

From the Utopia of Sustainable Development to Sustainable *Topoi*

Gonzalo Salazar, Valentina Acuña, and Luca Valera

The hegemonic discourse of sustainable development adopted as an international alternative solution to the socio-ecological crisis has implied a progression of the modern utopian project and most importantly, an intrinsic contradiction and omission that positions sustainable development as something that is not in any place. To understand, discuss, and transcend this oxymoron, we first review the modern utopian project and analyze its paradigmatic and ontological assumptions about knowledge, time, and space. Second, we show that sustainable development just re-adapted the founding premises of the modern utopias. Third, to transcend the modern utopian facet of sustainable development, we suggest an understanding of sustainability that stems from a topographical way of thinking. We suggest this approach allows us to seek alternatives to the modern epistemology and ontology that have shaped the current dominant vision of sustainable development. Finally, we propose to *move from the modern utopia of sustainable development to the praxis of topographical sustainabilities* to trigger a more comprehensive and relational praxis of sustainability.

I. INTRODUCTION

The concept of utopia as something that “is not in any place” can be traced back to Ancient Greece and the word’s roots in *οὐ* (no) and *τόπος* (place). Its sub-

Gonzalo Salazar, PhD, is an Associate Professor at Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile (UC) (Chile), and Director of the UC Center for Local Development. He is also researcher at Centro de Desarrollo Urbano Sustentable (UC); Centro de Estudios Interculturales e Indígenas (UC); and Cape Horn International Center for Global Change Studies and Biocultural Conservation (Chile). Campus Villarrica, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, O’Higgins 501, Villarrica, Chile. gonzalosalazar@uc.cl.

Valentina Acuña is a doctoral candidate in Sociology at Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile (Chile). She is a doctoral researcher at CIGIDEN (Research Center for Integrated Disaster Risk Management) and a fellow of CIIR (Center for Intercultural and Indigenous Studies). Campus San Joaquín, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, Centro de Investigación para la Gestión Integrada del Riesgo de Desastres, Vicuña Mackenna 4860, Mañchal, Chile. vmacuna@uc.cl.

Luca Valera, PhD, is an Associate Professor at the Department of Philosophy, Universidad de Valladolid (Spain) and an Adjunct Professor at the Bioethics Center, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile (Chile). He is also a researcher at the Cape Horn International Center for Global Change Studies and Biocultural Conservation (Chile). Departamento de Filosofía, Universidad de Valladolid, Plaza Campus Universitario, s/n, 47011 Valladolid, España. luvalera@uc.cl; luca.valera@uva.es.

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sequent reappearance at critical moments in history (Celentano 2005) raised the question of its “diffuse nature,” a central issue of debate in utopian studies (Vieira 2010). One of the few agreements that exist is that the concept’s most important feature is related to human beings’ desire to have a “better place” in which to live and its key attribute is, therefore, hope, understood as “a matter of attitude, a kind of reaction to an undesirable present and an aspiration to overcome all difficulties by the imagination of possible alternatives” (Vieira 2010: 6).

Utopia understood in the light of hope first acquired a historical dimension with the arrival of modernity when it began to be viewed as an attainable future, rather than merely an imagined society. Thus, a modern utopian project began to develop in which time and space served to define how the good place should be and how to achieve it on earth. Subsequently, the course of the twentieth century, marked by a deep social and environmental crisis, revealed the fragility of this project, causing urgent concern about the relations that human beings were establishing with their contemporaries, nature, and future generations. This, in turn, raised the issue of the sustainability of the modern utopian project and of the planet itself. In the face of critics of the consequences of the modern utopian project, the alternative adopted has been sustainable development, ultimately implying a progression of the modern utopian project.

This solution has an intrinsic contradiction: the problem was seen as part of the solution, ignoring a substantial dimension. In our view, sustainable development as an oxymoron (Valera and Marcos 2014) has, because of its conceptualization of space, not managed to transcend utopia as something that is not in any place. In what Vieira (2010) has termed a “euchronia”—or a good place in the future—time and space are separated, and the “good place” may exist only in the future. This concept has fostered a view of sustainable development as not being in any specific place, posing a central question: how is it possible to transcend the modern utopian facet of sustainable development to inhabit more sustainable places?

To answer this question, this paper first reviews the modern bases of utopia and analyzes its paradigmatic and ontological assumptions about knowledge, time, and space. There we show how modern knowledge of the world—characterized by the predominance of technical-scientific rationality—fulfilled a central function by establishing the foundations and mechanisms for achieving the place of perfection, well-being, and human progress. At the same time, we show how this project implied a problematic relationship with knowledge of reality as it was based on its instrumental and axiological neutrality.

Secondly, we look at how the “good place,” defined by the human perfectibility of infinite progress, acquired for the first time a historical dimension in a possible future, thanks to a correlative notion of time as a linear, objective, and measurable dimension, and fulfilling the function of endowing utopia for the first time with historicity and temporal proximity. We recognize, then, that the modern utopian project established a relationship of prioritization of time as a construction

of consciousness detached from the world, viewing the course of Western history as superior to other historical trajectories.

