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SOCIETY

# Green Utopianism

Perspectives, Politics and Micro-Practices

Edited by  
Karin Bradley and Johan Hedrén



# Green Utopianism

Utopian thought and experimental approaches to societal organization have been rare in the last decades of planning and politics. Instead, there is a widespread belief in ecological modernization, that sustainable societies can be created within the frame of the current global capitalist world order by taking small steps such as eco-labeling, urban densification, and recycling. However, in the context of the current crisis in which resource depletion, climate change, uneven development, and economic instability are seen as interlinked, this belief is increasingly being questioned and alternative developmental paths sought. This collection demonstrates how utopian thought can be used in a contemporary context, as critique and in exploring desired futures. The book includes theoretical perspectives on changing global socio-environmental relationships and political struggles for alternative development paths, and analyzes micro-level practices in co-housing, alternative energy provision, use of green space, transportation, co-production of urban space, peer-to-peer production and consumption, and alternative economies. It contributes research perspectives on contemporary green utopian practices and strategies, combining theoretical and empirical analyses to spark discussions of possible futures.

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# Preface

From our corner of the world, we see an urgent need for imaginaries, strategies, and practices of alternative futures beyond the current greenwashed environmentally and socially exploitative economy. This book compiles research perspectives on contemporary green utopian practices and strategies, combining both theoretical and empirical analyses to spark discussion of possible futures.

In 2010 and 2011 we organized a seminar series at Linköping University, Sweden, on Green futures, which inspired us to hold an international symposium on the topic. It was entitled “Green futures: From utopian grand schemes to micro-practices” and was held in September 2011 in Norrköping. Scholars of various backgrounds were invited to present and discuss their current research on this theme, and the discussions during this meeting gave birth to this book. It has been a privilege to work with all the contributors, discussing and refining their various contributions. We are grateful to Lars Orrskog and colleagues at the Green Critical Forum at Linköping University for reading and commenting on the introductory chapter and to the editors at Proper English for improving our language.

We would further like to thank the Swedish Research Council Formas for funding the research project “Exploring utopian thought in planning for sustainable futures” and the international symposium. We also thank DevNet—the Development Research Network on Nature, Poverty and Power—at Uppsala University and Water and Environmental Studies at Linköping University for financially supporting the symposium and the latter also for supporting the book production.

Karin Bradley and Johan Hedrén  
Stockholm and Linköping, August 2013

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# 1 Utopian Thought in the Making of Green Futures

*Karin Bradley and Johan Hedrén*

## 1. CRISES: HARBINGERS OF CHANGE?

In recent years, daily papers in the global North have reported on global warming, recurrent social uprisings in cities, financial crises, and the fragility of the debt-based economy. However, interpretations of these events differ. On the one hand, some argue that these problems can be fixed with better economic instruments and new technology. “Sustainable societies” can be created within the frames of the current through ecolabeling, pricing mechanisms, recycling, urban densification, etc. On the other hand, there are reasons to argue that the financial crisis of 2008, social uprisings since 2011, and recurrent floods and droughts in fact represent cracks in the “capitalocentric” regime: They are signs that the nexus of liberal capitalism and the Anglo–European domination of “other” genders, peoples, and species is entering its decline. According to this perspective, new technologies, smarter pricing, austerity measures, and sustainability policies tend to treat the symptoms rather than treating their cause. For centuries, the Anglo–European economies have grown, technological innovation has increased productivity, and overall consumption and purchasing power have increased. However, this wealth and “progress” have been built on the extraction of fossil fuels, nonrenewable resources, and global exploitation of resources and people (Hornborg, 2011). As the Worldwatch Institute (2012) has pointed out in its *State of the World* report, we are approaching the end of the cheap-oil era and of continuous economic growth and, for the rich nations of the world, this means a need to develop strategies for prosperity in futures characterized by *degrowth*. As Richard Heinberg (2007, p. 22) puts it, welcome to “the century of declines.” According to Heinberg, not only are oil resources peaking, but many other natural resources have peaked or will peak in the twenty-first century, including phosphorous, natural gas, fresh water, and rare earth metals. These are resources on which society, as we know it in the global North, is heavily reliant, including for current “green technology.” So what do we do? Will changes in resource supply and demand solve things? As development economist Latouche (2010) points out, lack of growth in a growth-oriented economy is painful and potentially dangerous. Hence, the

argument here is that we need a systemic change, a reboot into societal arrangements that do not rely on the extraction of nonrenewable resources or the exploitation of other peoples, species, or territories. We need to rethink and recast the economy, the technical infrastructure, housing, and production and consumption patterns (Worldwatch Institute, 2012). Historically, societal arrangements such as tribalism, feudalism, and mercantilism have changed and transformed and new regimes have evolved. It is therefore likely that global capitalism will also evolve into something else. But into what? How? When? And at the expense of what? Desirable for whom? Powered by whom?

