Boekbespreking van: Ecologische Utopieën

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This commitment largely depends on, and is connected with the ideas and experiences of other new social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, among which the democratization movement. Hence, one might wonder whether there is anything specifically ecological about the green view on democracy. After all, as the editors state, the most consistent meaning of democracy has always been "rule by the people". However, it is exactly this seemingly obvious definition that is attacked by the greens. In whatever way "the people" is defined, it does not include non-human species or the natural world, and so two challenges to the dominant definition emerge.

First of all, the nature of ecological problems suggests the need to consider a re-definition of the form of the democratic and moral community. If the answer to the question, "are human beings part of nature?", is yes, and if, moreover, the boundaries between humanity and the natural world are blurred and uncertain, it is harder to be categorical about restricting democracy to "rule by the people". As Mike Mills, writing from a biocentric perspective, argues: if nature could be represented in certain forms (even by humans acting on its behalf) this would mean that the moral community and the political community would become more congruent.

A second challenge to the current definition of democracy refers to the need to stretch its dimensions of time and place. Concerning the dimension of place: many contemporary environmental problems are global problems (destruction of the ozone layer, greenhouse effect) and so the impact of pollution may affect those living well beyond the place where it was created. As Doherty and de Geus argue, this inevitably leads to the issue of democratization at a transnational level. However, one might wonder whether this exclusively applies to ecological issues. After all, globalization is one of the essential features of many contemporary political issues.

The stretching of the time-dimension seems to apply more specifically to a green conceptualization of democracy. The impact of pollution inevitably challenges one to think about how obligations to future generations might be related to democracy. Saurin, for instance, has argued that pollution could be conceived as one of the "routine consequences of modernity". Increasingly we produce what we do not consume ourselves, and we consume what we do not produce ourselves. Distancing the site of production from the site of consumption also implies distancing the site of pollution from its original cause. Hence, the allocation of responsibility for this pollution is confused. To take the consequences of our decisions for future generations into account, our democratic decision-making procedures should be fundamentally adapted to our obligations to these generations.

The third broad question in the debate on green democracy referred to what a green democracy would be like. In the early years, green parties and radical green movements used to stress the need for participatory democracy. Only by challenging material inequalities and bureaucratic hierarchies, the argument ran, would a new communitarism emerge that would be powerful enough to overcome the atomized self-interest of individual consumers. In the 1990s however, the emphasis has shifted gradually from participatory democracy to ecological citizenship and associational democracy.

Whereas, according to Achterberg, existing forms of liberal democracy lack strong forms of associational life, associational democracy provides a better basis for sustainability as it entails the institutional form most likely to build global and intergenerational solidarity.

Opinions widely diverge with respect to the concrete form of associative democracy. According to Michael Kenny, the central concept of this form of democracy is "community", but in green circles at least three different interpretations are routinely confused: a nostalgic historical reading of community as a principle which underpinned social relations in the past; a sociological assertion that the bonds of community are under threat from the market; and a normative view that the ethics of community ought to determine the political and economic shape of contemporary society.

As Kenny observes, the problems associated with ecological communitarism echo some of the central themes of the so-called liberal-communitarism debate, and the works of some of the leading communitarian theorists – McIntyre, Sandel, Taylor, Walzer – contain many useful ideas about the nature and demands of community ties and identities.

By connecting different bodies of thought like this *Democracy and green political thought* presents a stimulating contribution to the discussion on the future of Western democracy, even though it does not offer any practical solutions.

Hein-Anton van der Heijden

M. de Geus, *Ecologische Utopieën: Ecotopia's en het milieudebat* (Ecological utopias: ecotopias and the environmental debate). Jan van Arkel, Utrecht 1996

In its early days, green political thought was as radical as green parties were inflexible. The theorists of the movement tried to develop either an ecosocialist ideology or one that was "neither right nor left" but went beyond Western industrialism and materialism. Green activists and politicians were less interested in taking political responsibility than in witnessing to the Green truth, raising eco-consciousness and mobilizing the masses. The introduction of the notion of sustainability changed all that: greens and non-greens developed a common language, recognized a shared interest in a *modus vivendi*, and defused the green bomb. In green political theory, the term "sustainable" has replaced the now unfashionable and even slightly suspect "green". On the research agenda, the introduction into green thought of elements of economic and political liberalism and democracy gained priority over deep-green interests. In environmental politics, all but the most radical activists have joined the powers that be in a dialogue about politically and economically feasible piece-meal strategies aimed at reducing the extent of environmental problems. The precise goals no longer seem worth bickering

about, the focus is on being practical, finding the right means and instruments. Green politics has become green policy.

In his latest book, Dutch green political theorist Marius de Geus opens a forceful and convincing attack on this development. He finds the evolution of the public debate on the environment in the direction of practical matters in itself commendable. Yet he argues that the initial, already ambiguous appreciation of greens, particularly green parties, for designs and blueprints of a more ecologically sane society has now changed into complete rejection. Hence, it is no longer clear where greens find their inspiration and where green politics should lead us. De Geus sets out to prove that green theorists and activists might gain considerably from a more positive interest in utopian schemes and novels.