Thirdly, we see, along with the projection of utopia in a historical future mediated by the idea of progress, a temporalized and imagined spatial conceptualization emerged that, albeit giving the modern utopian project proximity, also served to repress the meaning of space. This shows the utopian project related to space in a cavalier manner, revealing one of the essential attitudes of the modern condition and one of the most problematic dimensions for sustainability.

In the second section, we examine briefly that the notion of progress of the enlightenment, fundamental to the modern utopian project, was inherited by the proponents of the Industrial Revolution and we see how its consequences were criticized early in 1770. The above sketched the first critics of a growth-oriented and deregulated economy and functioned as a basis for environmental movements of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries that started to denounce the environmental crisis of the period. The environmental movement and the ecological economics were interwoven in the 1980s through the concept and politics of sustainable development. Yet we argue the dominant view of sustainable development readapted the founding premises of the modern utopian project to the situation of the socio-ecological crisis, without a deep discussion of the roots of the problem.

Finally, we look at how the understanding of sustainable development as an ideal formula—to which we can come close but never reach—met with a response in line with the contemporary shift in utopian studies, based on reviving the political function of utopia, but insisting on a temporalized vision of space, which does not open the way to sustainable places. To go beyond the modern utopia of sustainable development, we suggest understanding sustainability from a relational perspective as a means of rethinking the categories of space, time, and knowledge. Indeed, our main purpose in this paper is to move from the modern utopia of sustainable development to what we refer to as “sustainable *topos*.” By suggesting this, we seek to foster a praxis of sustainability based on an ecological way of thinking—as suggested by Leopold and Næss in the field of environmental philosophy and by several indigenous groups and “non-Western” knowledge systems (Berkes 1999)—and ultimately to amplify a hermeneutic of sustainability not focused on the notion of utopia, but on the dynamic emergence of “nowtopias”. When talking about nowtopias, we must necessarily refer to Carlsson’s (2008) intuitions and definition, which basically concern “creating and enabling of forms of living, working and producing together which sit outside of capital exchange and instead generate new commons and new forms of relationality” (Gearey and Ravenscroft 2019: 454). In this regard, nowtopia essentially deals with the concept of degrowth—that implies a reduction of the social use of resources in pursuit of the improvement of the quality of life—as it “refers to territorial processes of regeneration that involve non-wage labour and are motivated by a desire to produce an alternative future, today” (Demaria, Kallis, and Bakker 2019: 438).

II. THE MODERN UTOPIAN PROJECT OR THE MODERN NATURE OF UTOPIA

Utopia can be viewed as one of the most visible consequences of modernity and its understanding as something inseparable from the modern system of thought (Kumar 1987, Wegner 2002, Celentano 2005, Hedrén and Linnér 2009, Vieira 2010). This is what Vieira (2010) calls “euchronia” (as a move from the good/non-place to a good place in the future): she frames it as a product of the logic of the Enlightenment stimulated by revolutions that took place in the field of the sciences. As we will show in this section, the modern system of thought encouraged and produced a utopian project in which the functions of and relationships between knowledge, time, and space (Hedrén and Linnér 2009) were conceived in such a way that the “good place” was situated in a possible future of well-being, human perfection, and progress.

Firstly, modern knowledge of the world, characterized by the predominance of technical-scientific rationality, fulfilled a central function in the modern utopian project by establishing the foundations and mechanisms for reaching a “better place.” However, as we will see, this project implied a problematic relationship with knowledge of nature as it was based on its instrumental and axiological neutrality. The faith in linear reasoning and progress in science and technology to achieve material progress lies in the scientific revolution of the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, where principles of classical science and philosophy were developed following Newton’s ideas. A tenet at this epoch was “what is truly real is mathematical and measurable, but what cannot be measured cannot have true existence” (Pepper 2019: 138); that is to say, only objective knowledge was seen as true and correct. The purpose of this type of knowledge and its social role can be found in Bacon’s progressive notion of science: science is the most important driver to advance in truth and truth as the only way to achieve progress in improving society’s material conditions.

Enlightenment philosophes of the Eighteenth century took Newton’s ideas, extended Bacon’s argument, and adapted John Locke’s theory of knowledge for the improvement of society’s moral condition through a scientific view of society. From that moment, the potential of progress was understood as infinite. In this way, “the rise of classical science thus appears particularly associated with the rise of secular values: notions of progress and liberalism which were increasingly to regard nature as something to be controlled and manipulated for utilitarian purposes” (Pepper 2019: 148). Judeo-Christianity also played a role in this move, as the Christian idea of eschatological accomplishment survived in the idea of progress (Raulet 1976).