Within the contemporary socioenvironmental movements inspired by concepts such as degrowth, transition, the commons, relocalization, Occupy, “Buen Vivir,” and environmental justice, one finds similar forms of societal critique and attempts to articulate and practice alternatives. These movements indeed have historical roots in critiques and movements of earlier decades, such as green waves, ecofeminism, deep ecology, globalization-from-below, ecological economics, political ecology, social ecology, bioregionalism, and ecosocialism. However, in the wake of the current “triple crises” and the nonarrival of the promised “green growth,” these voices and movements are gaining strength. For new societal arrangements to materialize, new conceptions are needed—dreams, imaginaries, and experiments that are articulated and make the impossible seem possible. However, there is not only a need to dream of other futures, but, in the context of the recent economic crisis, there are also outright basic needs to immediately practice alternatives, to stimulate the utopian impulse telling us that change is both possible and necessary, and to focus the analytical lenses through which current society can be scrutinized. Arguments are mounting that Fukuyama and Thatcher were wrong in their insistent predictions: There are indeed alternatives. And history is beginning, again.

With this book, we would like to demonstrate that in-depth socioecological transition is possible—not only possible but in fact happening. We hope to demonstrate how utopian thought can be applied in a contemporary context, as critique and in imagining and practicing desired futures. The book includes perspectives on the changing of global socioenvironmental relationships, political struggles for alternative development paths, as well as analyses of microlevel practices in the form of cohousing, alternative energy provision, use of green space, transport arrangements, the coproduction of urban spaces, peer-to-peer production and consumption, and alternative economies. Most of the chapters are written by authors from Northern or Central Europe, and the cited cases and practices are drawn from France, Germany, Sweden, and the United Kingdom, as well as the United States and Australia. Some of the chapters are more theoretical while others are more empirically oriented. However, all deal with utopian thought or radical societal change in one or another way. Central questions in the book are: What forms of utopian thought, critique, and practice have evolved in

recent years? How can utopianism, in its various guises, be understood? Utopian or alternative, in what sense, and in relation to what? To what extent and how can these critiques and alternative practices affect political endeavors and institutional change? Who or what are drivers of change?

As academics we are trained in critiquing what exists, pointing out the flaws, hypocrisies, and inconsistencies in the everyday practices of professionals, politicians, and citizens. There is abundant scholarly critique of mainstream sustainability politics and practices, watered-down ecological modernization regimes, and “best practice” sustainability guides (Hajer, 1995; Krueger & Gibbs, 2007; Parr, 2009). There is also a growing body of action-oriented literature on the transition to postcarbon or postgrowth societies (Darley, Room, & Rich, 2005; Heinberg & Lerch, 2010; Hopkins, 2012; Murphy, 2008); however, it is characterized more by handbooks for community action rather than by ambitions to problematize and theorize strategies and practices. Our intent in this book is to contribute research perspectives on contemporary green utopian practices and subversive strategies, combining both theoretical and empirical analyses, which together may spark discussions about possible futures. In this book we attempt to explore various perspectives and existing practices that could be alternatives to the ecological modernization paradigm: certainly incomplete, fragmentary, iterative, plural, and at times paradoxical and problematic, but nevertheless sincere attempts at rethinking and recasting society. The perceived “impossibility of the utopian” is not a reason for not trying. As Samuel Beckett (1983) put it, “Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.”

In the remainder of this introductory chapter we will first, under the heading “Shades of Green,” situate the book in the spectrum of green politics and practices. Thereafter, under the heading “Utopianism as No-Place and Critique,” we will describe various strands of utopian thought and how we position the book in relation to them. Under the heading “The Purposes of Contemporary Utopianism,” we outline the functions we think contemporary utopianism could have. Finally, under the heading “Transforming Practices and Politics,” we contextualize and describe emerging practices: cohousing, urban commons, coproduction and coplanning, transition culture, alternative economies, and decentralized systems for energy and infrastructure provision. In this introductory chapter we refer to and build upon reasoning and examples from the book’s various chapters, albeit without intending to equally summarize each of them.

## **2. SHADES OF GREEN: FROM ECOLOGICAL MODERNIZATION TO GREEN UTOPIANISM**

The notion of “green” developed over the last few decades is used in various ways—green ideology, green movements, green lifestyles, green politics, etc.



Often it is closely connected to environmental concerns, although sometimes also linking environmental and resource issues to broader concerns such as justice between classes, genders, species, and generations—locally and globally.

Not only are there different notions of what is actually meant by “green,” but there is also a contested terrain of competing green diagnoses, comprehensions, problematizations, and prospects for the future. There is certainly no commonly agreed-on green agenda, but rather a green terrain that encompasses a range of both individual and common initiatives aiming at a more or less radical transformation of socioenvironmental relationships.

In parallel to this pluralist evolution of green thought, there is another, distinctly different development. The official politics in many countries in the global North downplay the genuinely *political*, i.e., issues related to conflicting interests, values, or prospects for the future. Under the rubrics of sustainable development or environmental policies, we find descriptions of the situation and suggested actions in which the comprehensive political concerns are made invisible. The tasks related to environmental protection, natural resource use, and environmental distribution are made to appear as technical or managerial issues to be handled by experts and administrators, in practice subordinated to the overarching goal of economic growth. A concrete example of this depoliticization of environmental issues is raised in Karolina Isaksson’s Chapter 7. She describes planning for sustainable mobility and how this is often framed as a technical concern, in which the transport system is supposed to adjust to any desired lifestyle; there is no questioning of the purpose of increased transport, the ends it serves, and whether the need for transport can be reduced and transformed.

