



Reconsidering Utopia

I have simply asked for permission

Joop van Hezik

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“A map of the World that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at. For it leaves out the one country at which Humanity is always landing. And when Humanity lands there it looks out and, seeing a better country, sets sail. Progress is the realization of Utopias.”

- Oscar Wilde, The soul of man under socialism, 1891

For Rianne

In memory of the victims of Typhoon Haiyan (Yolanda) in the Philippines, 7 and 8 November 2013.

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Cover picture: A Utopia is a portrayal of the ideal society. In Trinidad, a town on the Philippine island Samar – an important place for the author – they literally painted it on the wall. In 2008, a competition ‘mural painting’ was held, with the theme: ‘lessen global warming: protect the environment’. To the author, the mural painting on the cover pictures the dystopia of a desolate world of cut rainforests on the left, and a Utopia of abundant nature, an Ecotopia on the right.

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Preface: Utopian thinking

“Then they had opportunity of visiting many countries in all directions, for every ship which got ready for any voyage made him and his companions welcome as passengers. (...) To be sure, just as he called attention to many ill-advised customs among these new nations, so he rehearsed not a few points from which our own cities, nations, races, and kingdoms may take example for the correction of their errors. These instances, as I said, I must mention on another occasion. Now I intend to relate merely that he told us of the manners and customs of the Utopians.”

- Thomas More, *The best state of a commonwealth and the new island of Utopia*, 1516

The utopian tradition in the history of ideas draws her name from *The best state of a commonwealth and the new island of Utopia*, by Thomas More in 1516. Few works have been interpreted as diversely as More's Utopia, which is said to bear a feudal, a communistic, a capitalistic, an imperialistic, and even an ecologic character. Marx and Engels considered More to be one of the earliest critics of capitalism in the tradition of utopian socialism.¹

Utopia described the transition from a feudal to a capitalist society, Kautsky claimed. According to him More anticipated socialism and provided the design for a future communist society.²

Chambers interpreted Utopia as a huge monastery; the embodiment of the monastic ideal.³ More allegedly supported a Christian revival, inspired by medieval monk orders' virtue, discipline and frugality. At the beginning of the fifties of the previous century, Ames spoke about More as the spokesman of the commercial middle class, as a bearer of capitalism,

¹ K. Marx, *Das Kapital*, 1867

² K. Kautsky, *Thomas More und Seine Utopie*, 1887

³ R.W. Chambers, *Thomas More*, 1935

which then was on the eve of a breakthrough.⁴ In this context, Lemaire pointed out that besides capitalistic traits, Utopia also unquestionably shows imperialistic features; it contains a justification of colonization similar to the rationalization John Locke, founder of liberalism, would come up with more than a century later.⁵ Finally, De Geus discovered the outlines of an ecologically sustainable society in Utopia. De Geus based this claim on the interpretation More gave of nature: an entity with its own intrinsic value.⁶

The multitude of possible angles from which Utopia can be considered, is both the strength and the weakness of utopian thinking. Despite that, utopian thinking is utterly necessary to be able to move forward to a more sustainable world. And, should this sustainable world be achieved, utopian thinking still is needed. I will elaborate on this thesis further on in this book.

I graduated as a cultural philosopher in utopian tradition in the history of ideas in 1989. This was a so-called experimental doctorate program, based on the subjects of philosophy and anthropology, taught by Tom Lemaire. Instead of following the academic path I turned to the practice of sustainable development in the role of advisor and a chairman.⁷ Utopian thinking has always been my source of inspiration as is shown in the name of my Agency for sustainable development, Ecotopia – a compound of ‘ecology’ and ‘Utopia’.

In the following, I will sketch an image of this utopian inspiration. I feel compelled to do so because by now the fourth international attempt to move ourselves jointly towards a sustainable world has once more failed.⁸ This hopeless

⁴ R. Ames, *Citizen Thomas More and his Utopia*, 1949

⁵ T. Lemaire, *De Indiaan in ons Bewustzijn*, 1986

⁶ M. De Geus, *Ecologische Utopieën, Ecotopia's en het milieudebat*, 1996

⁷ An example of this is sending HVE students to the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in 2002, to develop a youth perspective on this conference for Provinciale Staten of the Province of Noord-Brabant. Another example is that I, in the capacity of City Council Member, drafted a ‘balance of sustainability’ of the municipality Oisterwijk, in association with the Center of Sustainability Telos of the University of Tilburg in 2009.