In this way, this scientific view replaced organic philosophies that prevailed in Medieval and Renaissance cosmologies. The notion of the intimate relationship between humans and nature changed. From an ecocentric point of view, classical science set the foundations of an anthropocentric view of nature. The scientific revolution was simultaneous with the start of industrial capitalism, and later when capitalism rose in Europe and America, it depended directly on the exploitation

of natural resources and was supported by exploitative attitudes that are inherent in the scientific view of the world (Pepper 2019). From there, human societies irrevocably began to change, and human progress also started to be associated with economic growth, material advancement, and the legitimate domination of nature as a means of guaranteeing development (Du Pisani 2006). In other words, it brought “certainty in the exact knowledge guaranteed by science, the political notion of man’s dominion over nature, and the high goal of achieving human well-being in this way” (Codina and Díaz 2006: 36).

In this sense, knowledge began to breed optimism about guaranteeing a “good place” in the future. As Bloch pointed out, the ideology of progress is a utopian future because the future is estranged from the present (Broca 2014): “utopia was confined to the best constitution, to an abstraction of constitution, instead of being perceived and cultivated in the concrete totality of being” (Bloch 2000: 178). In other words, the rational action of the human being, together with technology based on the logic of continuous progress and growth, is viewed as impartial, and disinterested instruments that lack moral implications and responsibilities towards the environment.¹ That is why, even though the hope placed in human rationality and technical-scientific developments increased human beings’ confidence in being able to reach “the perfect place,” they did so through the use and subjection of the environment, leading to its future of degradation and the indiscriminate exploitation of resources (Boyden and Dovers 1997).

Secondly, the “good place,” defined by the human perfectibility of infinite progress, first acquired a historical dimension in a possible future, thanks to a correlative notion of time as a linear, objective, and measurable dimension, giving utopia historicity and temporal proximity. With this, the modern utopian project established a relationship of prioritization of time as a construction of consciousness detached from the world. Modernity came to replace the notion of time as a cyclical recurrence (Valera and Tambone 2014) with a belief in the linear advancement of humanity as a distinctive product of the modern Western world (Kumar 1987, Davis 2012) and also of Christian axioms that underpinned Western thought “giving expression to the linear conception of time as a directed succession of events, that transformed the way of thinking about history and progress” (Du Pisani 2006: 84). This conceptualization was reflected in a new way of thinking about the past as a closed chapter that could not threaten the progress of the future (Davis 2012). In other words, “by projecting the ideal society in the future, the utopian discourse enunciated a logic of causalities that presupposed that certain actions . . . might afford the changes that were necessary in order to make the imagined society come true” (Vieira 2010: 10). Thus, if human perfectibility was possible and infinite, time must inevitably be a sequence of fixed and hierarchical states that allow human beings to advance towards a final state of earthly perfection (Liakos 2011).

¹ Illich explains growth is a question of technology, a historically unique relation of humans to their instruments, what he refers to as the disembodiment effects of modern technologies (Samerski 2018).

By prioritizing the human quest for the innovations brought by progress, this linear, irreversible, and infinite conception of time fulfilled a key function in that, for the first time, it gave utopia a historical dimension: a possible and close future (Vieira 2010). However, as the modern utopian project conceived time as an objective, external dimension that measures and situates, it produced the inverse effect: a loss of all anchorage with space (Giraldo 2015), because it established a relationship of prioritization of time as an abstract mental representation over and above the lived experience of time in space (Ingold 1993). Additionally, the hierarchical or scalar conceptualization of modern time established a value differentiation under which the past had to be overcome by affirming the superiority of the state reached by the Western world, contributing to the globalization of its history of modernity (Albet and Benach 2012).

Thirdly, the projection of utopia in a historical future mediated by the idea of progress brought with it correlatively a temporalized and imagined spatial conceptualization which, albeit giving the modern utopian project proximity, also served to repress the meaning of space. This shows the utopian project related to space disparagingly, revealing one of the essential attitudes of the modern condition. Namely, space was temporarily organized through the modern geographic imagination, configuring the spatial differences of the territories in a historical sequence where some are ahead of others on the line of progress (Albet and Benach 2012). This resulted in the repression of the meaning of spatiality itself and space continued to be in no specific place (Ingold 2015). To put it another way, “the standard version of the history of modernity—as a narrative of progress emanating from Europe—represents a discursive victory of time over space” (Albet and Benach 2012). This is corroborated by the almost total disparagement with which place is treated as a conceptual category in European philosophical discussions (Giraldo 2015). Davis (2012) reaffirms this when characterizing the modern utopian project as a Euclidean inspiration of space: “It can thus speak only in the future tense—the language of progress—and is inherently uninhabitable” (Davis 2012: 148).

The instrumental and axiological neutrality of knowledge began to show, rather than moving the history of humanity closer to a “good place,” the idea of progress central to the modern utopian project, with all it contained, was taking it even further away. As we will see in the next section, the modern utopian project began to reveal its lack of sustainability and that of the planet and was subject to criticism.

III. THE UNSUSTAINABILITY OF THE MODERN UTOPIAN PROJECT AND THE OPTION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: THE CONTINUATION OF A UTOPIA?

The notion of human progress of the Enlightenment was inherited by the proponents of the Industrial Revolution that started to position economic liberalization and technological advancement at the center of the idea of progress. In the 1770s, critics appeared against a growth-oriented and deregulated economy and made visible its negative effects on society, the economy, and the environment. They mainly

focused on the privatization of land, increased consumption of natural resources, and the jeopardization of livelihood for a more sustainable living. Although these critics did not generate an ecotopia they were fundamental inspirations for the detractors of industrialism in the next century and for the environmental movement of the twenty-first century (Cardonna 2014).