On a general level, this depoliticizing tendency might stem from the difficulties many political parties have had in integrating green concerns into their ideological foundations developed hundreds of years before the rise of the environmental movement in the 1960s. This depoliticizing process might also be explained by politically strategic considerations, given that green issues rarely rank high among voters in general elections. Whatever the reason, we can take as a departure point that the incremental, consensual approach typical of environmental policies of many states today can be attributed to a *post-political* condition in which the underlying assumption is that the liberal socioeconomic world order should be maintained (Swyngedouw, 2007).

This postpolitical condition can also be interpreted in terms of the triumph of ecological modernization, in which environmental problems are transformed into an engine of innovation and growth, dethroning the state to the position of service supporter of green companies (Spaargaren & Mol, 1992). In such a framing, the ecological crisis actually helps uphold the tenets of industrial modernization by stimulating the development of so-called green technology, which in turn is supposed to be the primary driver of an economy geared toward growth. In other words, the ecological

problems become neutralized and converted into a stimulus for the utopia of neoliberalism.

The postpolitical condition or various aspects of it have also been analyzed in terms of ideology and ideological mystification (Harvey, 1996; Hedrén, 2002). For example, the internationally celebrated Swedish environmental politics is based on an alleged consensus about an ideal environment which, because of its many and radically different meanings, turns out to be nothing but a “continually shifting signifier” (Soper, 1995, p. 151). This “environment” is the abstract space perfectly *controlled* by the monitoring and management implemented by the public administration and simultaneously the untouched wilderness bearing witness to origins and purity. It is also the cultural landscape, the fragile, sublime totality, the provider of ecosystem services, a recipient of waste, and an aestheticized icon for ecotourism, all adding to the messy and contradictory substrate on which the ideal *harmony* and *balance* between nature and society are supposed to be built. Such symbolic language of harmony, balance, and control hides the many real conflicts over competing values, risks, mobility, welfare, trade relationships, urban structures, spatial designs, etc., mystifying the genuinely *political* character of the issues at stake and making the environment a perfect companion to the ideology of growth and capitalism. In Chapter 3, Erik Swyngedouw analyzes this postpolitical constellation of green issues in discussing the preconditions for a revitalized democracy.

Since the 1990s, when rising public awareness of the urgent need to resolve environmental problems could be noted in many countries, the dominant green discourse is no longer hegemonically produced solely by governments, parliaments, and public authorities. As this rising public awareness is met by new trends in business and goods production, we also note that advertising and media in general strongly invoke the correctness of what are considered “green” or “ecological” lifestyles. Industry produces enormous amounts of commodities, ranging from clothes signaling a supposedly green lifestyle to luxury products for upper-class consumers, or from ecotourism to the greening of public spaces. The postpolitical framing continuously merges with the framing of a new kind of consumerism, in which green issues are commodified. The focus in this commodified turn of the green discourse is on the picturesque, harmony, intimacy, happiness, mysticism, safety, family relationships, the local, and the private. Global relationships are rarely represented, and the domination of (upper) middle class norms, values, and aesthetics (“ecological design”) is strong, giving rise to aestheticization rather than critical political analysis (Hedrén, 2009). Taken together, this can be viewed as a concretization of what is commonly described as the commodification of nature or green issues (Harvey, 1996; Jameson, 2010), which accentuates the nonpolitical framing already produced by the postpolitical turn in institutionalized politics (Meister & Japp, 2002). In such an era of political resignation, when potential controversies have been transformed into matters of lifestyle, “the utopian spirit remains more necessary than ever” (Jacoby, 1999, p 181).

In addition, international cooperation for sustainable development, led by the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development, appeals very strongly to management instead of politics. It is, as Phil Macnaghten and John Urry put it, avowedly *apolitical* (Macnaghten & Urry, 1998). There is no doubt that this global framing of issues related to environment and development is strongly correlated with postpolitical tendencies in many nations. Several authors have carefully critiqued how the sustainable development concept has been formulated and applied over the years (e.g., Boström, 2012; Redclift, 2005; Robinson, 2004; Swyngedouw, 2010). Several chapters in this book (notably those by Hedrén, Swyngedouw, Hornborg, and Gunnarsson-Östling) address problems arising from this depoliticized “common sense” understanding of environmental concerns. In Chapter 5, Alf Hornborg criticizes the belief in technological fixes for environmental problems, arguing that the production of new technology in capitalism will always be at the expense of someone’s cheap labor according to the pattern of unequal exchange. Moreover, he argues that there are definite physical limits to growth that will put an ultimate end to the expansion of resource extraction. Johan Hedrén (Chapter 4) targets the theory of resilience and argues that, contrary to its promises, the inward sense of this theoretical approach goes very well with the postpolitical hegemony, counteracting the development of new socioenvironmental arrangements.

