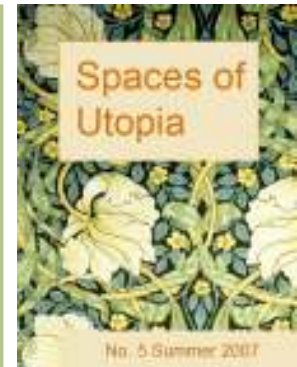


Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516) and Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (1854) as Possible Ecotopias¹

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The purpose of this paper is to examine how Sir Thomas More and Henry David Thoreau confront the related problems of limited resources and sustainability in their respective utopias. I see this as a contribution to a much needed debate concerning what constitutes an ecotopia today. I use the term, ecotopia, which was first coined by Ernest Callenbach in his seminal, ecotopian romance, *Ecotopia* (1975), in a very basic way to describe an ideal society that takes into account the problem of limited resources and tries to create a sustainable economy based on this limitation. The definition is intentionally broad in order to include as many examples of ecotopias as possible, both past and present. Ironically, in this particular field of utopian endeavor, the number of successful, practical experiments far exceeds the number of speculative ones. Given the propensity for utopians to dream first and act later, and the relatively low success rate of actual utopian experiments, it is surprising that there is no lack of practical experiments going on throughout the world in the form of eco-villages, cooperatives, etc. These

practical experiments are of course enormously important when it comes to finding viable solutions to specific environmental problems. But I think we also need to formulate more general, speculative scenarios if we are to successfully imagine the type of society we would like to live in. Examining the way utopian writers have dealt with the issue of limited resources and sustainability in the past can help us formulate such speculative scenarios for the future.

I have chosen works from two very different periods in history to give a more nuanced picture of how utopian writers can deal with the issue of limited resources and sustainability. Sir Thomas More was writing in the beginning of the sixteenth century when new methods of production and changing ownership patterns were transforming the old, feudal economy into the new, capitalist one; with resultant strains especially on local populations traditionally dependent on access to common lands to make their livelihood.² Henry David Thoreau was writing 350 years later in the middle of the nineteenth century when not only industrialism but also new agricultural methods were threatening nature; especially wild, untamed nature, which was of special importance for Thoreau.³ Both writers see the land as a limited natural resource and discuss ways of preventing undue pressure from being put on that resource. However, More and Thoreau have different approaches to solving the problem. More emphasizes the need for comprehensive social reforms, whereas Thoreau emphasizes the need for individuals to take responsibility for their interaction with nature.

In More's *Utopia*, agriculture is the basis of the economy. All citizens – men and women – work in agriculture; “with no exceptions” as More tells us (1992: 36).

All children are educated in agriculture, both theoretically in the Utopian schools and practically through work experience in the countryside. Utopian agriculture is very productive. According to More, the Utopians produce great quantities of “grain, honey, wool, flax, timber, scarlet and purple dye – stuffs, hides, wax, tallow, and leather, as well as livestock” (*idem*, 45). Utopians produce enough for their own nutritional needs as well as for creating a two-year reserve of food in case of hard times. Any surplus above and beyond this is exported.

More sees land primarily as an economic resource, but not one that is to be taken for granted. On the contrary, he is very conscious of the land being a limited resource and designs his economy in a way that will not put strains on it. The most important way he does this is by limiting the size of the population. This is not done by birth control, of which More does not approve. Instead it is done through movements of population, both within the island and between the island and the mainland if necessary. The basic social, economic, and educational unit of More's Utopia is the household; a unit consisting of from ten to sixteen adults and children. When the size of a household exceeds this number, the surplus population is moved to a household that has a lack of population. This is done to prevent one household from growing economically stronger and using more resources than another. The same policy is applied to the towns. Each town is to consist of no more than six hundred households, which makes a maximum number of some 9,000 inhabitants. If a town exceeds this stipulated limit, then people are transferred to towns that do not have enough population. Here again, the idea is to prevent one town from becoming economically stronger and using more resources

than another. By avoiding these concentrations of population, the Utopians ensure having even economic growth throughout the island. This in turn ensures that resources will be equally distributed between economic units and that not one piece of agricultural land will be subjected to more economic pressure than any other.

If the population of the island grows too large for its resources, then colonies are founded on the mainland, “wherever the natives have plenty of unoccupied and uncultivated land” (*ibidem*). This results in more land being brought under cultivation. If the local inhabitants of the colonized area of the mainland agree to work in concert with the Utopian colonizers, all is fine. But if they choose to oppose the colonizers, then the Utopians confiscate the land and cultivate it themselves. Thus, the Utopians avoid overpopulating their own land, but, ultimately, do so only at the expense of their weaker neighbors. It is easy to condemn More’s use of colonialism to solve Utopia’s population problems.⁴ However, he does highlight the problem of increasing population in relation to land as a limited resource – something that is not always done in the contemporary debate on sustainability.