In the 1960s the environmental movement was taking shape through the work of scholars, students, activists, organizations, etc. who started to talk about the “environmental crisis” to the public audience:

These works were not only critiques of, say air pollution or overpopulation, they were also much deeper critiques of the harmful myths of technological progress, modernity, and The Industrial Revolution. The assumption was that Western industrialism had failed to live up to its own utopian promises and had instead created an ecological crisis that threatened life on Earth. (Cardonna 2014: 94)

Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962) helped to define environmentalism as a new worldview against ecosystem destruction and industrial growth in the name of progress (Cardonna 2014). An important consequence of *Silent Spring* was it triggered international discussions and positioned environmental regulations as a political avenue to stop ecological degradation. The figure of scientist-activist was prominent with figures such as Udall (1963), White (1967), Ehrlich (1968), Hardin (1968), and Commoner, Corr, and Stamler (1971)—just to mention a few examples—and impacted the political arena with national laws (see, for example, Udall in the U.S.), the international conformation of the Green Party, and the foundation of international institutions and conferences to confront the ecological crisis (e.g., the UN Environment Programme, Conference of the Human Environment of Stockholm 1972). The latter laid the idea of international collaboration as the main accord to solve environmental problems.

Simultaneously, “ecological economics” grew as a school of thought that tried to integrate ecological concerns into a capitalist economic framework to rethink neoclassical economics. The principal critique was that the modern growth economy was unsustainable for a finite planet; historical events such as the oil crisis of 1973 helped to crystallize the idea of limitations of growth (Purvis, Mao, and Robinson 2019). Other critics against economic development programs implemented in the “developing world” also emerged (Caldwell 1984). In the 1980s, ecological and social critiques of economic development became related in the term sustainable development (O’Riordan 1985, Barbier 1987, Brown et al. 1987). Eventually, a dominant view of the concept of sustainable development emerged. It was mainly based on establishing limits to growth (Castro 2004)—e.g., by suggesting a reformist agenda of “sustainable growth” (UNCED 1992) and later of “green economics” (UN 2012).

The integrative model of conventional sustainable development formulated in the wake of the Brundtland Report (WCED 1987) and the Rio de Janeiro Local Agenda 21 (UNCED 1992) established a political compromise between the limits of growth and the need for economic development (Mitcham 1995). It was based

on three fundamental principles: i) economic development in line with ecological limitations, ii) redistribution to ensure the quality of life for all, and iii) the use of resources in such a way as to ensure the quality of life of future generations (Klarin 2018). As stated in the Brundtland Report (1987), sustainable development is a type of development that “meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (WCED 1987: 19) because “the ‘environment’ is where we all live; and ‘development’ is what we all do in attempting to improve our lot within that abode. The two are inseparable” (WCED 1987: 19). To achieve these objectives, Local Agenda 21 (UNCED 1992) stated it was necessary to strengthen the scientific basis for sustainable management, enhance scientific understanding, and building up scientific capacity and capability.

The option for sustainable development understood in this way implies, first, the self-perpetuation of the global system embodied in the modern utopian project as well as its universalizing character. Like the “Global Program for the World” (WCED 1987), it focuses “primarily on the needs and interests of humans . . . was concerned with securing a global equity for future generations by redistributing resources towards poorer nations to encourage their economic growth to enable all human beings to achieve their basic needs” (Du Pisani 2006: 92). It sought to solve the socio-ecological crisis by visualizing it as a shared problem in which all individuals and generations are integrated into a global society through the assimilation of their needs and aspirations by the prevailing economic system (Marcuse 2013). It sought a solution through planning and international intervention, setting a path of global development (Redclift 2005). It, therefore, remained close to the universalizing nature of the modern utopian project characterized by a world system vision and a globalization of history under modern parameters.

Secondly, the predominant view of sustainable development—enshrined in UN declarations of recent decades—has glorified the prevailing economic system, indicating “states should cooperate to promote a supportive and open international economic system that would lead to economic growth and sustainable development in all countries, to better address the problems of environmental degradation” (UNCED 1992: Principle 12). Over the years, there has been a consolidation of this view: “We commit to work together to promote sustained and inclusive economic growth, social development and environmental protection and thereby to benefit all” (UN 2012: Art. 6). In other words, by positioning economic development in the form of “sustained growth” and a “green economy” policy (UN 2012: Art. 6, Art. 56) as the only possible alternative to the problems posed by the socio-ecological crisis (Kallhauge, Sjöstedt, and Corell 2005, Hedrén and Linnér 2009), it installed of a view close to the epistemology of progress (Salazar 2018). In this way, it put capitalist economic growth at the center of discourse (WCED 1987, Mebratu 1998, Benton 1999, Jacobs 1999, Robert, Parris, and Leiserowitz 2005) and led to economic arguments² (Castro 2004, Singer 2010) for charting the road to a

² Environmental economists suspicious of the idea of sustainability contributed to this configuration of sustainable development by providing tools for policymakers (Castro 2004). Their arguments

“golden age of morality” through which generalized and equitably shared wealth and preservation of the environment would be possible in the future (Harlow, Golub, and Allenby 2011).