Green politicians often claim that the main arguments in the critique of traditional ideologies and current social and economic arrangements have merged into something that could be called green ideology. While this might be true as far as party politics goes, we believe that the field of green thought is instead a terrain of divergent and partly conflicting ideas about the “roots of the evil,” about our desires, hopes, and possible futures. Green thought ranges from an interpretation of the “crisis in nature” as a matter of social adaptation (to the putative principles of nature), to various views of what are described as the interlinked social-ecological-economic crises of global capitalism. Whereas this volume presents various diagnoses and understandings of green utopianism, it is throughout critical to the adaptation strategies that dominate in contemporary politics.

### 3. UTOPIANISM AS NO-PLACE AND CRITIQUE

The world stripped of anticipation turns cold and grey.

(Jacoby, 1999, p. 181)

Whereas utopianism of all kinds is based on a sense of discontent with contemporary social or socioenvironmental relationships, scholars diverge in how they define utopia. The concept is used in many different ways, for example, to signify a totalitarian political project, a certain genre of fiction, an ideal urban plan, or, as in the reasoning of Ernst Bloch, an expression

of lack and the desire for a better world or life (Levitas, 2001). It can serve simply to compensate, i.e., daydreaming as an escape, but even then it contains the seeds of critique by expressing a desire to go beyond the current state of things (Levitas, 2001). It has also been conceived of as a particular kind of political theory (Goodwin & Taylor, 2009). Generally, however, a loose definition is applied in which utopia is understood simply as a radically different, better, or ideal society (Levitas, 2011). For some authors, such as Krishan Kumar (1987) and Marius de Geus (1999), utopia is conceived of as a literary genre, depicting a society in full operation. Others, such as Ruth Levitas (2011), Ernst Bloch (1986), David Harvey (2000), and Fredric Jameson (1994, 2005), instead treat utopia as an analytical category, denoting thought about, and hope for, a better future. In Levitas's (2011) view, utopia means social constructs that arise as "a response to an equally socially constructed gap between the needs and wants generated by a particular society and the satisfactions available to and distributed by it" (p. 210). Utopias have often been described as spaces for speculation and critique in the interest of change (Sargisson, 1996), and this will be the most important aspect of the concept in this volume.

Krishan Kumar (1999) distinguishes *utopian thought* from literary utopias or *utopia proper*. While utopia proper is a description of what is considered a better society, not as an abstract ideal but as a society in full operation (Kumar, 1987), utopian thought is more fragmentary, denoting a wide range of visionary expressions, from abstract principles to concrete social practices. Utopia can also be practiced, either as temporary experiments with alternative social organization or on a more regular basis in intentional communities. This volume will only occasionally engage with utopia proper in Kumar's sense, focusing instead on utopian thought and utopian practices.

A distinction is often made between utopia and dystopia. *Utopias* elaborate on potentials and promising tendencies, while *dystopias* focus on problems and maladies. While dystopias often take the form of a narrative, including a certain subject position, utopias have more frequently been represented as static visions (Jameson, 1994). Engagement in the dialectics of social process and change (Harvey, 2000), however, has been prominent in the utopianism of recent decades, making dystopia and utopia harder to distinguish. Irrespective of their form and character, both utopias and dystopias are here understood as different manifestations of *utopianism*.

Utopianism is based on certain principles or sets of fundamental values (Stillman, 2001), and often those principles are held to generate a radically different society (Suvín, 2003). However, whereas utopia is by definition always somewhere else, it is also constrained by the imaginative resources at hand in contemporary society. As Fredric Jameson puts it, "even a no-place must be put together out of already existing representations" (Jameson, 2005, p. 24). Accordingly, a utopia inevitably to some extent expresses the ethos of its times (Heilbroner, 1996).

While utopianism generally entails a critique of contemporary society, not all utopianism is about radical alternatives: It can just as well be based on principles enshrined by powerful groups and already strongly affect existing social relationships. Perhaps the most prominent example of this is the utopia called neoliberalism, which has been strongly supported by right-wing ideologists for decades. Utopias can thus serve very different interests and purposes.

Utopian narratives often follow a certain structure. For some unforeseen reason, someone happens to arrive at an ideal place, often an island, and eventually goes back home to tell the story of this. A new delegation is then sent out to map this utopia in more detail, but the place cannot be found. This plot signals that a utopia is not only a good place but also a “no-place,” and that any attempt to treat it as a blueprint for realization will fail. In other words, when a totality is expressed in utopian form, it should be thought of as a “no-place” to reflect on, learn from, and investigate critically. Any idea of final perfection or closure is rejected. A great deal of utopian thought throughout history (including Thomas More’s *Utopia*) is resistant to closure and celebrates process over product (Harvey, 2000; Sargisson, 2000). Utopias should actually not be assumed to express a search for perfection, and utopian thought is generally not about *perfect* places (Sargent, 2003; Sargisson, 1996, 2007). Although examples of perfectionist utopias exist, the bulk of utopianism is instead experimental, exploring certain principles and engaging with process, change, and critique. This feature, that utopian thought concerns not only issues of spatial organization, formation, and relationships, but also change and the regulation of social and physical processes, has over the years become ever more significant.

