

Environmental Crisis



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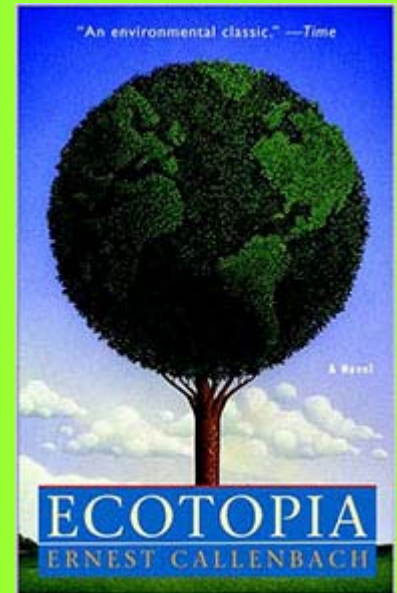
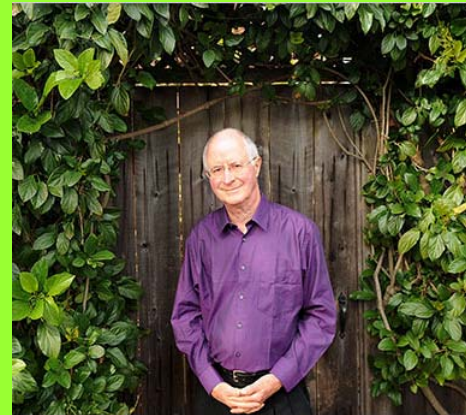
People, Planet Provision

College Eight Plenary

Wed., Oct. 3, 2012

Topics in today's presentation

1. Utopia, Dystopia, *Ecotopia*
2. Three views of ecological crisis
3. Crisis as opportunity
4. An alternative view
5. Focus on food



"The Novel that Predicted Portland," *NY Times*,
<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/14/fashion/14ecotopia.html>

1. Utopia, Dystopia, *Ecotopia*

- **Topia** = < *Latin topia*, < *Greek τόπια*, plural of *τόπιον*, diminutive of *τόπος* a place.
- **U** = *Greek οὐ* not
- **Utopia** = < *Greek οὐ* not + *τόπος* a place “no place” or “nowhere” (which has come to mean an “ideal place” (Thomas More, 1516)
- **Dys** = *Greek δυσ-*, notion of *hard, bad, unlucky*
- **Dystopia** = *An imaginary place or condition in which everything is as bad as possible*

(OED)

Ecotopia

- **Eco** = *ecological: interrelationships between living organisms and their environment; also: environmental; of or relating to the natural environment.*
- **Ecology** = **Oikos** *ancient Greek οἶκος house, dwelling* + *Greek λόγος word*
- **Ecotopia** = (ecologically-friendly) dwelling place

Ecotopia

- Traveller's tale: individual who visits an unfamiliar place & reports back on it (*Revelation of St. John*)
- Unfamiliar place must have recognizable features—usually extrapolations
- California today (1975) = California in the future (2000?) with differences
- Such tales are critiques of traveller's home place, not predictions of the future

What does *Ecotopia* suggest?

- Callenbach writing after peak of first environmental movement (*Silent Spring*)
- Energy crisis of 1970s poses challenges
- California in forefront of social change
- U.S. mired in ecological present
- What could be done to change things?
- William Weston focuses on many things to contrast his U.S. with Ecotopian ideal

On what does Weston report?

- Communication: TV & radio (no internet)
- Economic governance: worker control
- Technology: “appropriate” technology
- Political governance: rule by women
- Cultural mores: sexuality & separatism
- Organized violence: ritual war games
- Resource use: Food, energy, stable state

U/Dystopian themes in *Grapes of Wrath*

- Joads & others travel to Promised Land of Milk & Honey—migration from Egypt across desert
- Elders can only glimpse the New Eden, which turns out to be worse than the Egypt they fled
- Casey is “The Preacher”—preaches on self-liberation by the group—and is crucified for it
- Tom Joad takes up the mission and vanishes
- Final scene: Rose of Sharon feeding old man—what does it presage?

2. Crisis of justice & ecology

- Industrialism has begun to transform the world in irreparable ways
- Failure to act could be fatal
- Repairing the damage will require money & social change, which threatens the rich
- 200 richest people in the world have the same income as the 2 billion poorest
- Ecological repair depends on ecological & social justice

Three views of ecological crisis

- *Cornucopians* believe that humans are so ingenious that we can invent our way out of any ecological crisis (if it is happening)
- *Malthusians* believe that we are doomed: too many people, too few resources, not enough time → ecological calamity
- *Leopoldians* believe we need to modify our patterns of life & our consumption practices so as not to reach a “tipping point”

Callenbach favors the third

- “Steady-state economy” is similar to ecological circle: everything fits & there is “harmony”
 - Technological innovation is important
 - Social innovation is even more important
 - Crisis can be a strong motivation to both
- Common argument: Chinese word for “crisis” 危机 (*wei-chi*): means “danger” & “opportunity”
- Attributed to John Kennedy in 1959 speech
- Probably incorrect, but a nice motivational story
- Opposition remains intense & well-organized

4. An alternative view (mine)

- Market economy predicated on scarcity
- What is mine cannot be yours (vice versa)
- And if you get more, I get less (zero sum)
- Growth is required to make the pie bigger
- But who decides on filling? On pie?
- And how are the pieces to be distributed?
- Markets appear to naturalize outcomes
- Politics is about deciding & acting

Ecological crisis is an historical process

- Karl Marx: *“Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living.”*

(The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte. 1852)

What does this mean?