Thirdly, because sustainable development depends on objective scientific evaluation, it favors an exclusive system of thought: the dominant paradigm of science (Norgaard 1988). Its corollary is the use of measurement (Redclift 2005) and technology to advance towards sustainability (Beder 1994, Kos 2012) based on the belief that “continual growth in a finite world is possible through the powers of technology, which will enable us to find new sources or provide alternatives if a particular resource appears to be running out. Otherwise, technology will help us use and reuse what we have left in the most efficient manner” (Beder 1994: 1). This is evident in the promotion of the green economy by the Rio+20 Report (UN 2012), which tended to reduce the solution of environmental and social problems to a matter of technological innovation and economic growth (Murphy 2015, Salazar 2018, Salazar and Cerna 2020).

Finally, it perpetuated an understanding of nature as “a potential resource for humanity,” i.e., as a simple means to achieve human ends or satisfy the “needs” of a generation of human beings from a quite limited temporal perspective. This mode of appropriation of the natural world culminates in the valuation of nature in terms of “natural capital” or, in other words, as a set of goods through which to increase human well-being without taking into account the resulting damage to the richness, integrity, and diversity of life as a whole. Environmental ethics have, from the start, addressed this criticism (Valera 2016). Næss is critical of the concept of sustainable development contained in the report “Our Common Future” of the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED 1987): “There is sustainable development if, and only if, it ensures that it meets the vital needs of the present-day human population without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own vital needs” (Næss 2005a: 140). The concept of sustainable development expressed in the Brundtland Report (1987) is thus limited for three main reasons: i) it does not define the needs or which types of needs should be given priority and why, ii) an approach that focuses on satisfying needs related to material progress in developed countries and emphasizes the global expansion of unlimited progress of this type would in the long run aggravate the ecological crisis and, iii) by emphasizing the idea of satisfying human needs, it forgets “full ecological sustainability shall mean or include conservation of the richness and diversity of life-forms” (Næss 2005a: 143).

In short, the hegemonic discourse of sustainable development rearticulated and adapted the principles of the modern utopian project to the new circumstances of the twenty-first century. As Harlow, Golub, and Allenby (2011) state: “The ability

emphasized market measures (Pearce and Warford 1993) and the role of the government in proposing objectives and creating a market that would permit their achievement at a lower cost than the prohibition policies advocated by environmentalists. In this way, they encouraged nature’s conceptualization as capital or an asset in discourse about sustainable development as conventionally understood (Daly 1990, Pearce and Warford 1993).

to address social justice in concert with environmental conservation and regeneration while maintaining capitalist economic growth is a utopian vision built on the remnants of utopian past.” Although these authors argue sustainable development is heir to other utopian issues that converge contradictorily in the discourse, it was a collective capitalist project that ended up predominating and, by shifting from nature to the environment as something scientifically manageable by the modern global economy (Allenby 2013), imposed the modern principles of neoclassical economics (Harlow, Golub, and Allenby 2011). In other words, the economic development paradigm, where the foundations of modern consciousness are found, prevailed, facilitating a progression of utopian thought (Rich 1994, Mitchell 2002, Redclift 2005, Hedrén and Linnér 2009).

Sustainable development was, therefore, a mainstream vision based on the *status quo* (Hopwood, Mellor, and O’Brien 2005) because it leaned towards economic growth and modernizing points of view (Du Pisani 2006). Specifically, it rested on the same anthropocentric vision of the world laid out in the modern utopian project, incorporating social and environmental variables into the prevailing economic regime, and distancing itself from a social and ecological ontology of the human dimension as had been suggested by the environmentalist movement (Salazar 2018). Complementarily, because it saw economic growth and technology as the solution to the socio-ecological problems, it took the form of a global capitalist project based on the vision of continuous modern progress led by technocracies (Harlow, Golub, and Allenby 2011). That is to say, it remained anchored in a notion of modern knowledge under which the predominance of scientific rationality is viewed as the key to progress and development when it is, in fact, the cause of the problem. In addition, by charting a path to a “golden age of morality based on these principles, it perpetuated the notion of time and space understood in modern terms, transforming sustainable development into what some of its critics have termed a ‘versatile magic formula’ to which we can come close, but never reach” (Becker and Secretariat 1998).

Taken together, this poses a central problem. If the call for sustainability was born out of the crisis of the modern utopian project and sustainable development was offered as an alternative solution to the socio-ecological crisis, this implies sustainable development cannot only be considered as the progression of the modern utopian project, but also this project is understood as part of the solution and not of the problem. This contradiction raises the also fundamental question of how to transcend the modern utopian facet of sustainable development to inhabit more sustainable futures?

