2013

Ecophilosophy and communalist utopian novels: do bicycles and biotechnology go together?

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Keywords
bicycles, biotechnology, go, ecophilosophy, together, communalist, utopian, novels, do

Disciplines
Arts and Humanities | Law

Publication Details

This journal article is available at Research Online: http://ro.uow.edu.au/lhpapers/863
Ecophilosophy and communalist utopian novels: do bicycles and biotechnology go together?
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Abstract

The period of social change from the 1960s to the 1980s saw a flowering of utopian novels, from Huxley's *Island* (1962) and Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* (1964) through to Callenbach’s *Ecotopia* (1975) and Piercy’s *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976). These works were infused with a vision of an ideal world structured as a decentralised network of small villages or precincts. In each novel, local, participatory decision-making was the key to a utopian “good place” both for people and for ecological communities as a whole. The need to reharmonise with ecological systems saw a rejection of wasteful technologies which cater to consumerism. Instead, these utopias explored “high-tech, low-tech” societies. “High technology” (in the sense of sophisticated technology) was particularly encouraged for certain utopian purposes, such as biotechnology to improve ecology and agriculture. Technologies or sciences that might ravage the natural world were excluded, leading to a return to “low technology” (in the sense of simple, low-impact technology), such as bicycles for transport and manual labour for food production. Each of these utopian works was environmentally thoughtful, if not radical, in its suggested path to a better world. But did these communalist visions sufficiently challenge both the oppositions (nature/society) and the hierarchies (man’s interests before others) that have proven so destructive in the current age, or is a further radical shift needed in our vision of a reharmonised planet?

Paper

Utopian fictions offer details of a space – whether an otherworld, a society or a shared way of living – depicting an enactment of “a better life for us all”. The term “utopia” was first coined by More, in his 1516 title which famously punned on the Greek words for “no place” (outopia) and “good place” (eutopia). However, Western imaginings of ideal societies can be traced back much further, to classical works such as Plato’s *The Republic* (1 BC), and further still in tales of how people lived in golden ages or biblical Edens. Utopia is reimagined in each era. From the second half of the 20th century, many Western utopian works took an environmentally and socially inclusive turn. These may be seen as “utopias of reharmonisation”, as they envisioned an inclusive, egalitarian and often healing approach to the human which embraced difference of various kinds (gender, race, disability,
minority cultures), and also extended the notion of “us”, increasingly looking beyond the human to include natural systems and non-human beings and communities. Utopias of reharmonisation reflect the social changes of an era where rights of women and minorities were increasingly recognised, and at the same time they express environmental anxiety and growing awareness of dwindling resources and scientific warnings of wide-scale environmental problems. The period also inherited concerns around the alienation of the modern subject within industrialisation (iconically visualised by Blake’s “dark satanic mills”). Several forms of utopias of reharmonisation may be identified as emerging or reemerging within this period, including primal, arcadian, communalist, medievalist and post-human utopias. Of these, fictional communalist utopias have been particularly sophisticated, with a richness of detail concerning education, politics, law, social relations and daily activities. Communalist utopian fictions from this period include Huxley’s *Island* (1962), Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed* (1964), Callenbach’s *Ecotopia* (1975), Piercy’s *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976) and Robinson’s *Pacific Edge* (1990). Their world-building offers thoughtfully-drawn alternatives to the centralised modern industrial state. Earlier works may have contributed to the richness of some of their ideas; notably, a communitarian utopia had been prefigured by William Morris in *News from Nowhere* (1890), an ur-text in which he offered a detailed futuristic account of a localised form of socialism.

Just as the fictional communitarian utopias flowered in that period of intense negotiation of social change that occurred in the West from the 1960s, so too did intentional communities and social programs for the enactment of communalist utopias. Several theorists offered detailed ideas including Bookchin in his various non-fiction works on social ecology from the 1960s to 2002. These, too, may have deepened utopian imaginings.

Each of the fictional works listed above portrays societies at carefully described stages along the path of attempting to shift from disharmonious divisions to reharmonised, reintegrated relations between nature and culture. All are positioned in deliberate opposition to industrialised modernity with its alienated human subject and devastated natural systems. Each depicts an ideal world based on a decentralised network of small towns or villages organised at every level as a participatory, egalitarian society. Centralised structures are largely seen as dystopian and tending towards corruption and self- or class-interest, and are avoided as far as possible. ‘Power adheres to a centre’ is a popular saying on Anarres in Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed*.

