

LISA GARFORTH

# GREEN UTOPIAS

ENVIRONMENTAL HOPE  
BEFORE AND AFTER NATURE



'This subtle, lucid and measured account charts the changing and conflicting discourses of limits, sustainability, wildness, adaptation and apocalypse. With clarity and care, Lisa Garforth's distinctive use of social theory explains and counters the difficulty of thinking (beyond) crisis and the importance of the utopian lens in exploring possible futures.'

Ruth Levitas, University of Bristol

'*Green Utopias* moves from the romantic eco-utopian interventions of the 1960s, infused by hope for a redeemable nature, to the realistic, yet stubbornly utopian, manoeuvres of the Anthropocene. Garforth articulates a utopian method informed by "green hope" that "unsettles" capitalist hegemony and enables humanity to live creatively with "multiple ecologies and nonhuman others." This is essential reading for all citizens of the world.'

Tom Moylan, University of Limerick

Environmentalism has warned relentlessly about the dire consequences of abusing and exploiting the planet's natural resources, imagining future wastelands of ecological depletion and social chaos. But it has also generated rich new ideas about how humans might live better with nature.

*Green Utopias* explores ideas of environmental hope in the post-war period, from the environmental crisis to the end of nature. Using a broad definition of utopia and working across environmental policy discourse, social and political theory and speculative literature, Lisa Garforth explains how utopia's entanglement with popular culture and mainstream politics has shaped successive green future visions. In the face of apocalyptic, despairing or indifferent responses to contemporary ecological dilemmas, utopias and the utopian method seem more necessary than ever.

This distinctive reading of green political thought and culture will appeal across the social sciences and humanities to all interested in why utopias continue to matter in the cultivation of green values and the emergence of new forms of human and non-human well-being.

**Lisa Garforth** is Senior Lecturer in Sociology at Newcastle University

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## Environmental Hope Before and After Nature

Lisa Garforth

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# Green Utopias





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# Contents

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<i>Acknowledgements</i>	vi
1 Introduction: Utopia, Environment and Nature	1
2 Environmentalism: From Crisis to Hope	26
3 Deep Ecology: Wild Nature, Radical Visions	50
4 Utopian Fiction: Imagining the Sustainable Society	72
5 No Future: Green Utopias between Apocalypse and Adaptation	96
6 After Nature: Ecological Utopianism from Limits to Loss	126
7 Conclusion: Long Live the Green Utopia?	155
<i>Notes</i>	163
<i>References</i>	171
<i>Index</i>	188

# 1

## Introduction: Utopia, Environment and Nature

### Other green worlds

Every day seems to bring more news of environmental disaster. Flooded streets don't just bring chaos and loss to those who live there. Their images resonate through media networks with the threat of widespread climate change effects. The news media explodes around the latest scientific statement on global warming and then turns away, creating a silence or indifference in which it seems impossible that anything can be done. Hollywood films rehearse spectacular environmental disasters which only a lucky (or unlucky) few will survive, or present grim, grey worlds of endemic environmental dysfunction. Booker prize-winning novelists write trilogies tracing the collapse of biodiversity and the rise of genetically engineered posthumans. Young adult fiction offers dystopias set on the rising waters of a warming world. A wildlife documentary presenter looks at us through the tv screen; he gestures at the blank white icescape behind him and tells us that it is irreversibly melting. We wince then turn off the television, put out our recycling, get on with the next thing.

In the midst of these pessimistic, dystopian and apocalyptic narratives, it can seem that there are few hopeful images of or statements about greener futures in our culture. The environmental campaigner Jonathan Porritt (2011) has

## 2 *Introduction: Utopia, Environment and Nature*

expressed concern that a lack of positive visions makes it hard to imagine what sustainability might mean. But in fact all sorts of hopes and desires for better socio-environmental futures are at work across contemporary Western philosophy, politics and literature. Since the 1960s, environmentalism has warned about the dire consequences of abusing and exploiting the planet's natural resources, imagining future wastelands of ecological depletion and social chaos. But it has also generated rich new ideas about how humans might live better with nature. Environmentalists have warned that natural resources may run out, but they have also tried to show how we might live happier and more fulfilling lives by consuming less and making our relationships more fulfilling. Ecological philosophers have criticized modernity's dominant technocentrism and its instrumental attitude towards nature, but they have also explored the pleasures that valuing nature for its own sake might bring. Speculative fictions envisage post-apocalyptic wastelands, but also moments of joy and hope, and even descriptions of life in sustainable society.