In addition to limiting the size of the population of Utopia, the location of towns is designed to prevent strains being put on agricultural land. Altogether, there are fifty-four towns in Utopia. These are placed at regular intervals, approximately twenty-four miles apart, throughout the island. This is done to prevent an undesirable concentration of the urban population that would put strains on the local, rural economy. In order to protect the economic viability of the countryside, each town is surrounded by at least twelve miles of farmland. Where

the towns are farther apart, even more farmland is available. According to More, “No city wants to enlarge its boundaries” for fear of using up valuable farmland (*idem*, 32). If towns were to grow larger, they would automatically attract both people and resources from the surrounding countryside. This would be detrimental to the economy as a whole, since it would lead to an uneven economic development of town and country. More does not believe that the countryside should exist primarily to supply the towns with food and cheap labor. He is aware of the social and economic problems an uncontrolled flow of population from the countryside to the towns would create for both.

In addition to advocating balanced economic growth between town and country, More creates social and economic ties between town and country. He does so to create a better understanding amongst townspeople for the land and the importance of agriculture. One of these ties consists of townspeople building houses in the country and furnishing them with farm equipment. These houses are then used by the townspeople as dwelling places when they work there. These are not summer cottages, but large-scale households, which hold even more people than their urban counterparts. No rural house has fewer than forty men and women living in them, including two slaves. This compares to the maximum of sixteen adults and children of the urban household. The large size of the rural households suggests that they are primarily economic units, rather than the family units that make up the urban household.

Another tie between town and country is the alternating farm labor system More devises. Each year twenty persons move from the countryside back to the

towns, after having completed two years of work there. These people in turn are replaced by twenty new people from town who are sent to work for a two-year period in the countryside. This results in the average adult Utopian having considerable experience of farm labor. The editor of the Norton Edition of More's *Utopia*, Robert A. Adams, calculates that a man who has spent half his adult life on the farm would have had between ten and fifteen years of agricultural experience by the time he was forty (*idem*, 32 n4). Besides creating a link between town and country, More tells us that this system has been "solemnly established so that no one will have to do such hard work against his will for more than two years". Despite this hard labor, many people stay longer, since, as More says, they take "a natural pleasure in farm work" (*idem*, 32). As a final link between town and country, at harvest time people from the town – the exact number needed, as is stated with typical Utopian precision – go to the countryside to help with the work.

Nature exists in More's *Utopia*, both in the countryside, which consists mainly of cultivatable land, and in the "large gardens" that are situated in the courtyards of the urban household dwellings (*idem*, 34). The people are very fond of these and spend considerable time working in them. They do this for two reasons: they delight in the work and the different streets compete with each other for the finest gardens. In these gardens people cultivate "vines, fruits, herbs and flowers, so thriftily and flourishing that I have never seen any gardens more productive or elegant than theirs", says Hythloday, More's narrator. According to More, one will find "nothing else in the whole city more useful or more pleasant to the citizens" (*idem*, 35). For this reason it is assumed that King Utopus paid special

attention to the siting of these gardens. The twofold description of the gardens being both “useful” and “pleasant” shows that they have both economic and non-economic importance. Their economic importance lies in their being production units for nutritious supplements – the grapes, fruits and herbs mentioned above – to the basic Utopian diet that comes from rural agricultural production. Their non-economic importance lies in their being sources of pleasure and inspiration for the town dwellers. By providing these gardens, Utopian town planners allow nature to be experienced within the urban environment. As controlled representations of nature, they seem, in fact, to be more important aesthetically to the town dwellers than the cultivated fields outside the towns. Further, one should not underestimate the aesthetic role these gardens play in a functionalist society such as More’s Utopia. Utopian society places little importance on ornamentation or the decoration of private or public buildings. Nor does it seem to value other types of artistic works, such as painting or sculpture, favoring training only in “necessary crafts” (*idem*, 39).

More and Thoreau have very different conceptions of nature. For More, nature is primarily an economic resource, consisting mainly of cultivatable fields. The only exception to this purely economic view is More’s attitude toward the enclosed gardens. As seen above, these have both economic and non-economic value, providing produce as well as being a source of pleasure and inspiration. Thoreau reverses this order of priorities. For him, nature primarily has non-economic value. To be sure, Thoreau accepts that land needs to be cultivated in order to produce food, but this is only one way in which nature provides for

humankind. More important is the role nature plays as a source of pleasure and inspiration.