A utopia should therefore not be regarded as a final plan for a general transformation, but instead as an indispensable source of inspiration, propelling desire, imaginative capacity, reflexivity, change, and expectations of a better society. In Chapter 6, Ulrika Gunnarsson-Östling argues for the importance of generating multiple images of the future. Urban planning indeed has a history of utopianism and striving to create “ideal cities,” although, as many of these ideal plans, often realized in large-scale projects, have proven to be problematic, “utopian” has become a pejorative in this context. Gunnarsson-Östling argues that urban planning should not give up on the utopian but instead articulate *different* images of the future to highlight the political dimensions of planning and hence transparency and possibilities for democratic influence.

It has been argued that the postmodern epistemological turn, emphasizing the fluidity of knowledge claims and the difficulty of interpreting and representing others’ needs and desires, has strongly challenged utopian thought. Ruth Levitas points out that this led to “a greater provisionality and reflexivity of the utopian mode, and a marked shift from an emphasis on representation or content to an emphasis on process” (Levitas, 2001, p. 25). These challenges might have helped weaken the transformative potential, as

is sometimes argued, but they were definitely not only negative: the more experimental style of utopianism that has developed in recent years counteracts tendencies to confuse utopias with blueprints. However, when propelled by furious critique from authors favoring the hegemony of capitalism, or “free market fundamentalism” (Jameson, 2010, p. 22), there was definitely a period when any radical utopianism, be it feminist, red, or green, was in decline, evincing a crisis of imagination, but at the turn of the millennium, a number of authors voiced the need to overcome this crisis (Harvey, 2000; Moylan, 2003; Sargisson, 1996). What is more, not only do we need new utopian energy to nurture imaginative activity, we also need the fundamental will to change, i.e., *the utopian impulse* (Jameson, 1994, 2010).

#### 4. THE PURPOSES OF CONTEMPORARY UTOPIANISM

The most common motivations for engagement in utopianism are connected to the insight that current parliamentary politics lacks the capacity to seriously engage with alternative, possible futures. We argue that utopianism serves the following functions:

1. *Exploration of alternative socioenvironmental orders:* In its narrative forms, utopianism lays out daily life according to certain alternative ideas about social arrangements and, in so doing, complements the abstract reasoning of political theorists. Utopias allow people to playfully investigate alternative ideas and to escape from present-day dogmatic thinking (de Geus, 1999). Accordingly, utopias can be treated as heuristic devices for exploring and evaluating what might be possible or impossible (Levitas, 2001).
2. *Utopianism as reflexivity and critique:* All utopianism draws on, and is thus limited by, current experiences and understandings of social relationships, although, by introducing “alien” principles and relationships, contemporary orders are approached from afar. Utopias are fictive and illusionary, representations of orders that are thought of as beyond or outside dominant structures. As such, they serve as positions “from which to investigate the ideals, undertakings, and institutions of contemporary society, encourage a critical perspective on them, inspire a thoughtful evaluation of present and alternative individual and social ideals and activities, and consider if and where change is feasible and desirable” (Stillman, 2001, p. 11). Utopias can therefore function as regulative ideals against which unexamined contemporary norms, principles, and values can be evaluated, serving as stimulants and means of social criticism (Levitas, 2001, 2011). Through this critique, utopianism also serves as a means for destabilizing and relativizing the present, setting it in a context in which its fundamental elements must compete with alternative orders.

3. *Stimulation of the will to change and the power of imagination*: From a radical political point of view, a main problem with current social orders is that the will to change is weak. When the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, a right-wing rhetoric rapidly trumpeted the triumph of capitalism as representing the end of history. The failure of the Soviet Union to withstand competition from the capitalist world was treated as the end of socialism by right-wing analysts, and the Soviet failure ever to create a truly socialist regime demoralized those seeking radical change. For a while, then, utopianism was believed to be in decline—though the paradoxically utopian character of neoliberalism had not yet been recognized (Harvey, 2000). Taking that into consideration, it becomes apparent that we do not just need to stimulate utopianism per se, but also to lay bare the very different directions suggested by different utopias.

A key function of utopia is arguably raising consciousness and stimulating the will to transform (Moylan, 1986); an even more important function, however, is to promote plurality of vision, expanding the range of beliefs about *what is possible* (Wright, 2010). While utopias serve to strengthen the will to change, it is also necessary to connect this will with an opening of the mind to alternative possibilities: We need to broaden the range of imaginable alternatives (Jameson, 2005). In his exploration of utopian thought in science fiction, *Archeologies of the Future*, Fredric Jameson calls for “anti-anti-utopianism” (Jameson, 2005, p. xvi). The persistent denial of any alternative to the neoliberal or neoconservative utopia that sets itself up as a blueprint for development today must be recognized as an ideological mystification hiding its totalitarian dimension. The demand is not just for more utopianism, but for the kind of utopianism that liberates people from the dominant thought patterns established by the utopia of neoliberalism that sail under the false flag of anti-utopianism. The logic of the utopianism needed is *estrangement*, “the disruption of the taken-for-granted nature of present reality” (Levitas, 1997, p. 75). The goal then would be to foster the utopian impulse, to stimulate hope and desire for a radically different society that addresses the concurrent ecological, social, and economic crises and explores alternative socio-environmental arrangements.

