



Introduction

Utopian thought and sustainable development

In the small picturesque town of Vadstena in southern Sweden, just over 20 researchers from around the world met in August 2004, for free discussion of the tradition of utopian thought in the context of sustainable development. Several participants decided to stay in touch and elaborate on some of the themes discussed at Vadstena; this special issue is one result of these contacts. The seminar was to have opened with a keynote speech by Krishan Kumar, who has explored utopianism for many years in several books and articles. Although he was unable to attend in the end, the seminar was nonetheless inspired by his work. In this introduction we will briefly outline some of the theoretical viewpoints espoused by Kumar and other seminal authors in the field of utopian studies, and also summarize the outcome of the Vadstena seminar.

1. Departure points and considerations

Contemporary politics and other arenas in which utopian thought is produced reveal an almost overwhelming range of different – often contradictory – and controversial views of the preferred destiny of the sustainable development project. Some prominent examples of ecologically adapted utopias are green consumerism, the “eco-cycle society”, a locally and globally just society, a more reflexive democracy society, a technocratic or “technological fix” society, bioregionalism, eco-villages and eco-living, and a green welfare society. Through the sustainable development efforts of the UN and many countries, it has become evident that sustainable development is interpreted quite differently in different parts of the world. Moreover, the utopian nature of the various sustainability discourses differs dramatically depending on the scales, contexts, and relationships considered. Sustainable development, as a utopian concept, may comprise anything from the incremental perfecting of the basic institutions of modern society to an entirely new way of life and politics—a new world order.

For analytical reasons it is useful to follow Krishan Kumar in distinguishing general utopian thought from utopia proper. While a utopia as such is a narrative describing what is considered to be the best society, not as an abstract ideal, but as a hypothetical society in full operation, broader utopian thought is fragmentary and not necessarily narrative in mode; the latter concept denotes a wide range of visionary expressions, ranging from abstract principles to concrete models of a specific social order [1].

Utopias and utopian thought are always more or less founded on contemporary social conditions, as these comprise the main frame of reference for any author and express the ethos of their times. Utopias and utopian thought often entail a critique of current society, and are inspired by its conflicts and contradictions. However, this does not mean that they are essentially alternative in nature; they can just as well be founded on existing principles and relationships. It might, for example, be argued that the grand narratives of modernity are profoundly utopian, and have yet to be fully embodied in any society. Moreover, following the analysis of the early Frankfurt School, the greatest tragedies of the modern world have been triggered by ideas related to utopian thought – for example, social homogeneity, identity, truth, control and scientification – taken too far.

Generally, utopias and utopian thought describe fictitious places where conflict and severe problems no longer exist or are minimal; the places described are harmonious and fair, representing ideas of how to overcome contemporary contradictions and conflicts. In these fictitious societies, the values, interests, and goals of all people are presumed to follow a single pattern. From this it follows that utopian worlds tend to be morally homogeneous, which of itself renders any such society unrealistic.

Moreover, a utopia is always a place of otherness—a “no-place”. This aspect should serve as a very important reminder that utopias should never be regarded as *blueprints* for general transformation, but rather as sources of inspiration and driving-forces for reflections on how to design politics for a better future society. In utopias, the potentials and promising tendencies in the real world are elaborated on; in their opposites, dystopias, current problems and maladies are the focus.

The various activities related to utopian thought are sometimes referred to as *utopian practices*. Such practical endeavors can take many forms: housing experiments, planning, exhibitions, and building projects, either at model scale or lived in at full scale.

Utopian thought is not the same as the more general utopian *vision*. Apart from vision, all utopian activities, to be genuinely utopian, require a specific morality, an explicit idea of what is good and bad, right and wrong for society as a whole. In other words, utopian thought always concerns what is considered to be *the* good society, while utopian *vision* can concern just about anything born of the imagination.

2. State of the art

Compared with the radical 1970s visions of an alternative small-scale society, the utopian strain in sustainable development politics and projects, and in a more narrowly defined environmental politics, might seem to be marginalised. However, a glance at the discourse involved in the global co-operation and negotiations related to the UN conferences and summits on environment and development reveals a world of flourishing utopian thought: assuredly fragmented and embedded in a formal rhetoric indeed, but still principally utopian.

We hear many voices, from all over the world, calling for new basic orders in politics, economics, and social relationships at both the national and international levels. The challenges of sustainable development call for a rethinking of social organization, and the articles in this issue of *Futures* exemplify this call in several areas. This significant endeavour indicates that utopian thought is relevant to today's politics. The same trend holds for the theories and concepts of utopias, which seem to have recovered from the critique of utopianism that escalated at the time for the breakdown of the Soviet Union. When examining the international documents produced by the many institutions that have sustainable development among their main concerns, it becomes obvious that the utopian dimension is central.