De Geus' argument operates at two levels. Whereas chapters 2 to 10 discuss the ins and outs of a selection of environmentally benign utopias (ecotopias), the introductory and final chapters contain a more formal defence of the relevancy of utopianism for everyday green politics. Apart from illustrating the author's main thesis, the detailed discussion of ecotopias serves two purposes. For one, it makes the book easy reading, often more interesting than the original texts. It also gives the reader a working knowledge of the substance of several green utopian novels. As De Geus observes, utopian literature is hardly accessible to the Dutch reader. I know of only a few translations and even fewer serious studies in the Dutch language.

De Geus discusses no less than seven utopian authors: Thomas More, Henry Thoreau and William Morris as representatives of classical 'frugal' utopianism; Ebenezer Howard, Bernard Skinner, Aldous Huxley and Ernest Callenbach as modern illustrations. There is a degree of arbitrariness in this (as in any) selection. For instance, Henry Thoreau's Walden can hardly be called a utopia by De Geus' own standards: it is not a blueprint of a new and better society but a report of an attempt to escape modern life combined with a series of wandering reflections on diverse conditions of a more "natural" life. Furthermore, De Geus sees a break in the history of ecotopianism somewhere between the "classical" Morris (1891) and the "modern" Howard (1898), but I fail to see the difference in "modernity" between, say, Morris and Huxley (1962).

More importantly, De Geus immediately (p. 14) discards utopias (technotopias) in which abundance, luxury and wealth play a central role in favour of more frugal versions of the ideal society. The former are, he states, more like descriptions of the direction in which our modern materialistic society has developed than panorama's of a better, greener world. Hence, "frugal" ecotopias will be far more useful in the debate on the shape of a sustainable society. This is a rather odd supposition given the fact that de Geus admits, in the course of his analysis of ecotopianism, that the green society need not be too frugal (p. 203) and that modern technological gadgets can in fact be far more ecologically sane than a romantic life in the woods (p. 182). It is even more odd in view of De Geus' theses that the debate on the environment lacks substantive ideas about the desirable shape of a sustainable society (p. 12); that the goal of "sustainable development" is vague enough to allow a multitude of conceptions

of the green society (p. 215); and that greens should be more open to grand views of the shape of things to come. De Geus himself, on the other hand, seems to have a far more determinate idea of where we are supposed to be heading: towards frugality. But if sustainable development allows so many options, why can't technotopia be one of them? What happened to the idea of keeping an open mind?

A final comment on De Geus' selection of ecotopias concerns his (tacit) criteria for classifying a utopian scheme as "ecological". One may assume that the word meant nothing to More or Morris – it had not even been invented then. Hence, "ecological" must be an attitude towards nature that De Geus has interpreted into their work. One of the elements of this attitude seems to be the recognition of intrinsic value in nature (p. 62), another abstention from attempts to control and subject nature (p. 16, 198). Both are often hard to discover in the texts De Geus discusses. For instance, More's reason for treating nature with respect seems to be that Mother Nature may otherwise hit back (p. 63); his Utopians fill their days with gardening and agriculture, not with hunting and gathering. Morris and Howard share an interest in turning nature into a garden; Skinner wants to turn it into farmland. Thoreau and Callenbach are in fact the only ones who come close to an appreciation of wilderness and to an explicit recognition of the intrinsic value of nature. The one common factor in all these utopias appears to be that they describe social structures that ensure an economical use of natural resources, not because resources are finite, nor because of what economy means to nature, but because a frugal lifestyle would be good for mankind and mankind apparently has to be forced to be happy. This observation links up with my critique in the previous paragraph.

Although De Geus' discussion of ecotopias is both thrilling and challenging, the essence of his book lies in the outer shell, in the introductory and final parts. It is here that he discusses the advantages, disadvantages and relevancy of utopianism itself. Formally speaking, if these arguments were any good, the discussion of examples would be redundant; and if it they were not, examples would not save his project.

The formal argument in favour of utopianism begins with what looks like a logical fallacy: De Geus tries to discredit anti-utopian arguments. He does actually offer more support, as we shall see in a moment, but it is worth while considering this part of the argument first. The objections against utopianism are well-known: utopia would be totalitarian; utopianism would seldom offer practical reform strategies; there can be no such thing as a stable end-state in the evolution of society, let alone an ideal one; utopias contain unsustainable claims to an ultimate objective moral truth; they require an isolated, simple, inflexible society; they underrate the merits of comfort, technology and luxury; and so on and so forth.

Surprisingly enough, the same author who wants to defend utopianism admits to the truth of many of these arguments. Perhaps he even gives in too much. It may be true that the utopian novels he analysed are nearly perfect illustrations of the validity of anti-utopian critique, but there is no reason to assume that every utopian society must necessarily, by its very nature, be isolated, simple, inflexible, unalterable, and totalitarian.

