

## Essay

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# Let's talk about utopias

On the topicality of ecological visions and media critique in Ernest Callenbach's novel *Ecotopia*

**Abstract:** Utopias allow us to criticize the present from an assumed positive future perspective. At present, however, dystopias are dominating the discourse. Using Ernest Callenbach's 1975 novel *Ecotopia*, our author tested the topicality of a positive ecological utopia in a teaching project: Students at a summer academy read excerpts from the novel and explored its positive ecological visions of the future as well as its criticism of the contemporary media system. The students were fascinated by how much knowledge about ecological interrelations was already available in the mid-1970s. They now say they want to be more critical in their selection of information and of media representations of crises in the future.

Climate change, the dominant issue of our day, dwarves other big problems of humanity, such as hunger, war, or even pandemics, especially for those generations who still have most of their lives ahead of them. They do everything they can to preserve the world as we know it for themselves and their descendants. But under the weight of this impending catastrophe, are they even still receptive to positive utopias? And how do they see the role of the media?

Utopias are a great way to critically view the present day in the guise of a future perspective. The first utopias related to politics and society. In the course of the 19th century, they split into two branches: scientific and literary utopias (cf. Seeßlen 1980: 21f.). Since the industrial revolution, utopias have always featured technological elements. Often, they are about a traveller who ends up in an unknown place, as in Thomas More's *Utopia*; or in the same place in a future time, such as the protagonist who travels to the future in H. G. Wells' *Time Machine* and lives to return and share his adventures with his contemporaries (who also include

some journalists). As the genre evolved, the focus shifted increasingly onto building suspense as well as the psychology of the traveler, who sets out on a »hero's journey«. But in the course of the 20th century, positive utopias of an ideal state, also known as »eutopias« (Poltrum 2011: 23), were increasingly superseded by dystopias, visions of a catastrophic future.

While media and journalism are a common subject of science fiction films (see Godulla 2017: 260f.), they rarely feature in literary utopias. And when they do, they tend to be satirical swipes and innuendos, as in Terry Pratchett's *The Truth*, a novel in the Discworld series in which protagonist William de Worde speaks the beautiful words: »But news is mainly what someone somewhere doesn't want you to put in the paper« (Pratchett 2003: 407).

During a summer academy on the topic of »Utopias – Dystopias«, sponsored by the Studienstiftung in August 2021, the author had the opportunity to spend several days discussing utopias and their reception with German-speaking students. One workshop was devoted to an ecological utopia from the genre of eco-fiction, Ernest Callenbach's *Ecotopia*. As the summer academy participants explored in detail, the entire novel is practically one big media critique. It is also one of the few examples of a largely positive utopia that combines technological and social developments.

Below, I present a selection of the results of this teaching experiment, partly because the novel struck a chord with students in the light of the »Fridays for future« movement, but also because I hope to rekindle some interest in Callenbach's ecological and social utopia, which played an essential role in the founding phase of the ecological movement in the US and in Europe.

First, let me say that the students were fascinated by Callenbach's ecological visions, which were based on the state of research at the time. And they were amazed at how long it took, and in some cases still takes, to implement them.

### *Ecotopia* – an ecological utopia from 1975

Ernest Callenbach's protagonist, US journalist William Weston, travels to Ecotopia in 1999 on a double mission. The country consists of the former US states of Washington, Oregon, and Northern California, which seceded from the Union in the late 1970s and built a resource-saving alternative state – a kind of »alternate time stream novel«.

In fictional 1999, there are no contacts between the two countries, not even diplomatic ones. There is a nearly impermeable frontier; little is known about Ecotopia in the U.S. Weston travels to Ecotopia on behalf of the *Times-Post*, but also of the President and the White House, to establish initial contact with Ecotopia.

He reports regularly for the *Times-Post*, beginning with his trip, his reception at the border, his first impressions, his travels inland, his explorations of transportation, agriculture, and forestry, education and science, the all-pervasive recycling system, and, of course, the Ecotopians' communication technology and their media system.

Weston is also keeping a diary. In the novel, his journalistic pieces are juxtaposed with his concurrent diary entries. So formally, this is a classic novel in diary form, but also a novel in the form of journalistic articles.

As the story goes on, Weston's pieces for the *Times-Post* and his own diary entries begin to diverge more and more, implying criticism of the U.S. media system and American journalism in the 1970s at multiple levels.