What we find now in both green and sustainable development politics, and in politics in general, are mainly fragments of utopias that in theory are labelled "utopian thought" and "utopian practices", while the production of formal literary *utopias* – examples of utopia proper – is extremely rare. The holistic rationale of sustainable development as integrating the three pillars of environmental protection and social and economic development could have provided fertile ground for utopia proper. However, the strong focus on near-term implementation (in theory rather than in practice) has largely focused sustainable development policy on "prefix or suffix sustainability" – that is, particular limited *aspects* of sustainable development, such as economic sustainability, or *sectors*, such as sustainable agriculture. Virtually no proper ecological utopias have been produced over the last two decades. Ecology is sometimes addressed in feminist utopias, however, and this kind of utopia has perhaps been the most common type in recent years.

We can also note an evolution toward essentially contradictory ideologies or mindsets in the spheres of political ecology and sustainable development. On one hand, instrumental reason reaches its full power in the politics of ecological modernization. As explicated by Jürgen Habermas, utopian energies were for a while exhausted, but the linking between environmental issues and the project of modernity has charged the area with many deeply utopian conceptions that impel conventional modernization: (1) a trust in a traditional science that has become obsolete in the humanities and among most social theorists and philosophers, but which is still upheld by its protagonists, who treat traditional science as the supreme purveyor of truth; trust in Western reason and in the corresponding value of the Western identity and ways of life; (2) trust in a political culture that is close to technocracy and (3) belief in technological fixes and progress, though not with the former optimism. On the other hand, there is a vast array of calls for profound change of social, economic, and ecological relationships, which is often connected to the uneven distribution of resources on the global scale, and to the unbalanced power relationships between the North and South, and both within and between countries. However, the utopian dimension was more obvious at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio in 1992 than at the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in 2002, and the current focus seems generally to be more oriented to pragmatics. Though the role of utopian thought may now be somewhat on the decline in these areas, it probably still flourishes more here than in many other important political areas.

If we shift our focus to utopian thought generally, leaving the specific features of sustainable development behind, such thought has further qualities that should be mentioned. First, even a brief acquaintance with utopian theory makes it clear that the many dangers and pitfalls of a politics inspired by dedicated ideas or elaborate visions have been deeply and broadly reflected on. The reflexivity evident here will help foster awareness and knowledge of the promises, limits, precautions, and dangers of projects that aim at profound social change (including economic, ecological, political, and cultural aspects). Moreover, utopian thought is always more or less subversive, and thus will always provoke existing relationships and question current ways of life, ways of thinking, power relationships, etc.

Finally, to be well prepared to choose between different development paths, it is beneficial to be able to imagine and ponder how life would turn out in different settings. The closer you get to utopia proper, the more it will be possible to scrutinize the principles and values in real life.

3. The tasks ahead

The many principles agreed on in the UN summits and conferences must be translated into institutions, organizations, and ways of life, and utopian thought has the potential to promote such a development. The project of sustainable

development demands a thorough integration of the social, economic, and ecological spheres, and in some interpretations even calls for quite a different world order. Consequently, there is an urgent need to theorize and to develop utopian thought about social, economic, and ecological relationships on a global scale. Concepts and reflections developed in utopian theory can help us in this.

Traditional utopian thought is of limited value concerning the role and the treatment of boundaries, limits, and transboundary relationships, and also when it comes to institutional settings for resolving conflicts. The classical utopia is a comparatively small society situated on an island, harmonious and easy to comprehend. The contemporary real world is basically the opposite: contradictory, vast, diffuse, increasingly made up by the symbolic world of cyberspace, severely shattered by conflict and extremely difficult to grasp. Moreover, there is no reason to believe in a future world in which all these tensions are completely eliminated. Such a world would neither be possible nor desirable, and history demonstrates that when such a situation gets close to attainment, conditions easily turn nightmarish. So the ultimate task of utopian theory and thought is now to develop the intellectual tools with which to find a politics that incorporates techniques for handling conflicts, tensions, uncertainty, change, and pluralism, but that is also effective when it comes to the demanding goals of sustainable development.

Utopian thought of many kinds has followed humanity around the world, while the history of “utopia proper” is restricted to the West. These formal literary utopias adhere to a structure that is partly typical of a Western perspective: utopia is found by chance, in journeys connected to a culture of expansion, and is a harmonious and homogenous world within distinct borders, that is, in line with the island archetype. The striving for relationships of harmony and balance – in nature, in society, and between nature and society – is also prevalent in most Western discourse on green issues and sustainable development, but also in that of many other cultures. This feature obviously stands in sharp contrast to contemporary real world relationships, and the centrality of the goal of harmony in this discourse can be questioned. It would be more interesting to examine how to handle conflicts, tensions, contradictions, and imbalance in society, that is, how to minimize them or how to make them function as a creative impetus in development projects or reforms, and how to discern priorities and create legitimate and functional structures in political, scientific, and administrative systems.