Sometimes these green hopes take the form of a clear, detailed and explicit blueprint for the future: a manifesto or an explicitly utopian novel. But desires for a greener future can also be more obscure, fragmented and fleeting. Sometimes green alternatives are framed in terms of a coherent set of ecological values or politics. Sometimes they speak more loosely to a desire to protect or love or 'get back' to nature. The content, the form, the values of this green utopianism are diverse – they express different hopes in different ways. They vary over time and between societies and social groups. But they are more common than we might initially imagine.

This book, then, is about green utopianism. It explores some of the ways in which Western cultures have imagined better futures for human societies with nature since the emergence of the idea of environmental crisis in the 1960s and 1970s. This was a time when public talk about the future of nature was dominated by ideas of imminent ends (of resources), physical limits (to growth), and looming catastrophe (environmental and social). Closely linked to this crisis sensibility was a powerful sense that things could be different, that we could build societies in tune with nature that would be more sustainable, more satisfying and more secure.

In some ways those hopes have become familiar and mainstream. In other ways those futures seem more unattainable and more idealistic than ever in the face of grim climate predictions and arguments that we face the end of nature. So as well as the hopeful ideas that suffused early environmentalism, this book explores the kinds of green visions that are currently available in our culture. Green hope is more widespread, I argue, but at the same time less visionary and radical. Desires for a better greener future are still there, but they are less explicit and powerful, more fugitive and fleeting, often framed by narratives of loss and mourning.

Although the idea of utopia often gets a bad press, in this book I claim it unashamedly as an invaluable way of exploring images of and desires for a better way of living (Levitas 2010 [1990]: 9). Utopianism is about dreams and hopes for an alternative to the social arrangements that we currently have. Utopian thinking runs through art and politics, public debate and popular culture. I argue that it is critically important as we look forward to the possibility of a different environmental future and learn to take responsibility for what modern humans have done with and to nature in the past. Sometimes utopias are born of passionate and heartfelt political commitments, individual or collective. Sometimes the hope for a better world seems to happen despite conscious individual intentions (Garforth 2009). Either way, utopias are vital cultural spaces in which the taken-for-granted arrangements and practices of our everyday lives can be made strange, in which we can reflect critically on the big picture of what is happening in our social world, and through which we can explore alternatives. But it is not an unproblematic kind of thinking, so I also use the word utopia with some care. For many utopia is associated with rigid blueprints of perfection, totalitarian master plans or fantastical idealism. In what follows I will draw on less negative and more nuanced definitions to show how utopia should be understood as a social and cultural process that is partial and provisional, critical and creative.

If I use the word 'utopia' unabashedly, I use the word 'green' more cautiously. In this book I look back over the short history of Western environmentalist thought and ecological philosophy from the 1960s to the early twenty-first

#### 4 *Introduction: Utopia, Environment and Nature*

century. As a political, social and philosophical movement, environmentalism has focused on the problematic ways in which Western societies have treated nature. It has produced powerful new ideas about how those societies could instead both protect the planet and enhance human well-being. It has explored ecocentric positions in which nature is held to have intrinsic value separate from human perceptions, needs and uses. But environmentalism has also tended to treat the category of nature as unproblematic, as conceptually separate from society and culture. In contemporary science, philosophy and social theory there are serious challenges to these distinctions and assumptions, and compelling proposals for rearranging our worldly ontologies. Some question the idea that nature is 'One Thing with One Name' (Cronon 1996: 35) and critique environmentalist attempts to defend non-human nature primarily on the basis of its separation from human societies. Some argue that we can imagine an 'ecology without nature' (Morton 2007); some celebrate nature's end as the beginning of a new kind of ecological politics (Latour 2004). I use the word 'green', then, to suggest the complicated, dissonant bodies of thought that take part in ongoing contestations and debate about political and cultural ideas of the environment, rather than working with a strict or narrow definition of deep ecology or environmentalism.