This difference in approach to nature is illustrated in their respective definitions of what constitutes a garden. For More, a garden is the man-made, enclosed space in the courtyard of the urban household. For Thoreau, the entire earth is a 'cultivated garden'. It includes not only "cultivated fields" but also "prairies and forests"; the latter being examples of "wild nature" Thoreau so highly prizes and praises. All nature – cultivated land and wild nature – is "equally cultivated like a garden" (Thoreau 1992: 112); not by humans, according to Thoreau, but by a power greater than humans.

Because they have different attitudes towards nature, Thoreau chooses to interact with nature in a different way than More. Instead of rearranging nature to best suit human needs, as More does, Thoreau does his best to minimize the effect his activities have on the delicate ecosystem of the land. We see this in the way he chooses to build his house and cultivate his bean field while living at Walden Pond.

Thoreau builds his cabin in an environmentally friendly manner. He does most of the work himself, even if this means taking longer to build his cabin. He cuts down pine trees that are standing close to the location of his intended cabin, thus avoiding transportation costs and the use of manufactured boards. In addition, Thoreau uses recycled materials – planks and nails – obtained from a shanty in the vicinity that he buys and dismantles. When Thoreau cuts down the pine trees, instead of using a new axe, he uses an old one that he has borrowed.

When the axe needs sharpening he does this himself, instead of taking it to a blacksmith in town. Thoreau's ecological thinking does not stop there. When he needs a new wedge to fix the head of the axe on the handle, he finds a suitable piece of wood among the hickory chips that are lying close to his house. These are left over from his having made a clearing for his cabin. When it comes time to plaster his cabin due to the approaching winter, he makes his own lime from shells found on the shore of Walden instead of buying manufactured lime.

Thoreau wants to build a cabin that provides more than a bare minimum of protection against the elements but at the same time does not cut him off from nature. To this end he builds an "airy and unplastered cabin" (*idem*, 53). Thoreau does not fill in the cracks between the boards in the walls in order to let in fresh air and allow himself to remain in contact with nature outdoors. He brags that he does not need to go outside to get fresh air, since the air inside his cabin has lost none of its freshness. In an attempt to maintain this essential contact with nature, Thoreau delays plastering the walls, as long as possible, until the weather is freezing. His cabin becomes not so much a solid, imprisoning structure that cuts Thoreau off from the outside world, but a non-constricting structure that allows him to continue to engage with nature. Further emphasizing the transparent nature of his cabin, he says: "This frame, so slightly clad, was a sort of crystallization around me" (*idem*, 58). Thoreau likens his house to a birdcage that allows the maximum amount of interaction with his natural surroundings. At times he wants to get rid of even this minimal partition. When he moves his furniture outdoors for housecleaning, he imagines a dwelling without walls. He describes his desk and

chair as being happy outdoors and reluctant to go back inside. As opposed to the conventional “drawing room” of Concord houses, Thoreau prefers to entertain his guests in what he calls his “withdrawing room (...) on whose carpet the sun rarely fell”, which is in the pine wood behind his cabin.

Thoreau wants his home to be not only a home for himself, but for animals as well. He mentions the mouse who takes up residence beneath his floorboards whom he befriends when it comes up into his house. There are moles in his cellar “nibbling every third potato”, but Thoreau does not mind this since, as he argues, the moles have a right to his food as well. Later, the moles make themselves a snug bed from hair left behind after Thoreau’s plastering, which according to him shows that “even the wildest animals love comfort and warmth” (*idem*, 169). Thoreau even allows wasps to fly freely around him when it starts to get cold; stating that they did not harm him (*idem*, 160).

A final consideration in building his house is that it should be temporary. Thoreau only intended to stay in the woods for a limited period of time – two years as it turned out. Thoreau reminds us of the temporary nature of human structures in general by describing several former sites of human habitation he visited while living in Walden woods. These have all disintegrated and left little impact on nature: “These cellar dents, like the deserted fox burrows, old holes, are all that is left where once there was the stir and bustle of human life” (*idem*, 175). A sad scene, Thoreau feels; but one mitigated by the fact that nature in all its profusion has taken over; examples being “strawberries, raspberries, thimble-berries, hazel-bushes, and sumachs growing in the sunny sward there; some pitch-pine or

gnarled oak occupies what was the chimney nook, and a sweet-scented black-birch, perhaps, waves where the door-stone was" (*ibidem*). Thoreau knows that when he returns to Concord, his cabin will also return to nature; as indeed it did.