There are two points on which De Geus refuses to bend to anti-utopianism: he denies that utopia must be totalitarian and that it must seek to subject and exploit nature. To rebut the critics, he points to the democratic and ecology-friendly character of the seven utopias visited. I beg to differ with him there. As already argued, the idea that Utopians, the neighbours in Morris' Nowhere or the citizens of Skinner's Walden Two and Howard's garden cities follow a hands-off approach towards nature is questionable. What is more, a society may be totalitarian despite the (omni)presence of democratic institutions and procedures. A culturally and morally closed society, isolated from deviant ideas, constructed to mould people's attitudes in the right way from cradle to grave, permeated from top to bottom by one ideology only – a society like that is in effect totalitarian.

Two minor remarks *in margine*. First, De Geus seems to have neglected Karl Popper's critique of utopianism in *The Poverty Of Historicism*, which offers a much broader range of more formal arguments against utopianism than his *Open Society*. Second, one of the most forceful anti-utopian arguments states that utopianism uses people as means (to establish a perfect society), not as ends in themselves. By implication, utopianism violates other morally desirable phenomena like human autonomy, self-development, and self-realization. There is hardly a trace of this quite fundamental critique of utopianism in De Geus' book.

For the most part, De Geus agrees with the critics: utopias, however interesting, cannot be used as blueprints for the perfect society. Nevertheless, he argues, they can and should be used as sources of "meaningful questions, points of reference, ideas, perspectives and general criteria", as politico-navigational compasses (p. 199, translation MW). This is less vague than it sounds. The underlying idea is that utopia is not a destination but a direction: utopias can be used to develop policies and reform political discourse on a larger scale than piecemeal engineering. With this interpretation, utopian ideals can be compatible with pluralism and remain open to critique, correction and rejection. De Geus illustrates this point with an excellent analysis of the metaphors utopian authors use to describe nature, metaphors which are equally common in everyday political life: nature as a garden, as a wilderness, as a cycle, etc. His analysis indicates both why these metaphors are more or less convincing in utopias and why one may expect them to perform similarly in real life.

One should not expect the impossible. In the final analysis, De Geus does not prove that utopianism is a sufficient condition of "inspired" politics because he cannot. Utopias are illustrations of political theories rather than theories themselves, and they are destined to be imperfect, selective, incomplete, and superficial illustrations. Nor does he or can he prove that utopianism is a necessary requisite for bringing ideas back into politics. There are alternative means to re-inspire politics. One can talk about desirable practices and about the moral and political principles of radical reformers like utopian authors without an eschatological and perfectionist dimension. That way, politics can remain open to the contingencies of life and still be inspired by substantive ideals. Besides, it keeps politics honest – for if utopia is only a direction, then the description of it is a lie.

Nevertheless, Marius de Geus has made the far more modest and still controversial point he set out to make: even if one dislikes fiction, utopian fictions can inspire and they can be helpful in directing politics. He made his point, and he made it elegantly. The non-academic reader, for whom this book is meant in the first place, probably will not notice how well De Geus succeeds in translating philosophical subtleties into intelligible language. It is good PR for political philosophy and a good book to disagree with.

Marcel Wissenburg

Diane Sainsbury, *Gender, Equality and Welfare States*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1996

Since Esping-Andersen's *Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism* was published in 1990, a lively debate has developed on comparative welfare state regimes. An important topic in the international discussion is the gender dimension of welfare states or, to put it more accurately, the lack of attention given to gender in mainstream welfare state research. Feminist scholarship has contributed to the development of welfare state theory in several ways. It has shown how social programmes and social rights impact differently on men and women, and it has emphasized the role of unpaid care for welfare state variations. In addition, it has demonstrated that concepts such as social citizenship, decommodification and stratification are strongly gender-dependent in the sense that they are rooted in the experiences of men and focus primarily, if not exclusively, on the public sphere. Moreover, it has shown that welfare state formation is not only determined through economic processes, but also through the development of the interrelationships between the family, the market and the state.

However, although feminist approaches have been very strong in their criticism of mainstream welfare state theories and in the development of alternative concepts (such as the concept of defamilisation to pare with decommodification), as yet not much serious empirical work has been done on the international comparison of gender and welfare states. Diane Sainsbury's book certainly makes a contribution in furthering this research. She examines how gender variations have been developed in the Netherlands, Sweden, the United Kingdom and the United States since the 1960s and what its consequences are for stratification and redistribution of income.

Sainsbury, an associate professor at the University of Stockholm, has done an excellent job in carefully examining differences in bases of entitlements, and differences in access to and levels of benefits for men and women in these countries. She avoids generalizations about the two sexes, by cautiously distinguishing between men's entitlements as breadwinners and beneficiaries of benefits and women's entitlements as wives, mothers, caregivers and workers. From this perspective Sainsbury shows