I also argue that as arguments about the end of nature and the beginning of the Anthropocene circulate around Western cultures, the conditions for green utopianism have changed significantly. Where once environmental debates focused on the prospects for continuity and recuperation – sustainable development, ecological caution and protecting nature – now the dominant problematic is how we are to learn to live in a fundamentally different and unpredictable era. In what follows I take this transition seriously and try to trace green utopias before and after nature. The Anthropocene refers to a new geological era in which human activities are the dominant influence on the natural environment. It is also a cultural era in which we constantly reflect upon this state of affairs. The end-of-nature proposals that I discuss here are part of debates about what anthropogenic climate change means to and for us – materially, conceptually, politically, affectively – and how it changes our sense of the histories and futures we

are making and have made. As I have noted above, the idea of a separate nature has been crucial to ecological political philosophy as well as to modern Western science and culture. Once we start to think about the mixed-up, hybrid worlds that we have made and that we must live in and with (Latour 2004), and about the complex ways in which we ourselves are simultaneously matter and culture (Haraway 1991; Bennett 2010), we need new ontologies, new ethics and new ways of thinking about better greener worlds.

So in this book I trace a shift from utopias of sustainability to postnatural visions and try to locate the prospects for green hope when there is no separate nature in which to root it – and arguably a limited sense of the future in which green alternatives might unfold. I focus on a relatively limited body of utopian thinking and ideas: environmentalism, ecological political philosophy, and speculative fiction. This is not to deny the existence or value of a much broader field of green utopianism. Below I will sketch an argument about the ubiquity and formal diversity of utopian desires and expressions. A broad and inclusive definition of utopianism would include: ideas about better greener futures informing innovative technologies from genetic modification to the internet of things to zero-emission buildings; ecotopian experiments from eco-villages to smart cities to re-wilding urban spaces; movements such as slow food, permaculture farming or carbon-rationing groups; activist and local green visions; climate action plans. I have focused primarily, however, on discourses and representations relating to better greener worlds as they have emerged in mainstream environmentalism, well-established ecophilosophy and theory, and in self-consciously environmentalist fiction.

Other reviews and analyses have explored utopias beyond concepts and texts and examined how utopia is performed and enacted individually and collectively at a variety of scales and in multiple spaces. Attention to the material, physical, interactional and practised dimensions of green utopianism has been growing in recent years. Studies have looked at intentional communities, including environmental ones (Pepper 1991; Sargisson and Sargent 2004; Sargisson 2007a, 2007b, 2012; Miles 2008; Fremeaux and Jordan 2010; Andreas and Wagner 2012). Analyses of utopias in relation to lifestyle,

## 6 *Introduction: Utopia, Environment and Nature*

everyday practice and embedded citizenship are increasingly prominent in the field (Gardiner 2001; Firth 2012; Cooper 2014). Social and political scientists have explored utopian strands of 'transitions to sustainable living' (Leonard and Barry 2009): green urban and community projects including the transition towns movement; green co-housing initiatives; autonomous urbanism and squatting movements; alternative economies; sustainable architecture and planning practices; temporary ecological occupations of public spaces (Kraftl 2006; Miles 2008; Jamison 2010; Pickerill 2010, 2012; Brown et al. 2012; Davies and Leonard 2012; Bradley and Hedrén 2015).

My approach does not capture these important and innovative strands of green utopian thought and practice. But my more selective focus enables me to look closely at some of the most dominant narratives and frameworks for understanding environmental dilemmas and green hopes. This allows a modestly interdisciplinary focus that moves across politics and policy discourses, philosophy and social theory, developments in mainstream environmental ideas and radical ecopolitical thought, speculative literature and literary criticism. It also allows me to pay attention to important changes in major environmental discourses and cultural articulations of green ideas over the last fifty years or so. The successive constellations of green utopian ideas that I have analysed are necessarily indicative and partial rather than exhaustive and systematic. I have not sought to make hard and fast periodizations, but attempted rather to feel out historically situated clusters of concerns and concepts and analyse continuities and differences. Looking across a loosely chronological and overlapping set of ideas reveals something new about the nature of green hopes and the changing contexts in which we articulate and express them in particular periods.