4. *Transgression of current orders and structures*: One main reason for recent interest in utopianism is its supposed potential to stimulate *transgression*, to cross the boundaries of thought and understanding that dominate minds in a specific society, to “enable ourselves to break free of mental constraints and think differently” (Sargisson, 2000, p. 3). As Lucy Sargisson argues in a conversation with Ruth Levitas about the conditions for utopianism, such activities are not only about change in the future, but also about transforming contemporary thought and understandings (Levitas & Sargisson, 2003). Whereas societies are to some extent imagined communities, a transformation



of the imagination could also be interpreted as change *per se*. Moreover, changed understandings are likely also to affect everyday life and goals and expectations. Sargisson (2007, p. 37) advocates “paradigm shifts in consciousness” through glimpses of new conceptual spaces to be used in analyzing the contemporary social order.

## 5. TRANSFORMING PRACTICES AND POLITICS

What kind of architecture (in the broadest possible sense of that term) do we collectively want to create for the socioecological world in which we have our being? Not to pose that question is to evade the most crucial task confronting all forms of human action. (Harvey, 1996, p. 14)

### 5.1 Transition and Do-It-Yourself Culture

The late 1990s and early ‘00s saw heated debates over the lack of “corporate social responsibility,” and social movements, notably what came to be called the “antiglobalization” movement, were pushing for multinational corporations to act more responsibly and for transnational institutions such as the World Bank, IMF, and UN to set global environmental and social standards. Groups desiring structural change gathered at the annual World Social Forum, beginning in Porto Alegre, Brazil, 2001, and rallied at the international climate summits, pressing corporations and governments to agree to act to curb climate change. However, in the aftermath of the “failure” of the Copenhagen climate summit in 2009 and in subsequent climate summits, sentiments have perhaps shifted. The Transition Network movement, its front figure Rob Hopkins, and environmental journalists such as George Monbiot are explicitly arguing that there are no benign public institutions or governments that will “take care” of things and resolve problems when they appear (Hopkins, 2012; Monbiot, 2010). They argue that institutions such as the UN, the EU, and national governments have little capacity to handle a global financial meltdown or the serious socioenvironmental crisis that four degrees of global warming would imply—much less capacity than most of us would like to think.

Hence, the Transition movement and similar initiatives have emerged in a spirit of do-it-yourself: Start where you are, with the means at hand—your neighborhood, friends, and workplace—and step by step change practices, exchange knowledge, reskill, and build alliances with others and, on this basis, move on to work for institutional change. Activities often take place in loose networks with the help of social media, some focusing on place-specific projects, others coalescing around certain themes or events—such as the global Critical Mass rides, described by Isaksson in Chapter 7.

Hence, in recent years we can see increased interest in transforming everyday practices—how we live, work, eat, socialize, and consume—and



in reengaging with practical *making*—repairing things, growing food, knitting, baking, remaking houses and collective spaces, and finding ways out of the corporate work-and-spend cycle (Astyk, 2008; Carlsson, 2008; Hou, 2010). In this local work, environmental concerns are often interwoven with questions of quality of life, use of time, community cohesion, and an ethic of care. Though this localized, and at times individualized, focus can be criticized for not working for structural and institutional change, it can equally be seen as a predecessor to, and bringing about, institutional and political transformation.

## 5.2 Alternative Economies

A recurrent motif in contemporary socioenvironmental movements is attempts to strengthen local economies. With rising fuel and transport prices and possibly more competition over land resources, consumer goods currently produced in low-cost countries and transported long distances will likely become more expensive. Environmental activists and researchers argue that essential goods, such as food, clothes, building materials, and other basic necessities, need to be produced more locally (Darley et al., 2005; Heinberg & Lerch, 2010; Hopkins, 2012; Murphy, 2008). The standard economic formula and policymaking has long been phrased in terms of finding one's competitive advantage, specializing, and producing for the export market. This formula is being challenged, particularly in the face of peak oil and the global financial crises, as illustrated in Chapter 2 by J. K. Gibson-Graham. Under this pen name, Katherine Gibson and the late Julie Graham have for several years been rethinking regional development, mapping and articulating what might be called postcapitalist economies. In their chapter, they outline what regional development “driven by human intentionality and practices of cooperativism and environmental care” might be. They describe examples of localized postcapitalist economies—such as the worker-owned cooperatives in Cleveland, Ohio, engaged in urban farming, solar energy, and commercial laundry and the Mondragon Cooperative in Spain, engaged in a wide range of local sectors—finance, social services, health care, education, manufacturing, and agriculture. They point out how these forms of noncapitalist enterprises help strengthen the local economy rather than serving an export market and how the surpluses are distributed among the workers and reinvested locally rather than siphoned off to distant shareholders.