Instead, the local community is assumed to be the ideal locus of government, firstly because an individual can contribute directly to shaping the social order and be in turn shaped by the social order, and secondly because the individual human and the ecological community can be brought into a more considered relationship. Local production supports a non-exploitative cycle of energy and resource exchange with natural systems (this is increasingly argued by ecophilosophers: see eg Salleh, 2010). Overconsumption is avoided and scarcity embraced, for both socio-political and environmental reasons (Williams, 1978, p 111; de Geus, 1996, pp 20-21). Arguably, these works respond to a perceived “metabolic rift” within and between human and other-than-human systems, brought about by industrialisation (Foster, 1999, p 379; Salleh, 2010, p 206; citing Marx and others).
All of the works perceive large-scale industrialisation as dystopian. *Island* depicts its ideal society Pala as resource-rich and vulnerable to invasion by a nearby industrial dictatorship, ultimately failing when its oil reserves bring about its conquest and destruction. The negative impacts of industrialisation are strongly associated with the unrestrained use of technology, and Piercy’s ideal world of Mattapoissett is at war with a dystopian technocracy. Utopias of reharmonisation are shaped in part by their differing responses to the question of the place of technology in an ideal world. Primal utopias, like that of Pandora in James Cameron’s *Avatar* (2009), reject modern technologies entirely; in some post-human utopias (and dystopias), the human is reengineered (as attempted by Crake in Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake* (2003)) or may be conjoined with technological artefact or machine intelligence. The communalist utopian novels, in seeking to reharmonise both social and ecological systems, instead explore a “high-tech, low-tech” solution. Carefully selected forms of “high technology” (in the sense of sophisticated technology) operate side by side with “low technology” (in the sense of simple, low-impact technology). Aspects of modernity and subsistence farming coexist. Unfettered use of high technology is implicated in dystopic exploitation of natural systems and the destruction of resources and communities, and is rejected in all the texts. Even in the nineteenth century, Morris was predicting a waste of resources associated with inappropriate use of high technology:

‘by that time it was as much as – or rather, more than – a man could do to fix an ash pole to a rake by handiwork; so that it would take a machine worth a thousand pounds, a group of workmen, and half a day’s travelling, to do five shillings’ worth of work’ (p. 185).

Many high technologies are associated with consumerism in Huxley’s *Island*, and therefore rejected. Consumer desire is readjusted:

‘We don’t feel any need for your speedboats or your television’ (p. 86).

Recycling is embraced in several works, including Piercy’s *Woman on the Edge of Time*:

‘Our technology did not develop in a straight line from yours ... We have limited resources ... We can afford to waste ... nothing’ (p. 125).

Rejection of unsustainable uses of “high technology” leads directly to a return to “low technology” or manual labour for many tasks, typically including food production and the crafting of household goods. From this commitment to low-tech production and from Morris’s idea of “work-pleasure” comes a renewed commitment to artisanship. Guest observes in *News from Nowhere* that tableware and furniture is often handmade but beautiful despite its lack of a commercial finish:

‘The glass, crockery, and plate were very beautiful to my eyes, used to the study of mediaeval art; but a nineteenth-century club-haunter would, I daresay, have found them rough and lacking in finish ...’ (p. 105).

However, modern technology is not eliminated completely as it is in primal utopias, nor is it part of the machinations of dark forces as in many medievalist utopias (for example, Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-5)). Eco-primitivism is not the aim (Bookchin, 2002, p 97). High technology is in fact encouraged for certain utopian purposes, such as ecology and agriculture. Innovation and research that will assist an eco-balanced society are foregrounded, so that in *The Dispossessed*, Takver is playing with the genetics of fish (p. 158); and Luciente in *Woman on the Edge of Time* is a plant geneticist (p. 53). In *Island*, the
life-sciences are taught to a sophisticated level, at the same time as technologies or sciences that might ravage biological communities are excluded:

‘We don’t really have any practical need for that [non-life sciences] kind of research – no heavy industries to be made more competitive, no armaments to be made more diabolical, not the faintest desire to land on the backside of the moon. Only the modest ambition to live as fully human beings in harmony with the rest of life on this island at this latitude on this planet’ (p. 246).

Even Morris’s quasi-medievalist utopia includes “force barges” and other new technologies (p. 168). Morris is sometimes read as anti-technology, but this is an oversimplification. Rather, as Williams points out (1958, p 28), in News from Nowhere workers are to choose when and how technologies are to be employed:

‘All work which would be irksome to do by hand is done by immensely improved machinery; and in all work which it is a pleasure to do by hand machinery is done without’ (p. 100).

This position is echoed in Woman on the Edge of Time:

‘Okay, so you can automate a whole factory … So why do I see people grubbing around broccoli plants picking off caterpillars? Why is everybody running around on foot or bicycles?

‘We have so much energy from [various sources] … That’s a fixed amount. Manufacturing and mining are better done by machines. Who wants to go deep into the earth and crawl through tunnels … Who wants to sit in a factory sewing the same four or five comforter patterns?’ (pp. 129-130)

The juxtaposition between high and low technologies in the twentieth century works in particular is very evident and deliberate. In Ecotopia, for example, the train is extraordinarily sophisticated, fast and vibration-free, whereas the knapsacks and skis of the passengers on the train are primitive and homemade, and the carriages “are full of hanging ferns and small plants” (pp. 7-8). This may point to a contradiction in the work, for a train which is so sophisticated must surely be associated with aspects of industrial modes of resource extraction and production. Arguably, each of these novels has an ambivalent stance on technology, as does Western society. Like many peoples, the utopian inhabitants do not want the destructive outcomes of industrialisation but they still desire – to avoid onerous labour, or to travel reasonably fast, for example. Restraint is exercised; bicycles are favoured in many of the works, but even bicycles imply extraction of materials, metallurgy and sophisticated machining of parts.