In addition to building his house, Thoreau cultivates a rather substantial area of two and a half acres of land. Thoreau uses most of this land to cultivate beans. However, he also grows potatoes, corn, peas and turnips. Cultivating the land constitutes a moral dilemma for Thoreau. First of all he has qualms about digging up the land at all, asking himself what right he has to uproot the "cinquefoil, blackberries, johnswort and sweet wild fruits and pleasant flowers" that grow there (*idem*, 104). Once he has cultivated the land, he has the same moral qualms about weeding. On the one hand he feels he must defend his crops against the intruding weeds, but on the other hand he sees this as an intrusion into a complex ecosystem: "Consider the intimate and curious acquaintance one makes with various kinds of weeds (...) disturbing their delicate organizations so ruthlessly, and making such invidious distinctions with the hoe, leveling whole ranks of one species and sedulously cultivating another" (*idem*, 108).

Thoreau reverses the conventional roles of Man as cultivator and Nature as that which is being cultivated. Instead of seeing himself as the agent upon whose efforts cultivation of the land depends, Thoreau sees himself as playing a relatively minor role in this process; emphasizing instead the role nature plays. He states: "This broad field which I have looked at so long looks not to me as the principal cultivator, but away from me to influences more genial to it, which water and make it green" (*idem*, 112).

In addition – just as was the case with building his house –, Thoreau argues that animals, as well as himself, should benefit from his interaction with nature. Thus, although in one place Thoreau complains about woodchucks eating one-third of the bean plants, and cautions prospective cultivators about this danger, he also realizes that the produce of the land he cultivates should not be for his own use only, but to provide for animals as well: “These beans have results which are not harvested by me. Do they not grow for woodchucks partly?” (*ibidem*).

Finally, he knows that his cultivated field, like his house, will not remain for ever. It too will return to nature. Thoreau is conscious while he cultivates his bean field that he is only a temporary part of a longer cycle of nature – cultivation –, nature that has been going on before him and will continue long after he has gone. With reverence he unearths the remains of the earlier Indian culture that has cultivated the same land; with reverence he carries out his own work of cultivation; and with reverence he lets his fields return to nature once again, perhaps at some time in the future to be cultivated once again by another group of humans. What links these different human cultures together through time are the ties with the land, producing what David M. Robinson calls “the commonality of the human experience” (1993: 336).

Thoreau gives us a highly individualized account of how we should interact with nature. The detailed account he gives us of his activities plus the minimalist approach he takes to interacting with nature, forces us to reevaluate the way we conceptualize nature and the kind of relation we would like to have with it. By looking at Thoreau’s example of building his house and planting his bean field, we

can come up with at least three basic guidelines for how to interact with nature. Two of these reinforce arguments that are being put forward in the contemporary environmental debate; the third is perhaps more “utopian”. The first guideline is that we should use as little of nature as possible when providing for human needs. The second is that human activities should have limited long-term effects on nature. The third – and this is the most utopian of the three – is that animals as well as humans should benefit from human activities.

This paper has examined the way two different utopian writers, who are writing three hundred and fifty years apart, confront the problems of limited resources and sustainability. They offer different approaches to solving these problems. Sir Thomas More emphasizes the need for social action; Henry David Thoreau, the need for individual action. If we see these two approaches as constituting two different strands in the current environmental debate, I feel that the emphasis today is very much on individual action, rather than integrated and comprehensive reform. In this respect the Thoreauvian tradition of individual responsibility is very much alive – as it should be. Unfortunately, broad-scoped and far-reaching social action seems to be less visible today. One reason for this can be the failure of governments to question the prevailing economic systems they are administering. Another can be the reluctance of people to change their consumption patterns. Even though the highly regulated society More designed in 1516 does not appeal to us today – as indeed it should not – his emphasis on the need for comprehensive, social change should remind us that we need collective as well as individual action. Creating new visions of ecologically sound societies

can be one way of highlighting both the importance of, and the need for, collective action.

Notes

¹ A shorter version of this paper was presented at the 8th International Utopian Studies Society Conference at Plymouth, England, 12-14 July 2007.

² For a discussion of these changes, see chapter three, "Farming for Profit: Pasture and Sheep-Grazing 1485-1558", in Ernle 1936.

³ For a discussion of how changing agricultural methods affected farming in Thoreau's home town of Concord, see Gross 1982.

⁴ For a discussion of More's *Utopia* in relation to early ideas on colonization, see Sweet 1999. For condemnation of Utopian colonization, see Adams' note 8 on page 41 of Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* (More 1992: 41 n8).

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