Another way to strengthen local economies is through the use of local or complementary currencies. Hornborg (2010) advocates establishing “sphere economies,” for example, so that there is one market and currency for basic regional goods and services and then another international market and currency for specialized goods and services. In recent years of environmental and economic crises, there has been increased interest in local or alternative currencies or Local Exchange and Trading Schemes

(LETS), which can take the form of time banks, such as the Time Dollar used in the United States, or local notes such as the Bristol Pound (Seyfang, 2010). In Chapter 2, Gibson-Graham describe an alternative currency, the digital currency Ven, which is the first currency to include carbon externalities and can be used to buy, sell, and trade knowledge, goods, and services at off-line pavilions in 130 cities around the world as well as on the Internet at large. Gibson-Graham describes this as peer-to-peer exchange, which builds on the same idea of “peer economies” that Karin Bradley describes in Chapter 11. Both Gibson-Graham and Bradley explore examples of how the Internet facilitates peer-to-peer exchange, connecting those who have certain resources to offer—goods, knowledge, or services—to those who need such resources, but without a commercial intermediary. RelayRides is one such example, in which Internet applications and geomapping are used to connect car owners with car lenders. There are similar schemes for connecting land owners with growers, exchanging tools, or arranging overnight stays in private apartments. Bradley’s chapter deals with peer economies practiced in three different fields: architecture, hardware production, and collaborative consumption. Proponents of commons-based peer economies and open-source production argue that they signal the beginning of a larger societal transformation away from the twentieth century’s industrial and propriety economic forms (Benkler, 2006; Siefkes, 2007).

### 5.3 Housing Communities and Urban Commons

Intentional communities, ecovillages, or other place-bound alternative communities are often criticized for creating a narrow form of utopianism, catering to groups of like-minded individuals, withdrawing from structural change and the messy reality outside their boundaries. Though this might at times be a relevant criticism, such place-based “microtopias” are often involved in translocal networks, exchanging information, learning, and engaging in various forms of outreach.<sup>1</sup> By their mere existence they also show that alternative forms of living are possible.

In this book, a number of examples of alternative communities are described and analyzed. Lucy Sargisson (Chapter 13) explores two contemporary quests for socially and ecologically sustainable communities—the New Urbanism and the cohousing movements—asking the question “Whose utopia is this?” Sargisson concludes that cohousing communities tend to be democratically shaped, designed, and governed by their residents, while New Urbanism communities tend to be more paternalistic, being creations of landowners or developers in conjunction with architects that residents later “buy into.” She concludes that there is a form of egalitarian utopianism in the cohousing movement and that cohousing generally does improve life for its residents “but does not necessarily form part of a wider agenda for social, political, ideological or economic change.”

In Chapter 12, Alexander Vasudevan takes us to the Berlin squatter scene. By analyzing four decades of squatting, he explores how the commons, or commoning, take geographical shape. The squatters possess the will to create not only housing and live-and-work commons, but see the city as a commons. In contrast to Sargisson's more inward-looking communities, these housing squats are sites of broader political struggle to transform the city into a site of alternative living with new forms of urban citizenship. Vasudevan explores the micropolitical tactics of the squatters in rebuilding houses, taking action in public spaces, and participating in broader political processes, and argues that these can be described as attempts to create autonomous urbanism, i.e., "spaces where people desire to constitute non-capitalist, egalitarian and solidaristic forms of political, social and economic organization through a combination of resistance and creation" (Pickerill & Chatterton, 2006, p. 730).

The notion of the commons is further elaborated on in Chapter 15 by the architects Constantin Petcou and Doina Petrescu. In their research-based practice, they are working on retrofitting the Parisian suburb of Colombes to become more ecologically resilient and socially just. They are developing a set of collective facilities: self-built ecological cohousing, a workspace for ecoconstruction and recycling, a fab lab (i.e., a small fabrication laboratory), and an agro-cultural unit with a microfarm, community gardens, energy production, and spaces for cultural and pedagogical activities. These collective facilities are intended to serve as sites for social organization, learning, and reskilling. They are to be managed and organized by the residents themselves, by local organizations, and/or run as social enterprises. The intention of this pilot project, conducted jointly with the municipality and local organizations, is to exemplify how participatory retrofitting of metropolitan suburbs could be done. They call their approach R-Urban, as the intention is to reconsider and develop the urban-rural intersections of the suburbs and to shorten the need-supply chains, making them as local as possible.

Historically, utopian urban planning has often taken the form of "ideal cities" materialized in a specific urban form—the Garden City of Ebenezer Howard, Radiant City of Le Corbusier, and Broadacre City of Frank Lloyd Wright. In contrast to this, the R-Urban approach does not propose a specific urban form but rather a process for change starting from the existing urban fabric. In the international best-practice cases of sustainable urbanism, the examples cited are often newly built ecodistricts (Wheeler & Beatley, 2009; Farr, 2008). However, a major challenge from a European and Northern perspective is instead how to retrofit existing areas, perhaps particularly the postwar suburban landscape. In this context, and specifically in the participatory approach of Petcou and Petrescu, the role of the architect is less that of a designer shaping physical objects, but more of a comanager, initiator, negotiator, or enabler of change. The built environment is here regarded as something that ought to be coproduced and

comanaged by its inhabitants. This approach to architecture is evident in Bradley's Chapter 11 dealing with peer economies and the coproduction and coconsumption of spaces and products. In the case of the French architect-designer-DJ-cook collective Exyzt, public spaces are coproduced and comanaged together with citizens. The collective comes with an initial idea and certain skills, but then shapes and remakes the public space together with its users, living and working on site.

