

Utopianism for a dying planet

*Radical changes in individual and collective behaviour may be required to mitigate the impact of climate change over the coming decades. Drawing on a new book, **Gregory Claeys** argues that a utopian outlook can provide the impetus for transitioning to a more sustainable way of life.*

Few observers of the ongoing process of environmental degradation will have failed to note that the past summer seems to have been a turning point in our consciousness of the crisis we face. Extreme temperatures throughout Europe and much of the rest of the world, the worst drought in history in China, widespread water shortages, and spiralling energy costs and shortfalls in food supply now offer a grim picture of the likely future to come.

Those who follow scientific narratives will have seen the widespread abandonment of any likelihood of keeping to 1.5°C warming, even within this decade. To those minded to join up the dots, forest fires, melting glaciers and icecaps, record temperatures in the Arctic and elsewhere, spell out one narrative: we have reached a turning point in our battle against nature, and we are staring at imminent defeat.

To the doomers, in one corner of the ring, despair freezes action, and a sense of chilling remorse is supplanted by numbness which denies the possibility of any reprieve. To the denialists, in the other, none of this is real, and abundant profits await those willing to continue the exploitation of nature.

Sober readers will point out that such results could have been predicted (and were) long ago. We have known for decades that the process known as global warming was a near-inevitable result of industrialisation. But we doubted its severity and, bombarded by downright lies and widespread disinformation from the fossil fuel industry, we chose instead to embrace the comforting thought that our high (northern) standard of living need not be upset by a few degrees of further heat.

Our leaders, awash with the cash generated by the industry and consequently enmeshed in corruption, willingly connived to deny every worst-case scenario. To the denialists, business as usual is the slogan. And that means jobs and prosperity for everyone, which we all want. And so, in our reluctance to acknowledge the facts, and our own role in their making, we conspire together to ignore the coming maelstrom. Yet this is the most pressing problem humanity has ever faced. Every other problem is relatively insignificant. No-one will escape its consequences, including billionaire Mars fanatics and prepper bunker-diggers.

A third alternative

There remains, however, a third alternative to capitulating before looming catastrophe, and simply sticking our heads in the ground, closer to the natural resources whose exploitation is its cause. Most campaigners for radical responses to environmental degradation acknowledge that a small window remains to turn around what will otherwise become a rapidly-unravelling catastrophe.

Ending fossil fuel extraction within this decade, while warming would still continue for some time, could enable us to avoid its worst effects, and to level off global temperatures before the earth burns up. A transition to renewable energy sources, to wind and solar and wave power, is viable and realistic even within slightly more than a single decade. Around 80% of Europe's energy could be renewable by 2025, for instance, eliminating virtually all coal and gas.

Renewables are now vastly cheaper sources of power than fossil fuels. The immediate savings would be vast, and the long-term benefits immeasurable. For at stake is nothing less than the threat of the collapse of civilisation, and the extinction of humanity itself as temperatures rise above 3°C and our planet becomes one vast Sahara.

The destruction all around us at a warming rate of 1.2°C will bring us to this end if we remain on our current course. It indicates that the entire global warming narrative of a "sustainable" increase of 1.5-2°C has been false, and misleading. So, we need to achieve warming of below 1°C. And this means more dramatic interventions than any previously mooted.

Utopianism

The question remaining is how to create a movement towards this level of sustainability, at a time when much of our leadership (notably in Britain) remain in thrall to fossil fuel arguments and donations, and energy shortages are being used to threaten further resource extraction, and even the introduction of fracking, one of the most destructive of extraction techniques.

My own response, after following this scenario across some forty years, is spelled out in a new book, [Utopianism for a Dying Planet: Life After Consumerism](#). My arguments rest on accepting the premise that the current scenario is as dire as can be, that we do genuinely face the prospect of extinction, and therefore that tinkering with the present system is a waste of time. Much more radical solutions, and a much more radical “green new deal”, are required, which will include a fundamental change in our outlook towards nature and towards the consumption of resources.

A vast new apparatus will be needed to introduce the necessary changes in energy production and consumption, and to ensure climate justice, and that a fair distribution of the very substantial costs of the transition to sustainability does not fall unduly on those less responsible for the incipient catastrophe. The obsession with consumerism will have to be supplanted by greater self-sufficiency, voluntary simplicity, and the satisfaction of needs rather than wants.

For four reasons I have chosen to portray this response in terms of the long tradition known as utopianism, which dates from the publication of Thomas More’s famous [Utopia](#) (1516), but stretches through to early socialism and Karl Marx to the early environmentalist writers and the deeper green thinkers of the 1980s and later.

What utopianism almost uniquely offers us is firstly a demand that we think about long-term futures rather than the short four- to five-year economic and political cycles which typically dominate our thinking. Secondly, utopian thought usually envisions a vastly better future than the one we live in. Thirdly, it involves a concern with the common good rather than the profits of the few. And fourthly, it is predicated on a vision of improved social relations between people, on enhanced solidarity, amicability, mutuality, respect, and greater social equality. These are the key utopian values, portrayed in thousands of ideal worlds from the Renaissance to the present.

Introducing a world defined by these qualities is of course vastly different from merely imagining their presence. The transition to sustainability will involve many sacrifices, not least by the wealthy who will have to fund most of it. I have in mind a world where the cities where most of us live are made vastly more pleasant places; where a universal basic income ensures the means of life; where public pleasures provide the means of greater sociability; where free public transport alleviates the pain of temporary loss of some long-distance travel; where local communities and local identity become the means of overcoming that creeping alienation which has done so much to define modernity; and where an overwhelming sense of having averted catastrophe unites us as never before.

These are attainable goals. They are not, by and large, shared by our political leaders. But we can now act to ensure their introduction, and our survival. We must wake them up. The alternative is too terrifying to contemplate. And so we must act now, or forever regret our inaction. See you on the streets.

For more information, see the author’s new book, [Utopianism for a Dying Planet: Life After Consumerism](#) (Princeton University Press, 2022)

Note: This article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: [Gustavo Quepón](#) on [Unsplash](#)