⁸ The United Nations Conference Rio+20, 2012

failure combined with my personal ‘journey’ through insights which have both inspired and influenced me, strengthened my conviction on the necessity of utopian thinking in order to be able to reach for a sustainable world. I will describe that journey, without any conceit to write an elaborate philosophical elucidation. Travelling fits the utopian tradition, since ‘travelling makes one feel restless’. The important notion of human restlessness changed utopian thinking during the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. It neutralized the classic idea of human nature and thus the ideal of static utopian thinking. Nicole Pohl: “Utopias are discourses on change itself rather than simply blueprints”.⁹

Besides philosophical explorations, my thinking has been influenced by physical journeys. Especially my trips to the Philippines have been of great meaning. The country can most certainly not be described as a Utopia, but it is a source of inspiration for my thinking about sustainable development. The biggest culture shock is not when I arrive in this so-called developing country; it arises when I return to the so-called developed Netherlands.

Yolanda’s fury

November 7 and 8, 2013. Haiyan, christened Yolanda in the Philippines, tore through the Philippines leaving a devastating trail. The thirteenth typhoon with a name is categorized as one of the heaviest storms ever measured. It is the fifth super typhoon of the year.

Yolanda cost the lives of thousands of people. Hundreds of thousands lost their houses. Harvest, homes, roads, everything that was touched, broke down. Yolanda’s fury caused total havoc.

Three days later, on November 11th, Warsaw in Poland saw the commencement of COP 19, international climate

⁹ N. Pole, *Utopianism after More: the Renaissance and Enlightenment*, in: *The Cambridge companion to utopian literature*, 2010

summit.¹⁰ Financial aid by rich countries in times of climate catastrophes was one of the issues at stake. In Warsaw, too, there was a storm. Warsaw showed its two-facedness, by simultaneously convening an international conference on coal and by being sponsored by huge contaminators. These companies got a lot of exposure in exchange for petrodollars. Non-governmental organizations, including the World Wide Fund for Nature, Greenpeace, and Oxfam International, left the summit furiously. ‘Polluters talk. We walk.’ (Not for the first time, as will become clear in the following). WWF wrote on her website: “Enough is enough. We have said we stand in solidarity with the millions impacted by Typhoon Haiyan, and with all climate impacted people. Our solidarity compels us to tell the truth about COP 19 – the Warsaw Climate Conference.”¹¹ Heads of the governments of rich countries showed more interest in economic growth than in the solution of the climate problem, appeared in Warsaw (too).

While his brother searched for bodies from under the rubble with his bare hands, and had to do without food and without sleep for three days, Naderev (Yeb) Saño represented the Philippines in Warsaw. He felt hopeless. In an emotional speech Saño called upon the world “to end the madness”. Saño bade not to dismiss the deadly devastations on the island Leyte as a natural disaster. “There is nothing natural about the scientific fact that global warming will keep causing more intense storms. There is nothing natural about human kind having such a huge impact on global warming.” He found it ludicrous that our polluting lifestyle endangers vast areas on the globe. Saño declared he would not sign vague and half-hearted climate agreements any longer. “For in that way, we ratify our own downfall.” In the same speech, the Philippian representative heralded a hunger strike, out of solidarity, until

¹⁰ United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change/ Conference of the Parties COP 19

¹¹ <http://wwf.panda.org/?212532/NGOs-Social-Movements-Walk-Out-Of-Warsaw-Talks>

tangible constructive actions were agreed on at the climate conference. “What my country currently endures, is madness. The climate crisis is pure madness. But we can solve this. We can stop the madness.”

Finally a little bit of progression was made, just before the closing of the conference. The result is an agreement on an international mechanism for financial aid in case of loss and damage due to climate disasters, crucial for the developing countries. However, the real question remains: How to stop the madness? The history of the UN conferences offers little to no hope, as I will subsequently show you. The ideological stratum is the reason for this. All UN conferences have been founded on the objective of, and belief in, economic growth. To stop the madness, we must break away from the growth-ideology. This is something we can only do from a new utopian perspective.

Joop van Hezik brings philosophy to life, in more ways than one. He shows that the ideology of ‘economic growth’ is the basis of our modern societies and economies, and even of our sustainable development policies. In this ideology people and nature seem to be merely instruments for economic growth. This results in destruction and the failure of sustainable development policies at all geographical levels. As Van Hezik clearly demonstrates, we need utopian thinking to reflect on the real values of life on earth. So-called poor local communities in the Philippines have found ways to pursue their own utopia, based on respect for people and nature. Does the rest of the world have the guts to follow their example?

Rob Wolters, Executive Director ECNC-European Centre for Nature Conservation



Joop van Hezik (Hedel, NL, 1959) achieved his master degree in 1989. He studied cultural, social and political philosophy, and economic anthropology at the Catholic University of Nijmegen. He founded ‘Bureau for sustainable development issues Ecotopia’ after working for consultancies for a number of years. Van Hezik is co-founder of ChancEd, opportunities & education for

Philippine children. He served as group chairman of the leftist political party GroenLinks in the Provincial Council of Noord-Brabant, and as alderman in Oisterwijk (2003-2012). Since 2013 Van Hezik works as consultant biodiversity and green economy at the European Centre for Nature Conservation, as well as director of the Nature Assisted Health Foundation. He is member of congress of European Green Parties.

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