IV. BEYOND MODERN UTOPIA: FROM SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT TO SUSTAINABLE *TOPOI*

In the twenty-first century, utopian thinking has undergone a transformation as a result of skepticism about ideas of progress and theories of modernization. This has led to a paradigmatic shift in contemporary utopian studies (Liakos 2011, Davis 2012). In a bid to distance themselves from the abstract modern utopia, these

studies have tended to re-situate the “desire to live in a better place” in the quest for historical alternatives to the existing order (Wallerstein 1998, Bloch 2000) and in the redefinition of the focus of action of the utopia in the present (Vieira 2010). In the case of reflections on environmental policies, this shift has taken two general forms. In one, utopia is seen as a process or plan of changes which, rather than describing perfect visions of the world, would inspire the quest for mechanisms through which to gradually implement the objectives of sustainable development in the present (Barry 2006, Kos 2012, Płachciak, Zielinska, and Bilan 2015, Bukrejewski, Latawiec, and Matuszewska 2019). In the other form, which recovers the reflective and critical vision of utopia as such, it is capable of illuminating alternatives for addressing current global challenges regarding development and the environment (Hedrén and Linnér 2009, Harlow, Golub, and Allenby 2011, Steffen et al. 2011, de Freitas 2015, Giraldo 2015).

The former has contributed important elements to the discussion about sustainable development by giving it a present historicity but has concentrated on issues of economic security and its modes of local implementation, sidestepping a decisive questioning of the underlying principles of the hegemonic sustainable development consensus and its obvious contradictions. The second, on the other hand, contributes more inspiring elements that do question the hegemonic character of the sustainable development discourse, doing so from different standpoints: the problematization of its economic assumptions, a broadening of the range of political alternatives other than objectivist and depoliticized science (Hedrén and Linnér 2009, Söderbaum 2009, Harlow, Golub, and Allenby 2011), and rescuing the principles of communality and solidarity for the survival of the human being in the face of ecological devastation (Giraldo 2015). However, none offer ideas on how to overcome the oxymoron of sustainable development: the theoretical and practical problematization of place.

The problem of the proposals discussed above is not so much that they rescue the utopian potential, but that it is not used to question the epistemological, ontological, and axiological foundations that make the sustainable development discourse problematic as a modern utopian project. Therefore, to draw on this potential and go beyond the modern utopia of sustainable development and inspire a transition towards what we refer to as sustainable *topos*, we propose to redefine sustainability based on a *topographical way of thinking*. The latter is intended to enrich and broaden the idea of “nowtopias” described in the first part of the manuscript, by providing them with a clearer epistemological basis. So, what do we mean by a *topographical way of thinking*?

Thinking topographically implies recognizing both the connection and the conceptual distinction between place and space. The concept of place has proved elusive, little analysis has been devoted to it (Casey 1993) and there is little clarity as to its definition (Massey 1992). As noted by Malpas (2018), the notion of space is inseparable from any attempt to define place:

Just as space has come to be associated with a narrow concept of physical extension, so too has place come to be viewed as a matter of simple location within a larger

spatial structure. Place, after all, is not separable from some notion of spatiality. Consequently, within a framework in which space is not only given a privileged role, but is also understood within the narrower frame of physical extension alone, there will also be a tendency towards a similarly narrow and ‘spatialised’ understanding of place. (Malpas 2018: 27–28)

This asymmetric link between space and place can be understood considering the historical trajectory of these concepts in the Western systems of thought. Although both were related to the Greek concepts of *topos* and *chora*,³ they were gradually eclipsed by the word *kenon* or emptiness, which played a significant role in the development of the concept of space in the framework of the modern scientific paradigm (Casey 1993). Indeed, underlying the concept of emptiness is “the idea of a pure realm of ‘containment’ of the sort that is arrived at, for instance, when one abstracts the thing from its enclosing surroundings so that what is left is nothing but an empty but open ‘space’—and it is precisely this idea that lies at the heart of thinking about space” (Malpas 2018: 26). This means modern thought makes a “characteristic attempt to abolish the limits of the human, to transcend the limitations imposed by the place, to open a sphere of spatiality without restrictions” (Malpas 2015: 221).

Despite this, the very characteristics of place—as something endowed with content and its own character—give it an inherent heterogeneity that reveals the connection between space and place (Casey 1997). The differentiation of place implies a relationality that is essential to it: “No place exists except in relation to others and each one contains others that are connected with it. In this way, the distinctive character of places is something that emerges through the interaction between them, and not from their absolute separation” (Malpas 2015: 207). This means, from the standpoint of a topographical way of thinking, the notion of place carries within it the concepts of openness, spaciousness, or location, which are central to the concept of space. Place is, thus, a kind of

opened space, but it is a space opened within a boundary, and so the space that appears in place is a space that takes on an almost ‘felt’ quality that is quite distinct from the smoothed-out, abstracted mode of extension that is ‘space’ as it is understood apart from place. . . . The bounded space of place is also a space inextricably bound to time, since the spatial openness of place, which arises through its boundedness, is essentially dynamic. (Malpas 2015: 5–6)