What I offer here, then, is a new reflection on some well-known strands of green thinking over the last fifty years. One way of looking at this is that utopia offers a novel lens through which to understand debates and developments in green political thought in that period. Ecopolitical philosophy frequently touches on the value and relevance of utopian ideals to green political ideologies and political movements (Eckersley 1992; Dobson 1995; Torgerson 1999; Harvey



2000; Pepper 2005). But identifying a wider stream of green utopianism enables us to trace the ebbs and flows of hope and future visions across environmental discourses and situate more radical ecocentric visions in relation to their broader environmentalist context. Adding utopian and speculative fiction to this mix offers to enrich our understanding of green political thought. Fiction does not simply illustrate ecological ethics and ideas. Narrative offers a distinctive approach to exploring alternative green values, translating them into social experiences and ways of life. As Moylan argues, it is not just the content of ecological ideas that matters here. The form is crucial. Science fiction world-building creates new possibilities for estranged speculation, visioning beyond 'the limits of the present' (Moylan 2011: 26). If science fiction is 'our culture's vast, shared polyvocal archive of the possible' (Canavan 2014: 16), examining that archive's traces of ecotopia brings a fresh perspective to green political debates.

The book can also be seen as a synthesis of otherwise disparate approaches to green hope in utopian studies. Previous studies of green utopias have mainly emerged from debates in political science and philosophy and from studies of science fiction. Some have focused on describing and comparing the content of ecological visions across a long history of utopian texts (De Geus 1999). Some, as I note above, have discussed the value of utopian ideas for ecological political ideologies and practical environmental politics. Others have examined the transgressive utopian ideas of radical ecocentric philosophy (Sargisson 2000, 2012). A growing number of studies have focused on speculative fiction (Murphy 2000; Yanarella 2001; more recently, Otto 2012; Canavan and Robinson 2014). These approaches are surprisingly divergent, however, covering different historical periods, texts and genres. I hope to suggest a contextualizing framework within which the connections between them might be understood and to offer a more synthetic approach to the recent history of green utopias than currently exists in the field.

It will be clear even from this brief outline, then, that the concepts of both utopia and nature are rich, contested and shifting. The relationships between them are necessarily various and complex. Even since the 1970s, there have been marked shifts in the green futures that it has been possible

## 8 *Introduction: Utopia, Environment and Nature*

to imagine. Continuing threads of green hope can be traced throughout this period, but there have also been reversals, reinventions and renewals. Environmental utopias develop in relation to specific political, social and intellectual contexts. Different green visions emerge in response to new framings of social-natural problems and dilemmas, and from changing experiences of living in and with different kinds of environments. To understand how this works, we need to look more closely at what we understand by utopias and utopianism, and how we can think with them.

### Thinking with utopias

Utopias are often dismissed as rigid blueprints linked to totalitarian attempts to impose a new way of life on a nation or people. They are associated, as Jameson remarks sardonically, with ‘a will to power over all those individuals for whom you are plotting an ironclad happiness’ (2000: 383). For some, the very idea of a perfect society constitutes a denial of fundamental human qualities (fallibility, creativity). Pursuing the vision of an ideal republic amounts to a denial of democracy and the open society (Gray 2008; Popper 2013 [1945]). Here utopia is an attempt to achieve perfection and freeze social life forever in one static arrangement. It is contrasted with the lively, messy reality of politics and social change. For others, utopia is equated with impossible and impractical dreams and fantasies. Here utopia is a grand scheme for human betterment that is too big and too far-fetched to come about, a whimsical pipedream for social improvement or moral enhancement that distracts from practical politics and reform. Popular ideas of utopia, then, are associated with the two equally off-putting poles: totalitarian violence and dreamy ineffectuality. Utopian thinking is also seen, albeit perhaps implicitly, as a minority interest: something for politicians, demagogues, dictators, drop-outs or fantasists, not something that most of us indulge in.

But we can and should understand utopias and utopianism differently. The field of utopian studies that has developed over the last thirty years has generated new definitions and