The coproduction of public spaces is also a theme in Meike Schalk's Chapter 8, which deals with the transformation of the Tempelhof Field, a huge former airfield in Berlin. A current experimental interim use of the site is the so-called pioneer fields where citizens can use small plots for noncommercial "spontaneous" temporary self-generated projects" (see Figure 8.2). Schalk is not concerned only with alternative ways of using public space, but even more with how public planning can become more democratic and participatory. She explores how citizen initiatives have influenced the Berlin planning apparatus and what forms of institutional change might be needed for future public planning to become more democratic and transformative.

Berlin is known for its radicalism and citizen-driven planning, in which authorities have learnt to incorporate and, in one way or another, use the energy of its active residents. The Berlin context and the experimental use and planning of the Tempelhof Field green space stands in stark contrast to Ylva Ugglä's case of Stockholm and one of its larger urban parks (Chapter 9). Here the urban park, Nationalstadsparken, instead serves to stabilize the existing socioenvironmental order. The public authorities' emphasis on preserving the unique character and history of the park turns it into a "paradise contrived." The park contains royal castles, sites associated with famous poets, as well as everyday recreation areas. In the authorities' management, the park's historic and pristine character is emphasized—indirectly fostering respectful and law-abiding use of the park. With reference to Kaika (2005), Ugglä speculates whether the preservation of the park might in fact legitimize or reinforce socioenvironmental disintegration elsewhere. By highlighting the preservation of the pristine green park, the authorities might find it easier to build housing and expand roads on less pristine green spaces elsewhere in the region.

These examples illustrate how the built environment and open spaces can serve as sites of experimentation, utopian desires, and the nexus of contestations over the future, not only over the use and forming of space but over broader ideas about how to live together.

## **5.4 Small Scale: Big Change**

The ecological modernization discourse often advocates large-scale, advanced technological solutions. One such recent example is the planned large-scale construction of solar energy plants in the Sahara Desert, where European energy companies are to construct power stations and then

transport the electricity to Europe (Meinhold, 2009). Even more drastic are the experiments with geo-engineering to offset global warming via solar radiation management techniques, iron fertilization of oceans, or spraying clouds with miniscule droplets of seawater to make them whiter and hence reflect more sunlight back into space (Black, 2012). In Chapter 5, Hornborg criticizes this type of technological utopianism, arguing that it lacks an understanding of thermodynamics and how economic value is created. Moreover, he points out that this technological utopianism fails to address power issues such as: Who will benefit from the technology? Who can afford it? Whose livelihoods will be displaced by it? For example, the promise that biofuel imports would give “green cars” to those in the global North soon proved problematic as the expansion of soy and sugar monocultures to produce these biofuels in countries such as Brazil meant lost biodiversity, lost livelihoods for smaller farmers, and social conflicts (Galli, 2011).

In contrast to such centralized mega-energy projects, Martin Hultman (Chapter 14) discusses the 1980s vision of a decentralized hydrogen society. Through an archival analysis, Hultman illustrates how a demonstration project for households and cars run on local hydropower materialized in Sweden, was brought into high-level politics, became internationally recognized, but was then relegated to the refuse heap by the advocates of large-scale nuclear energy. This struggle between locally managed energy systems and centralized large-scale systems is still ongoing. Tom Mels (Chapter 10) analyzes the contemporary expansion of large-scale corporate wind power and the conservative anti-wind power movement counteracting this expansion. He argues that both of these strands are problematic and lack a locally rooted desire for a more environmentally just future. Using Harvey’s (1995, 1996, 2009) notion of “militant particularism,” Mels advocates tying together diverse local struggles to achieve larger common goals. In the context of energy provision, this can mean tying together initiatives for locally managed utility systems, such as the wind-power cooperatives common in Denmark and Germany or the decentralized rainwater harvesting schemes mentioned by Gibson-Graham. In Isaksson’s (Chapter 7) search for radical schemes for sustainable mobility, it is also in the decentralized practices of cycling activism that she finds most transformative potential.

*Small Scale, Big Change* was the title of an architectural exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 2011, arguing that it is often in small-scale, localized, and low-budget projects that we today find socially engaged architecture. Compared with the ideologues of modernist utopian manifestos and grand architectural visions, these architects operate through small-scale and collaborative approaches. This book includes examples of such small-scale changes—in housing, transport, energy provision, use of space, consumption, production, and economic exchange—and discussions of whether and how they can be seeds of larger societal transformation. Utopianism’s various guises—imaginaries, critical readings, micropractice transformation, and political reform—all contribute to changing the

perception of “the possible.” In line with Lucy Sargisson, we hope that this collection of perspectives on and examples of contemporary utopianism can help revitalize the current political climate:

Utopias—good places that are no place—are good places from whence to attempt this kind of thinking. They are outside the real world, but engage critically with it. They arise from discontent and attempt creative imaginings of how things might be better. They provide for bodies-of-thought spaces in which creativity is possible, they add momentum and resist the petrification to which academic minds are vulnerable. They give to social and political movements a sense of direction or vision. Utopias are ideal places in which to engage in the kind of thinking that I suggest is appropriate for the contemporary political environment. (Sargisson, 2000, p. 3)

## NOTES

1. For example, the Global Ecovillage Network is an umbrella organization bringing together ecovillages and intentional communities from various countries—spreading information, exchanging skills, working for various forms of cooperation and global partnership; see <http://gen.ecovillage.org>, retrieved 12 May 2013.

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