## Ecotopian society

Without going into the details of Ecotopian society as Callenbach constructed it in 1975, let me outline his ecological utopia so you can better understand his media critique.

The central tenet of the Ecotopian economy is the principle of a »stable equilibrium«. This is backed by a sophisticated recycling system that separates and fully reuses all waste water and solid waste. Ecotopia uses only renewable raw materials to produce clothing or building materials, especially cotton, linen, and wood.

Accordingly, forestry plays a major role, as does agriculture (over the course of the novel, Weston engages in a passionate love affair with a head forester named Marissa, who has a both spiritual and pragmatic relationship with trees). Trees and forests are plentiful, as is game, and the urban population often goes hunting with bows and arrows.

The large cities are divided into manageable communities. Opportunities for grassroots democratic participation are numerous and eagerly used. In general, Ecotopians love a good debate; this is also how they solve their conflicts.

Hover trains cover long distances; cities have free e-buses and free bicycles for all. Cars still exist, but are hardly necessary in cities anymore. They are constructed from standardized components that drivers can assemble themselves and repair easily. Since most destinations are walkable, Ecotopians are in great health.

Factories are owned collectively by the workers. They have overcome the Fordist system of division of labor; machines make the work easier, all employees know the entire production process, and they perform a variety of tasks. Their residential units are similarly convenient as the work units. In spacious multi-family dwellings, people live together in groups, with ample spaces for privacy and retreat. They usually cook and eat together, and they raise their children together.

Schools rely on in-person teaching, while the US, as of fictional 1999, has long since switched to online learning from home (Callenbach 1975/1990: p. 155).

Of course, women are (almost) fully emancipated. Ecotopia is ruled by a woman president. There is a guaranteed minimum income that covers food, housing, and basic health care. They only form of taxation is corporate tax, but there is also competition between the small companies (Schwendter 1994: 38). Marijuana is legal (this is straight-up wishful thinking of the 1970s), there is free sexuality (Callenbach goes into great detail about these sexual activities, which has earned him criticism from feminists), but most Ecotopians live in stable couple relationships. There are sports, but no athletic competitions.

Protagonist Weston is particularly irritated by the indigenous population and their return to tradition and spirituality, which also manifests itself in strange clothing and notorious regular martial games, which often end in bloodshed.

Callenbach also describes the transition from US society to an ecological economy, almost relishing the precipitate departure of the wealthy after the peaceful revolution, which leads to a spontaneous emergency socialization of their factories and operations.

Overall, *Ecotopia* is a counterstory to Thomas More's *Utopia*. One example is the human relationship with the forest: In More's *Utopia*, it is harnessed and deforested. In Callenbach's story, it is being reforested, valued as an important element of the ecological cycle, and managed thoughtfully.

The relationship between work and leisure is also different. Whereas for Renaissance writer More, the ideal is a strict separation of work and leisure, late industrial-age writer Callenbach blurs the boundaries between the two.

But there are also similarities:

- Utopia as well as Ecotopia are real places (albeit Ecotopia is a projection into the near future),
- both are travelogues,
- both criticize their own present day in the guise of a utopia.

Author, period of origin, and reception

Obviously, much of the Ecotopian vision stems from the early days of the social-ecological movements, particularly on the Californian West Coast. Richard Saage point out references to the experience of crisis in 1970s US society (cf. Saage 2000: 1179f.). Ernest Callenbach himself put it this way: »In fact, I'd even say that *Ecotopia* could only have been written by someone who lives right here in the San Francisco Bay Area. We have the ›Sierra Club‹, ›The Friends of the Earth‹, and many other ecological initiatives that would have been unconceivable elsewhere at that time« (Saage 2000: 1180).

Who was the author? Ernest William Callenbach (3 April 1929 in Williamsport, Pennsylvania - 16 April 2012 in Berkeley, California) was a writer and film journalist. He taught film history and theory at the University of California at Berkeley. Until 1991, he was editor of the journal *Film Quarterly* (cf. Saage 2000: 1181). Ecology was his life's overarching theme, *Ecotopia* his lifetime achievement, as he himself stated.