In other words, space and place are related not only through historical and linguistic links between the terms and spatial and topographical ideas, but also because place contains spatial characteristics. Place provides a framework for understanding any form of appearance because “place is integral to the very structure and possibility of experience” (Malpas 2018: 32). From a phenomenological point of view, this means human thought and experience are essentially rooted in the corporeal and

³ *Topos* and *chora* are based on the notion of a certain delimitation that also permits an opening or extension within them. The *topos* of Aristotle’s *Physics* is the most internal limit of a containing body (Hussey 1983) while, for Plato, *chora* is the womb or matrix from which things come into existence (Cornford 1937).

concrete and are, therefore, also intimately connected with the environmental world in its particularity and immediacy (Merleau-Ponty 1982). This is not only to say we experience ourselves and other entities in relation to places, but also the mind's structure is intrinsically tied to them in our ability to think, feel, and act (Malpas 2018). This implies putting topographical thinking at the center of understanding the human, accepting human existence is founded on place (Malpas 2015).

From this standpoint, it is not social forces that determine space or place. On the contrary, place is the matrix in which and from which social matters are configured while space (and, with it, time) provides their medium and form. At the core of the notion of the topographical is the idea that entities and events should not be understood in terms of some sort of predetermined internal structure as they are, on the contrary, essentially relational. That is, entities and events are determined in what they are because of the way they relate to other entities and events. Human identity, thus, becomes interdependent with the identity of the places where human lives are rooted. Moreover, the very fabric of human lives (the character and structure of both personal and collective life) and the character of the places and spaces where life is lived are also intertwined. Thus, a place "in which one can dwell is a place that provides a space in which dwelling can occur—it 'gives space' to the possibility of dwelling—and yet a place to dwell must be more than just a 'space' alone" (Malpas 2018: 22).

Here, we can notice an interesting link with different ecological ways of thinking, and, among them, Leopold's *Land Ethic* maybe is the most peculiar one. The strong connection between people and place—i.e., topology—is achieved by Leopold (1989: 203–204) through the concept of "community" as something more-than-human: "The individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts. . . . The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land." Leopold's concept of "land," thus, can be considered as the ancestor of the idea of "place" in topological thinking (and in Arne Næss's thought, indeed): the intimate relationship between inhabitants, habits, and their habitats (Rozzi 2012, 2016) is both present in these two paradigms. Indeed, they both remind us to think more carefully of our embeddedness in place and in rhythms of nature that are not the same as industrial time.

V. FINAL REMARKS: TOWARDS TOPICAL FUTURES

The implications of this topographical way of thinking are important for reconceptualizing sustainable development. In general, it allows us not only to question the abstract utopia related to this concept, but also to advance in seeking alternatives to the modern epistemology and ontology that have shaped the current dominant vision of sustainable development. That is why we propose—in a nutshell—to *move from the modern utopia of sustainable development to the praxis of topographical sustainabilities*. This implies, above all, transcending the ontological basis of the modern utopia expressed in its etymology—i.e., its disregard of place as relational and dynamic space of human habitation. U-topia as the "no place" or "that which

happens nowhere” lays the foundations for a praxis of sustainable development that—in line with modern thinking—conceptually disarticulates the spatio-temporal compression of place (Massey 2010) and, with it, denies the importance of social and ecological relations with which the places we inhabit are dynamically built. On the contrary, we believe in order to shape alternative futures in the face of the global socio-ecological crisis, it is key to connect the challenge and praxis of sustainability with the places of which we are relationally part.

Specifically, and considering the shift proposed in contemporary utopian literature, we can, by moving towards the idea of topographic sustainability, establish a theoretical and political framework through which to leave behind the problems of the dominant vision of sustainable development examined here.

First, it enables us to question the universalizing nature of modern thought and seek alternatives that offer space for a global sustainability praxis that emerges from heterogeneity and difference. Insofar as the globalization of history under modern parameters does not allow us to address the challenges of the global crises that arose from within it (Orr 2002, Leff 2010), it is imperative to investigate epistemological and ethical foundations for a global era based on an emerging ecological rationality—i.e., a relational paradigm that invokes the importance of the interconnections with which the places (or *topoi*) we inhabit are configured. An ecological rationality, “rooted in the imaginaries and in the subjectivity of the social actors of the nascent environmentalism” (Leff 2010: 44), can find its path insofar as it questions the rationality that promotes cultural homogenization and the assimilation and reduction of human needs in the terms of the prevailing economic system. At the same time, it offers an opportunity for a praxis of sustainability built on diversity, beyond the prevailing canons of knowledge. As Harlow, Golub, and Allenby (2011) proposed, self-examination of the dominant sustainability discourse opens the way to other forms of understanding human behavior and the inclusion of non-Western knowledge and approaches to sustainable development. Beyond the dominant scientific knowledge, a praxis of sustainability that takes spatio-temporal diversity into account also can—and must—harness the imaginative and creative capacity that cumulatively arises from cultures, societies, and minority and indigenous groups, located in different places but articulated globally. This is not something new, obviously. For example, among others, Kyle Whyte (2013) pointed out the importance of Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) for environmental thinking, more concretely for “non-Western” knowledge systems (Berkes 1999). The critique of decolonial thought (de Sousa Santos 2010a, de Sousa Santos 2010b, Mignolo 2010, Walsh 2012) also has argued along these lines, indicating the power relationships present in colonial spaces have historically established homogenizing epistemologies about knowledge and dwelling places. In this context, Leff (2010: 99) suggests the need to move towards the “deconstruction of metaphysical, scientific and postmodern thought” to make room for an environmental awareness based on the diversity of the territories. Similarly, Escobar (2018) suggests it is necessary to make visible the “*pluri-diversity*” of practices that refer to the spatiality, identity, and historicity of marginalized people