High technology is strongly favoured in the novels when associated with ecological innovation and solutions. The works typically envision an individual scientist or creative problem-solver – a person embedded in their local communities, both human and other-than-human, who sensitively solves local problems. Yet behind these individual engagements with science and technology must surely lie a larger scale base of research and development, and it is also clear that at the same time as critiquing the detriments of the consumer era, some manufacturing is nevertheless to be retained. Activities such as mining and timber-felling are typically scaled back, but not eliminated, as the passage above from Woman on the Edge of Time confirms.

The question of technology is a difficult one, and has been much debated. Technology has been associated with both the goods and the ills of modern life. The positive aspects include
oft-cited examples such as labour-saving devices to improve the quality of daily life; the scientific advances in medicine, extending lives and giving women control of reproduction; engineering feats such as bridges, levees, trains and canals, which can facilitate transport of food and goods; the liberatory impact of the communication technologies such as the printing press or the internet.

The negative impacts of technology are also well understood. Its tendency to instrumentalise was discussed by Heidegger in his essay “The Question Concerning Technology” (1954). He argued that modern technology has an essential quality, which he named enframing, of converting everything into a “standing-reserve”, that is, a resource or energy supply awaiting use. This involves setting upon nature in a “challenging forth” of its energies, using technology to unlock, command, regulate and secure, not merely for storage or use, but always driving forward with a further intent such as increased profits or productivity. Presciently, he saw that enframing, or the process of setting-upon nature, threatens to turn everything, including man, into standing-reserve.

The role of technology in large-scale and often destructive military enterprises was discussed by Lewis Mumford, who also suggested that machine technology was actually invented in the ancient world through the coercive use of human parts to form a “mega-machine” (1965).

Cudworth (2011) problematises even the positive aspects of technology, pointing out that the benefits and detriments are unequally distributed. Looking beyond the human, our technology has brought extensive detriments and virtually no benefits to any ecological community other than our own. Habitat destruction has occurred at the local level through to the global level and technology is deeply implicated in climate change.

These are just a few of the insights from theorists into the problems of technology, of which there are far too many more to discuss here. However, the underlying question is not the dichotomous one of whether technology should be accepted as a given or completely rejected. The latter response is arguably not possible unless advocating a return to the pre-modern primal – and perhaps not even then. Bookchin argues that “humans have been constituted to intervene in nature”. Ecophilosopher Freya Mathews (2011) reflects that “Artefact must be seen as a potential expression of the natural” (p. 266). Nor is a shrug of acceptance of technology as an unstoppable force very helpful; while it is true that technology has escaped and cannot be put back into its box, its potentially destructive power must surely be brought under control if ecosystems are to survive and support life into the future.

Perhaps the fundamental problem is that technologies have developed within the modern era much more rapidly than society could possibly develop ethical, legal and organisational frameworks to moderate their application. By way of comparison, “rights” as an ideal to work towards has taken centuries to develop, from the chivalric codes in the middle ages to the relatively recent emergence of animal rights and even more embryonic articulations of the rights of ecological communities. There are many difficult questions remaining, of how and when technology should be used, at what level, by whom and having regard to which communities (human and other-than-human). These are not un-debated or lacking in
understanding, but rather unresolved within broader society on cultural, political, economic and policy levels.

Communalist utopian novels attempt (as do many communitarian communities and ecovillages) to model a possible ethical response. They suggest an alternative wherein technology is used for energy storage and use, but where a conversion of all systems into standing-reserve is avoided. Human desire to apply technology is restricted in agreed ways and consumption is reduced to avoid damaging the integrity of natural systems. Partnership and/or harmony with nature is a strong underlying ethos. In *Woman on the Edge of Time*, Luciente explains:

‘You might say our – you’d say religion? – ideas make us see ourselves as partners with water, air, birds, fish, trees (p. 125)’.

Communitarian utopian texts suggest better decisions might be made by decentralising both urban and rural life, and placing the human and the other-than-human in closer proximity. Certainly, as Chakraborty observes, “One need not stop for a moment to consider the right or wrong of any action regarding something to which there is no relatedness.” In an era when questions of scale are increasingly disturbing, and Mumford’s observations of the danger of the mega-machine seem more and more relevant, these novels attempt to scale back the human enterprise to localised, synergistic forms of production and exchange. The hi-tech, low-tech solution offered by communalist utopian novels is a compromise position – one which seeks an ethical point of balance between industrial modernity and premodern modes of living. In this sense, bicycles and biotechnology do go together in communalist utopian novels. They represent selective use of technology, and a position of restraint.

**References**

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