- Processes of industrialization deeply rooted
- Expectations of “progress” strongly held
- Transformations of landscapes last a long time
- Values of ancestors retain a strong hold
- Understandings of problems slow to change
- Societies tend to be conservative (slow change)
- Economy privileges those with wealth & power
- Politics lends itself to blocking redistribution
- Crisis threatens social hierarchies & structures

Sustainability is the supposed answer



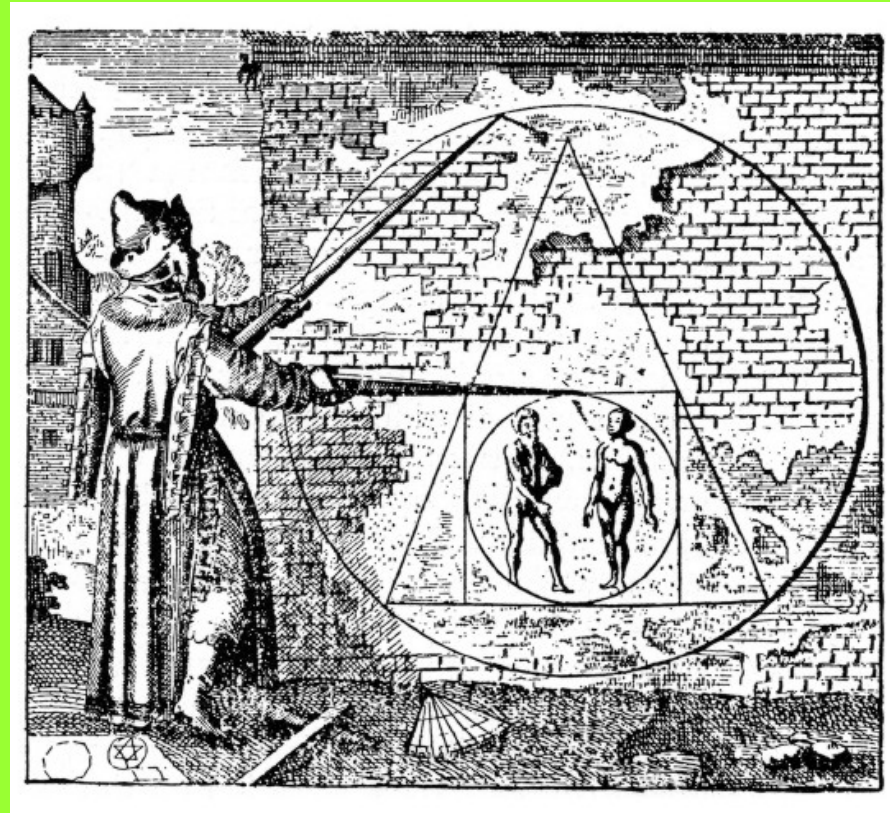
(There should be a citation here; don't do this!)

But what is “sustainability?”

“Sustainability requires the simultaneous reconciliation of three imperatives:

- The ecological imperative is to stay within the biophysical carrying capacity of the planet,*
- the economic imperative is to provide an adequate material standard of living to all, and*
- the social imperative is to provide systems of governance that propagate the values that people want to live by.” (p. 381)*

(John Robinson, “Squaring the Circle? Some Thoughts on the Idea of Sustainable Development,” *Ecological Economics* 48 (2004):369-84, at:[doi:10.1016/j.ecolecon.2003.10.017](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecolecon.2003.10.017))



Is sustainability possible?

Our societies are not organized for sustainability

- Our living & working patterns are very resource-intensive
- We take high consumption levels as a “right”
- We fail to include the full costs of stuff in the price of stuff
- We tend not to be concerned about either distribution or unfair impacts of consumption
- We strongly resist any efforts to modify production & consumption patterns

Ecotopia suggests a path to sustainability

- Technology matters, but not as much as *social innovation & social change*
- The technologies to address the ecological crisis are in hand—we know *what* to do
- We disagree on *how* to do it, and *who* will pay for it
- Callenbach suggests that changes in how people think precede changes in their behaviors
- Things are not quite that simple: consider food

5. Focus on Food

- Distribution of wealth in a society reflects state of economic & social justice
- *Grapes of Wrath* portrays how poverty & want can exist amidst wealth & plentitude
- Who owns what, and who controls access (and justifies it) makes a difference
- Why do farmers destroy crop surpluses when people are going hungry?
- Food (& water) most basic in this respect

Food system structure is one example of how power & wealth are distributed

- The well-off can demand nutritious, high-quality (designer) food because demand creates market
- Poor cannot afford such foods & mass-produced foods are cheaper but also lower-quality
- Food systems are premised on markets in which producers seek to maximize profits
- Production scale fits particular market segments
- Few in the food system are concerned about the final distribution of their products
- In times of famine, there is often plenty of food available, but the very poor have no money to buy it

Returning to *Grapes of Wrath*

- Midwestern food production premised on monoculture, many farmers, few buyers
- Poorer farmers forced off the land by climate, bankers, Depression
- California is a “Garden of Eden” for the middle class & rich landowners
- The poor cannot find jobs or income, buy good food (if any), or afford to settle down
- Today, California maintains its class structure & ignores the dire plight of the poor, hungry migrants

Ecotopia offers a contrast (maybe)

- Redistributive society (yes, ***SOCIALIST!***)
- Everyone has enough, it appears
- Where are the poor, migrants, minorities?
- Have they been “birth-controlled” away?
- Why do African-Americans declare their independence from *Ecotopia*?
- But is *Ecotopia* merely a bourgeois, white middle-class fantasy?