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Book Review

de Geus, M. 1999. *Ecological Utopias: Envisioning the Sustainable Society*. International Books, Utrecht, The Netherlands.

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In an age characterized by pragmatism and postmodern skepticism, utopian thought is easily rejected as a useless form of daydreaming or a dangerous flirtation with totalistic social planning. Marius de Geus, a political theorist at the University of Leiden in The Netherlands, argues that this depreciation of utopian thought is unnecessary and unjust. For contemporary environmental scholars and practitioners, he maintains, utopian writing constitutes a unique and valued resource.

In *Ecological Utopias*, de Geus offers a concise review, critical analysis, and synthetic appraisal of the works of nine authors whose utopian writings span the last five centuries. Each of these authors limned what de Geus calls a "utopia of sufficiency." Utopias of sufficiency posit ideal societies whose *raison d'être* is the satisfaction of moderate human needs through harmonious social and ecological relations. These societies are characterized by simplicity and self-restraint rather than material abundance and overconsumption. They demonstrate how a high quality of life can be achieved through richness of community, sufficiency of goods, meaningful work coupled with significant leisure, and ecological integration. Utopias of sufficiency are contrasted to utopias of abundance. De Geus does not examine this latter genre of utopian thought, where technological prowess produces widespread luxury. Such "technotopias," as portrayed by Bacon, Owen, Saint-Simon, and Fourier among others, celebrate human power over nature rather than human interdependence with nature. Instead, de Geus investigates the ecologically attuned works of Thomas More, Henry David Thoreau, Peter Kropotkin, William Morris, Ebenezer Howard, B. F. Skinner, Aldous Huxley, Ernest Callenbach, and Murray Bookchin. While paying heed to the shortcomings and dangers exhibited in the utopian thought of these authors, de Geus highlights the insight and inspiration that a critical reading of their works may yield.

Utopias of sufficiency are not all cut from the same green cloth. They vary dramatically on a number of scores, including the individual liberties they celebrate and the forms of social control they advocate. In 1516, Thomas More published the first depiction of an ideal, ecologically attuned state. More's *Utopia* is characterized by egalitarian relations (notwithstanding its inherent patriarchy) and the absence of private property. Its inhabitants achieve happiness and spiritual fulfillment by way of harmony with nature, adherence to a strict work ethic, and puritanical ethical standards. Ecological values are pervasive, but so is a lack of personal freedom. As de Geus observes, More's utopia is largely modeled after the monastic community. While underlining its originality, de Geus rejects More's vision because of the stifling social control it promotes. With similar qualms, de Geus assesses B. F. Skinner's modern depiction of utopian life in *Walden Two* (1945). Although the inhabitants of Skinner's community

are not subject to coercion and are much more open to technological progress than the citizens of More's ideal state, they are made equally compliant to social and ecological norms. This control is achieved by way of "positive reinforcement" and other forms of behavioral engineering that are routinely exercised on the denizens of Walden Two from cradle to grave.

Henry David Thoreau published *Walden, or a Life in the Woods* in 1854. In this paean to the simple life, personal freedom is the foremost concern. However, it is a particular sort of liberty that Thoreau advocates. For Thoreau, the freedom to live luxuriously generally leads to lives fettered to production, consumption, and accumulation. Thoreau's remedy is an unadorned life that mimics natural rhythms and liberally imbibes the "tonic of wildness." For Thoreau, the ideal is not the cloistered communitarian but the noble savage. De Geus rightly doubts whether the world could sustainably support six billion Thoreauvians marching off to the woods with axe in hand to find peace of mind.

Most of the utopian works discussed in *Ecological Utopias* lean more toward anarchism than authoritarian control. When Peter Kropotkin wrote *Mutual Aid* (1902), he was setting himself against the (social) Darwinists who described nature red in tooth and claw and claimed that survival and success went to the fittest of rugged individuals. Kropotkin argued that in the animal world, no less than the human, welfare was gained by way of solidarity and cooperation as much if not more than individual struggle. It is the pervasiveness of mutual aid, Kropotkin believed, that makes anarchism a viable option for humankind. Kropotkin looked to the Middle Ages as a period of relative well-being whose virtues were trampled under by the rising bourgeois society and the centralized state. Kropotkin suggested that the ideal society of the future might go beyond the decentralized and federative structures of the Middle Ages to foster lives of liberty and harmony, such that cooperation would supplant coercion and the preservation of nature would replace efforts to master it.

In William Morris's romantic novel, *News from Nowhere* (1891), we confront an ecological utopia grounded in small-scale human craftsmanship. Like his acquaintance Kropotkin, Morris lauds decentralization, cooperative community, social equality, and individual freedom. Yet, more than any other utopian writer, Morris grounds these virtues in an aesthetic view of the human condition. Inspired by medieval arts and crafts, Morris became one of Europe's foremost graphic designers and established a well-known firm of artisans. Morris was appalled by the array of shoddy products that large-scale industry belched out along with pollution. *News from Nowhere* depicts a society in which the preservation of nature goes hand in hand with the beautification of the world. Ebenezer Howard's *Garden Cities of To-morrow* (1898) provides another account of sustainable communities defined by human artistry. Howard's blueprint of utopia, however, is grounded in architectural and horticultural arts that effectively wed town and country.

Murray Bookchin combines and modernizes Kropotkin and Morris. In *The Ecology of Freedom* and his other writings on "social ecology," Bookchin argues that the domination of nature first arises from human domination, including patriarchy. Achieving a healthy relation to nature, Bookchin insists, will only be possible if humans first achieve egalitarian social relations. Aldous Huxley suggests a similar dynamic. Huxley is best known for his dystopic novel, *Brave New World*. However, he also wrote *Island* (1962), a utopian novella depicting a people that seeks ecological balance and the development of higher consciousness through meditation and the use of non-addictive psychedelic drugs. The basic premise is that environmental preservation and spiritual development go hand in hand. The inhabitants of Ernest Callenbach's *Ecotopia* (1975), a secessionist nation of the 21st-century northwestern United States, also live a decentralized, egalitarian life close to nature. Many cultivate marijuana and, like Huxley's islanders, facilitate ecological attunement through higher states of consciousness. In *Ecotopia*, sustainability is the foremost concern. Consequently, production is small-scale and laws require that goods be durable and easily repairable. What cannot be repaired or reused simply gets recycled or composted, as almost everything is organically produced. In *Ecotopia*, the steady-state economy has been attained.

De Geus makes the valid criticism that ecological thinkers, including modern ones such as Bookchin and Callenbach, generally propose relatively static models of society. In turn, most utopian thinkers portray their lands and peoples as isolated from the world around them. Yet, contemporary societies are highly complex, quickly changing, and increasingly interconnected on a global scale. The utopian writing most needed today, de Geus suggests, would provide a vision of a sustainable society that preserves individual freedom, complex social relations, and ongoing social and ecological transformation. De Geus might have been more specific in this regard. One could argue, for instance, that what is most needed is the utopian portrayal of a progressive, market society characterized by full-cost accounting, wherein the social and ecological costs of production, distribution, and waste management are figured into the price consumers pay for goods and services. Herein, ecological sustainability would be achieved without sacrificing economic freedom.

In the end, de Geus makes the case that utopian thought provides insightful social critique and imaginative vision. Radical perspectives allow us to evaluate the habits of thought and practice that we so often assume to be necessary features of our world. A political theory of sustainable society is still lacking, de Geus notes, and the critical insight and visionary ideals of utopian thought are an indispensable component of such theorizing.

BOOK INFORMATION

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RESPONSES TO THIS ARTICLE

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