and communities, to generate civilizing transitions and enhance greater community autonomy. Our argument is also related to the debates that political ecology has led around the deep environmental injustice that emanates from global capitalism (Bustos, Prieto, and Barton 2017) and the need to move towards new forms of social-ecological order (Bookchin 1992) and Earth Democracy (Shiva 2005).

Therefore, this is the basis for our point of view, here. We are arguing we should apply this general kind of thinking—especially focusing on topographical praxis—to the particular issue of sustainability. In this sense, we intend to amplify this voice coming from “situated thoughts” (Andrew Light [2003] offers an interesting example of this topic), to offer a more practical hermeneutic of sustainability, thereby fostering the emergence of several “nowtopias” from different territories, communities, and cultures.

Second, it calls on us to abandon the notion of progress that underpins the prevailing neoliberal capitalism, now in crisis. This has a philosophical and a socio-economic dimension. In the former, the praxis of topological sustainabilities involves questioning the visionary nature of the utopia as “projecting the utopia on the horizon, placing it in linear time, on an endless path that recedes the further one walks, [is the reason] why it ends up becoming an inaccessible end. Limiting it to the guiding function means reducing it to the unattainable” (Giraldo 2015: 47). In line with the authors reviewed, we advocate a praxis of sustainability that draws on the inspiring force of the utopia but takes its shape from the present and the place, recognizing the complexity and socio-spatial particularities that configure the spaces we inhabit as well as the globalization of which we are part in the present. We, therefore, seek a praxis of sustainability that is not misaligned spatio-temporally, but is implemented pragmatically in particular places and conditions, close to people’s daily lives, and also boosts the synergies, forces, and knowledge arising from socio-ecological particularities.

In the socio-economic dimension, a praxis of topological sustainability implies revealing the dominant vision of sustainable development as a utopia in its final stage of realization—i.e., as an ideology (political program) that preserves and protects the status quo (Płachciak, Zielinska, and Bilan 2015)—or, following de Freitas (2015), moving forward in reformulating the concepts of economic development and citizenship as an ecumenical consensus that focuses on the establishment of a philosophical and social concept centered on interculturality and solidarity as a means of reordering the capitalist system.

Third, it serves as the framework for the emergence of an ethical point of view that allows us to understand the asymmetric relationships the human being has established with the world (Valera and Bertolaso 2016, Valera 2018: 663). We can no longer say the environment begins where the limits of our skin end, as we dwell the environment rather than living in it (Valera 2018). In other words: “The human self is then basically an ecological self, that is, a kind of part of ecosystems” (Næss 2005b: 222). One consequence of this idea is a change in the concept of environment. It ceases to be merely the setting of the human substance and becomes something that constantly forms relationships that are substantial to our existence.

A second consequence is that, if we *inhabit* the environment, we can share spaces with other beings in a different way (Valera 2018). “The human being needs the other—human and non-human—in order to reach its realization, since ‘our self-realization’ is hindered if the self-realization of others with whom we identify is hindered” (Næss 2005a: 516). In other words, if each form of life has its own nature that determines what type of life gives it the maximum satisfaction, the way is opened to consider that the very nature of every living being is worthy of respect.

From this perspective, the “ownership of place” may emerge. Please notice this ownership does not mean a relationship of slavery or property, as Leopold (1989) highlighted in his *Sand County Almanac*. Indeed, it is a mutual relationship of belonging between the inhabitant and the habitat, as Arne Næss (2009: 64) effectively highlighted: “The classic case of belonging to a place is that of being born and raised somewhere, just somewhere in a geographical sense, and then the place develops into the Place. But when the place is physically destroyed or unfit for living because of other factors, can a different place develop into the Place?”. Through dwelling, thus, the space becomes the Place: it is a space related to me, a place to which I belong and vice versa.

What, then, are the practical consequences of our way of living—inhabiting—in the future? The first, and most obvious, is we must rethink topical futures. Futures that can be embodied in the motto “Think Globally, Act Locally” (Murray 2017: 384), so temporal dynamics are closely linked to spatial ones. We have argued the starting point for these futures is the Place, lived and interpreted by all who inhabit it, and, of course, by multilateral policies that promote and facilitate an appropriate praxis of sustainability connected to socio-ecological determinants situated in particular places. Hence, our way of relating to these topical futures always will be “bottom-up” or based on (the valuation of) our experiences of inhabiting the Places.

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