His protagonist Weston, forced to leave his children behind in News York, laments that they are »living a life that is, after all, increasingly dangerous, not just because of crime and all the crazy people around them, but because the smog and the chemicals will poison even our children's children.«

Initially, Callenbach could not find a publisher who would accept the manuscript, which is why he finally self-published it in 1974. It was only after the novel's success that Bentham picked it up and published it (cf. Saage 2000: 1180). It was translated into nine languages and published in German by Rotbuch-Verlag in 1978. By the early 1990s, it had sold 600,000 copies. The novel was required reading at some schools; which is why German scholastic publisher Reclam came out with an abridged, annotated English-language version for German readers. Due to its success, Callenbach later followed up with a prequel titled *Ecotopia Emerging*.

Overall, the novel had a great impact on counterculture and the development of the Green movement in the late 1970s in the US as well as in Europe (cf. Saage 2000: 1181). Many elements of the future ecological development had been known since the early 1970s, especially since the Club of Rome published »The Limits to Growth« in 1972. The author of his contribution also referred to this in her short introduction before group work began. Students later also picked up on this aspect.

## Callenbach's media criticism

During his stay in *Ecotopia*, Weston notes a fundamental change in social relations in the 24-year history of *Ecotopia*, as a result of the changes in the economic and social fabric. A vital factor in this development is the *Ecotopian* media system, in which the protagonist, himself a journalist, takes a keen interest. But that's not the only form of media criticism Callenbach incorporated in his novel.

In the following, we will identify four levels of Callenbach's direct and indirect media criticism:

1. Presentation of the *Ecotopian* media system
2. Obvious framing in reports and features for the *Times-Post*
3. The media system as the government's vicarious agent (the traveler realizes: numerous armed conflicts have been concealed from the US citizens)
4. An widening gap between the content of the newspaper articles and the diary entries, leading up to the (expected) point at which the author decides not to return to the USA.

### *Media system*

The Ecotopian media system is a direct response to the both horizontal and vertical process of media concentration in the US, which has been going on since the 1960s. As a counter design, Ecotopia's big media corporations were broken up and replaced by a new crop of small, local media companies, especially television stations. Accordingly, the program is dominated by local news, such as broadcasts of town hall meetings, and an anarchistic program consisting of comedy, vintage movies, rock music, and documentaries. The program is interactive: Viewers can join the discussion via a telephone feedback channel.

The Ecotopian Press Act prohibits media concentration. In advertising, small production companies are given priority. And instead of one major newspaper, San Francisco now has a variety of dailies that cover the entire spectrum of opinion. Other cities also have multiple papers: four in Seattle, three in Portland, three in Sacramento – a truly utopian vision given the current demise of the newspaper market in the US.

Technologically, the newspapers are delivered as e-papers: They are stored centrally on computers and can be copied very quickly in decentralized locations, or issued temporarily with a kind of electronic ink. Similarly, the book market is organized in a way that is accessible to small and micro publishers. Any book can be accessed and transmitted electronically from the National Library in Berkeley (cf. Callenbach 1975/1990: 149).

Moving images also dominate individual communication in Ecotopia: Wired video telephony is available almost everywhere. This makes business trips superfluous, and people travel mainly for pleasure (cf. Callenbach 1975/1990: 53). Overall, technological development has come a long way: There are »remarkable small electronic devices«, such as tiny portable stereos and two-way radios integrated in lightweight headphones, and highly sensitive control devices for solar heating systems.

Our modern-day students appreciated that the novel was free from any technophobia. On the contrary, electronic and technological inventions are advanced; Ecotopia develops eco-friendly advanced technologies to serve the entire community. This way, Callenbach anticipated the emergence of the first virtual communities, which were also based in California and emerged from the alternative scene, such as »The Well«, as Howard Rheingold describes (cf. Rheingold 1994).

### *Framing*

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For example, he uses condescending adjectives and verbs to describe the Ecotopian Secretary of State, who tries to explain the economic system to him. While he does report the benefits of Ecotopia's resource cycle over US resource waste, as explained by the Secretary of State, his report then goes on to note: »Needless to say, this smug account aroused my skepticism in every way« (Callenbach 1975/1990: 27). He comments on the Ecotopian preference for communal sports: »Even volleyball – God have mercy on them! – is a popular pastime [...]« (Callenbach 1975/1990: 49).

Obviously, Weston can be sure that his US audience will share his journalistic assessment. He thus creates a sense of implicit agreement. One student observed that Callenbach deliberately breaches a fundamental rule of Anglo-Anglo journalism: the separation of facts and opinion. He probably did this to caricature contemporary US reporting on countries of the Eastern Bloc, Asia, or Latin America, which was riddled with prejudice and its corresponding frames.

