of its writing: the world economy was not going to recover from the oil crisis, impelling intelligent minds toward alternative power sources. Here, the Survivalist Party (which will dominate Ecotopia) emerges, arguing not only against ecological destruction but also against the evident economic waste of a petrochemical, permanent war economy.

Survivalists gain the critical numbers and confidence to state their political positions, more articulately and with greater effect than the Green parties of real-life since. They appeal successfully to a mixture of old-fashioned anti-waste mentality (which sometimes seems almost within Ralph Nader’s grasp but then slips out again) and new-tech solutions. They become a political force in municipalities like Berkeley, San Francisco, Davis and Eugene, creating car-free zones. They even invent a sort of spiritual sensibility, appealing to the do-gooder instincts of the traditional church-goers. They struggle, with less success, to get past the romantic tangles of straight society. They plan and, thanks to a favorable combination of events, achieve the first

moments of independence. An island of sanity amid a worsening planet ecology; but also an island of hope.

Every utopia is liable to interrogation by those of later days who live in a non-utopia. Many of the complaints against Callenbach's two volumes have been launched against Bellamy's or Morris's: people show so little sign of the needed degree of cooperation and so much apparent eagerness to buy bigger vehicles like SUVs, yet more gas-powered toys for every terrain, woods to water, more cravings (if that's possible) for new clothes, new houses and so on. But that's not how I read these books.

I suspect the original readership of Callenbach must have been heavily among those who had taken part (or were still taking part) in food coops and other institutions that have all but vanished since the Reagan years. Certainly, it is harder now to imagine the free and easy but also responsible, casually organized style of the thousands who traded work-time for low-priced vegetables and a share of what seemed like an alternative future. Those of us who participated know how limited the experiment really was, how flawed and ripe for early collapse. But the looks on the faces of the young — and middle-aged — utopians who took part are not easily forgotten. They wanted so badly to make it work. Given the physical and economic space, the technological expertise, the time for some patient learning, their subsociety might have looked a lot like *Ecotopia*. As a former participant-observer, I like to think so.



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