



Utopian thought and the politics of sustainable development

Johan Hedrén^{a,*}, Björn-Ola Linnér^{a,b}

^a Department of Water and Environmental Studies, Linköping University, SE-581 83 Linköping, Sweden

^b Centre for Climate Science and Policy Research, Linköping University, Sweden

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ABSTRACT

This article argues that utopian thought is a necessary condition for the politics of sustainable development. Since utopian thought has so far been constrained by some typically Western features from the era of modernity, this requires a shift that transcends the following three fundamental aspects: the notions of fixed truth, fixed territoriality and fixed final goals for politics. The article argues that the concept of global sustainable development can entail three new elements of utopian thought: the disintegration of fixed territoriality, a never-ending story, and prismatic blueprints. Using these elements, utopian thought can provide transformative power, so that politics and policymaking can meet contemporary global challenges to development and the environment.

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1. Introduction

Utopian thought has developed in conjunction with modernity. Utopian thought has drawn criticism, since it has been associated with aspirations for final political solutions, which inevitably lead to totalism. As well, it has also primarily been structured around the mindset of control, reason, and centralism, all of which have proven to be obsolete and in contradiction to the ethics of tolerance, pluralism, and dignity that has grown and spread rapidly around the world in the post-war era.

In spite this heritage, we argue that utopian thought can foster important kinds of reflexivity that illuminate our constantly transformative politics, a reflexivity that we consider the most apt to meet contemporary global challenges to development and the environment.

The concept of sustainable development has slowly but surely become accepted as a distinct element in international and domestic politics, and its overarching goal is to combine environmental protection with social and economic development in the long term. Sustainable development is now a goal accepted by the United Nations and many international organizations, including the European Union. In various ways it is included in the policies of most countries, rich or poor. At the same time, ever since the report of the World Commission on Environment and Development, *Our Common Future* (1987), sustainable development has been criticized for being too conformist, too vague, and too mainstream. For some analysts, it has lost its potency—if it ever possessed any [1].

In this article we argue that it is as a utopian concept that sustainable development can play an important part in politics; as such, it has a transformative power for politics and policymaking around the world. This requires a utopian thought that transcends three fundamental aspects of modernity: scientification or the notion of fixed truth, nationalism or the notion of fixed territoriality, and “blueprints” or the notion of fixed final goals for politics.

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +46 13 28 25 09; fax: +46 13 13 36 30.
E-mail address: johhe@tema.liu.se (J. Hedrén).

The development of the formal utopian genre (“utopia proper”), as well as philosophical reflections on utopias and utopian thought, was not only simultaneous with the development of the project of modernity, but also closely linked to it. Utopian thought has been apparent in flourishing work on various ideologies, mainly in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and also frequently evident in its corollary form, the dystopia—i.e. critique of current trends and hopes. Moreover, utopian thought and utopias have always addressed the moralities, social relationships, and technological projects that have either already been developed or have been conceivable as part of the future.

Kumar, among others, argues that the utopian way of thinking about future alternatives is typically “Western”. Outside the Western world, there has not been a tradition of utopian thought: “Other varieties of the ideal society or the perfect condition of humanity are to be found in abundance in non-Western societies, usually embedded in religious cosmologies. But nowhere in these societies do we find the practice of writing utopias, of criticizing them, of developing and transforming their themes and exploring new possibilities within them” [2].

Because of this close relationship between Western modernity and utopian thought, the latter is partly based on tenets of modernity that have turned out to be problematic. As will be developed in this article, these tenets concern the roles of, and relationships to, space, time, and knowledge.

2. Modernity and utopian thought

The concept of modernity is frequently cited in the social sciences and humanities, so we will initially pinpoint some central elements of what is commonly held to distinguish *modern* utopian thought. Analytics have highlighted different features of modernism and presented different suggestions as to how modernism and modernity should be pinpointed theoretically. While these differ in detail, most of them have tended to stress the following three characteristics in the mindset of modernity.

One, *demythification* and *desacralization* has been a key feature since the beginning of modernity, peaking in the Enlightenment, with its striving for “disenchantment”—in Weber’s terminology. Two, the idea of *progress*, of a linear development toward higher stages in the history of humankind, has been just as important [3]. As a paradox, this idea has flourished side by side with the notion of a final goal, where society at last reaches its full potential. Taken together, this means a break with tradition and strong connections to history. Three, the view of development as basically a *collective project* can be discerned as basic to most political efforts in the modern era [4,5]. The central unit has been *mankind*, and a collective striving toward creating a society of harmony and affluence has basically been taken as a given.

The following criteria of *modernization* listed by Habermas in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* seem to be broadly accepted: (1) the formation of capital and the mobilization of resources; (2) the development of means of production and the increase of labour productivity; (3) the establishment of centralized political power and the formation of national identities; (4) the proliferation of the right of political participation, of urban ways of life, and of formal schooling; (5) the secularization of values and norms [6].

We emphasise three fundamental aspects of modernity are particularly important in light of utopian thought on sustainable development: “blueprints” or the notion of *fixed final goals for politics*, scientification or the notion of *fixed truth*, and nationalism or the notion of *fixed territoriality*. Breaking with these three categories of modernity is what distinguishes utopian thought on sustainable development as a transformative politics, from the conventional modern utopia as a blueprint for totalitarianism

2.1. The notion of fixed final goals for politics

All through the processes of modernization one thing remains, namely destruction. As Berman has developed at length, destruction is always the backdrop of creation and change. In his analysis of Goethe’s *Faust* he states: “he [Faust] won’t be able to create anything unless he’s prepared to let everything go, to accept the fact that all that has been created up to now – and indeed, all that he may create in the future – must be destroyed to pave the way for more creation. This is the dialectic that modern man must embrace in order to move and live” [7]. According to the logic of capitalism, in the struggle for profit and growth, this creative destruction is happening faster and faster. This creates an experience of mobility in society, acceleration in history, and what Habermas has called “a changed consciousness of time” [4]. Following on this is another particularly modern experience, an orientation toward the future, to a specific horizon of expectation that opposes the traditional experiences of previous generations [6]. The intensifying sense of time, the continuous speeding up of processes, and the orientation toward the future results in a fundamental dislocation: “the centre of attention becomes the future, and the emotional relation to the future becomes one of dread and uncertainty” [8]. In a sense, modern humans could be described as living beyond reality, always in the rushing passage of time, which is either too late or has yet not happened, and that can only be grasped as in a dream. This de-centering or dis-embedding effect becomes more intense and more rapid with the increasing transformation of social conditions in general.

One essential feature of the notion of final goals for politics pointed out by Lyotard and others is a general decline in the ideological hold of common projects, codified as “grand narratives” or metanarratives [9]. The narratives in focus are more or less related to the Enlightenment project of progress: i.e. those of disenchantment, the praising of authoritarian science, of formal democracy, of emancipation, and of the market economy. Through these narratives’ decline, it is argued, a postmodern state of mind has come into being, which is in fact the victory of modern “culture over the modern society it

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