As the novel progresses, the bias in the newspaper articles fades. Weston seems to be making greater efforts to report more objectively on the situation and the state of Ecotopia.

### *Censorship and self-censorship*

The heaviest criticism of the US media system, however, is probably a diary section in which Weston, having befriended Ecotopian journalists, is asked: »What do you think was the biggest story the Times ever suppressed?« (Callenbach 1975/1990: 150). Weston first tries wiggle out of the question by mentioning »the Bay of Pigs thing«, which ended up becoming public knowledge. This is a hint at the 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba, whose aim was to overthrow Fidel Castro with the help of the CIA. The US government had initially denied its involvement, but was then forced to admit it.

Likewise, Weston cites the example of the »Pentagon Papers«, highlighting the positive role of the *Post* in the publication of an initially classified study of U.S. foreign policy (in real life, it was the *New York Times*). Ecotopian journalists agree with him on this.

But, as they now reveal, the US media kept an entire war from the citizens, the so-called Helicopter War on the US-Ecotopia border. »What Helicopter War?«, Weston asks. Initially, the Ecotopian journalists don't buy his ignorance.

Why was the war kept quiet? Because Ecotopia won this war in a matter of days with superior technology and modern helicopter defense missiles, with great losses to the US military. (Readers might spot allusions to modern missile

defense systems during the Cold War .) Ecotopia thus mounted a successful military defense against the US, not least because of its excellent intelligence service, while the US attempts to win with a Vietnam War-era strategy failed (Callenbach 1975/1990: 153).

Although Weston is now persuaded that the Helicopter War did really happen, he decides not to tell his newspaper readers about it. He justifies this to himself by saying: »(...) I am not a reckless fool who just writes whatever pops into his mind« (Callenbach 1975/1990: 155). He later decides not to write about it under any circumstances, although he now believes »that there may be other, similarly outrageous dark chapters in the recent history of our country [...]« (Callenbach 1975/1990: 163).

### *Formal structure*

As described, the novel juxtaposes each of Weston's journalistic contributions with a long diary entry. The students worked out that the reports serve to describe Callenbach's ecological vision. The diary entries, in contrast, lend psychological depth to Weston's character and create tension.

First, each piece for the *Times-Post* is juxtaposed with diary entries on the same topic, written in a similar vein. While in his journalistic pieces, he still supports his misconceptions with a certain level of argumentation, his diary entries betray Weston as a stereotypically arrogant, unapologetic US-American.

As the novel progresses, the relationship changes. As his journalistic work becomes more objective, he starts to present the situation in Ecotopia more knowledgeably, even sympathetically. At the end, the author is received by the President of Ecotopia. In his last contribution to the *Times-Post*, he concludes »that the social experiments conducted here have been successful on a biological level« (Callenbach 1975/1990: 201) – the air is crystal clear, people are healthy and happy, and the economic system is viable in the long term, he reports. However, he then qualifies this statement again, hailing the US as the better system – to the point that he ends up being disgusted by his own piece.

Finally, the prospect of returning to the US and thus losing his relationship with his Ecotopian love interest Marissa and the people of Ecotopia plunges the protagonist into a deep psychological crisis, from which he emerges with Ecotopian help and decides to stay in Ecotopia. The novel ends with a matter-of-fact afterword by the New York-based editor to whom Weston sent his diary, and a personal farewell letter from Weston to his friend – in keeping with the dual format of the novel.



## Reception by students in 2021

Going into this project, the author of this piece could not anticipate how Callenbach's eco-fiction would resonate with today's students and was all the more surprised by the positive reception of the text excerpts. The students briefed each other about Ecotopian economy and society and visibly enjoyed the technical gimmicks and gadgets that Callenbach affords his Ecotopians.

In their feedback, almost all expressed an interest in reading the novel. Others wrote that they would view the media more critically in the future, or question their own frames when reporting.

Even during their lunch break, they were still eagerly discussing the material, with a twist that was surprising for us teachers: One student first called for more time for students to write down their own visions and utopias based on what they had heard so far. Addressing the teaching team, she passionately asked: If all of this was known in 1975 – why didn't you prevent the climate catastrophe?

I won't reproduce the rest of this discussion here – she unpacked a few »boomer« stereotypes, then eventually turned to the possibility of intergenerational cooperation, which included a discussion of the role of the media. But it did confirm the topicality, indeed the very necessity of a positive utopia in the face of the climate catastrophe.

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