There is also a need to clearly identify the implicit and explicit utopian content in the many discourses on sustainable development, to see and better understand the different points of departure of the many actors involved. Such investigations could be used to stimulate political activity at all levels, and to deepen and widen lay knowledge of what is fundamentally political, and not only practical/technical, in global efforts to attain sustainable development.

The relevance of utopian thought to today's politics is obviously also related to its capacity to grasp and ponder global social, economic, and ecological dimensions, and especially how these dimensions relate to each other and how changes can turn out in daily life and practical work. When we consider that these relationships are only occasionally treated together in contemporary theory, the potential of utopian thought here is definitely worth exploring.

Over the past decade, it has also been more frequently stressed that sustainable development demands that cultural issues be addressed. In this light, the role of the humanities is obvious; moreover, the ambitions of sustainable development basically encompass the whole range of academic disciplines. This, in turn, means that relevant utopian thought should also include the organization and role of the arts and sciences, and especially consider how to bring these diverging fields closer together.

There is, of course, always a need to reflect on the role of science, which in the utopian tradition is mainly treated as “reading the book of nature”. A utopia proper is generally organized around a science and technology axis. As science is now so deeply intertwined with the destructive and problematic aspects of development, its role and characteristics in a sustainable development context should be quite different from those in traditional utopian dreams.

The articles in this issue cover both theoretical and empirical aspects of utopian thought and sustainable development. The first three articles are more theoretically oriented, and reflect on the principal and general features of the relationship between sustainable development and utopian thought.

In “The dystopia of technoscience: An ecofeminist critique of postmodern reason”, Ariel Salleh discusses and criticizes some of the theoretical positions that have been developed in recent decades and have strongly influenced social science studies in a broad range of areas. She focuses on views of and relationships to nature, and argues that the critical potential of postmodern thought is slight when it comes to the liberation of disempowered people. Moreover, postmodern thought is useless when analysing the relationship between the capitalist world system and the environmental crisis. An important part of this problem is the neglect of utopian thought on the part of the postmodernists. “Utopian thought and the politics of sustainable development” by Johan Hedrén and Björn-Ola Linnér approaches the tradition of Western utopian thought from the viewpoint of the goals of sustainability politics. The authors maintain that certain limitations in this tradition must be overcome to make utopian thought appropriate for the demands of such contemporary global politics. The need for such thought in this politics is strong, as these goals demand radical changes of basic social processes. In Johan Hedrén's “Shaping sustainability: Is there an unreleased potential in utopian thought?”, the basic tenets of the utopian tradition are spelled out in order to discuss the practical role of this kind of thought in processes aiming at sustainability. This article develops a simple typology for distinguishing different forms of utopian thought, and reflects on its relevance to politics and planning in this area.

The next three articles all closely examine specific political and practical fields in the broad context of sustainable development. Martin Hultman analyses the politics of energy supply in “Back to the future: The dream of a perpetual mobile in the atomic society and hydrogen economy”. The utopian dimension of contemporary discourse on the hydrogen

economy is compared to older discourse on the atomic society. He demonstrates the relevance and utility of discerning utopian layers in political discourse, in order to reflect on and relate them to previous historical lessons. This article concludes with arguments for more reflexive attitude toward utopian thought regarding energy issues in planning and politics.

In the article “Utopian and dystopian thought in climate change science and policy”, Linnér and Hjerpe demonstrate how utopian thought has surfaced in climate science and multilateral negotiations in references to sustainable development and emission scenarios. They conclude that visions of future society fall into three categories: projections, dystopian thought, and utopian thought. Dystopian thought functions mainly in the rhetoric different actors use to spur action or inaction, to avoid either economic catastrophe by acting too fast or ecological catastrophe by not acting fast enough. Utopian elements in climate change science and policy call for the de-coupling of greenhouse gas emissions and economic growth, the even distribution of the benefits of economic globalization, and smooth technological development. The article concludes that utopian thought regarding sustainable development could usher in more holistic visions of future society in climate science and policy.

In “Enacting the vision for sustainable development”, Tony Stevenson starts with the tension between the concepts of vision and utopia, and then discusses the former in light of practical planning. His specific case is a community-based futures project to create a strategy for the sustainable management of natural resources in the Mary River catchment in Queensland, Australia. This process was close to what is described as “action learning”, meaning a process in a particular social and organizational setting that is expected to enhance the involvement of affected people in their own change. He shows that in this process, visioning was mostly a matter of individual engagement, and a result of the time-consuming process of shared learning.

Taken together, we believe that these articles demonstrate the benefits of using utopian thought, not only as an analytical concept, but as a tool in policy-making regarding global sustainable development.

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Reference

- [1] K. Kumar, *Utopianism*, Open University Press, Milton Keynes, UK, 1999.

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