

Beyond Utopia and Dystopia: The Ecological Techno-Positivism of Solarpunk Literature

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Abstract. Speculations on the future has been a central element of human civilisation. Hope and fear are the two points of origin of such speculations. Hope, over the centuries, has given rise to utopian narratives while fear has birthed various dystopian nightmares. One sees a remarkable increase in utopian and dystopian literature in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. A common theme of such works is the human interaction with nature and ecology. In utopian works, either society is imagined totally within the ecology wherein technology is shunned or, it is imagined as a technological Shangri-la wherein nature has been completely conquered. On the other hand, dystopias are imagined as places where technological advancements have destroyed human civilisation as we know it. This paper interrogates the relationship of human civilisation with nature and technology from the point of view of Solarpunk literature which presents an alternative way of situating humans in midst of ecology and technology. The paper analyses the extent to which Solarpunk literature negotiates with utopianism in speculating on the future from its ecological and techno-positive stance.

Keywords : Utopia; dystopia; ecology; solarpunk; techno-positivism.

Speculations on the Future

Speculations on the future have historically played a central role in human societies. Fear of the future and planning for the future have informed important sections of politics, business, literature, and art. From royal astrologers advising the king when to attack the enemy to the modern-day stock market, a number of institutions are premised upon speculations on the future. In literature, we find a range of imaginative scenarios that present a spectrum of ideal or catastrophic possibilities of the future. The ideal human society and the future combine in the works of utopia while dystopian works depict how things can go wrong and to what extent. While the commonly cited example of Plato's *Republic* (4 BCE), is seen as a proto-utopian work, the proper starting point of utopian literature in Europe is Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516). *Utopia* presents

the general format of utopian literature that consists of a protagonist who travels to another social set-up that is shown as ideal in every way, distant in location and /or time. The protagonist witnesses the daily lives of the people of the utopian society and comes back to narrate the experience. A similar narrative pattern is seen in the utopian works of later period such as *Looking Backward : 2000-1887* (1888) by Edward Bellamy, *News from Nowhere* (1890) by William Morris and *Baisvi Sadi* (1945) by Rahul Sankrityayan. On the other hand, dystopian works such as *1984* (1949) by George Orwell, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* (1968) by Philip K. Dick, *The Road* (2004) by Cormac Mc Carthy, etc. present a society where things have taken a turn for the worse due to war, technology, climate change or political authoritarianism. The visions of the future thus often swing between the two ends of utopia and dystopia. In the present time, dystopian works greatly outnumber utopian works in literature and popular media. With the increasing crises in the economy, climate, and politics in the twenty-first century, it is only obvious that the future is speculated on dystopian terms. Whether it is *The Terminator*, *Bladerunner* or *The Matrix* in cinema or *1984*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, *The Children of Men*, *The Road* in literature, at present, the note of dystopia rings prominently.

Utopian Speculations Across Cultures

The term 'utopia' is first seen in Thomas More's 1516 novel *A Truly Golden Little Book, No Less Beneficial than Entertaining, of the Best State of a Republic, and of the New Island Utopia*. In this work More presents an island society that can be seen as the ideal state. In the novel, this hidden island is described by a traveller named Raphael Hythloday. Utopia is presented as a place where there are no social ills and a collectivist political order is practiced. There is no private property. Even though the term utopia is seen for the first time in this work, it is not the first utopian work. *Assembly Women* by Aristophanes, written in the fourth century BCE, is the first utopian work written in Europe which is actually a political satire on Athenian democracy. Here too, one finds a strong note of collectivist politics. This work is closely followed by the well-known text on political philosophy, *The Republic*, wherein Plato describes the system and workings of the ideal state and its ideal citizen. Collectivism is found here as well and it may be said that *The Republic* presents a proto-communist vision that has survived the centuries after the decline of ancient Greece. Ancient utopian texts can be found in

Chinese and Arabic too; *Tao Hua Yuan (The Peach Bottom Spring)* written by Tao Yuanming and published in the fifth century is a utopian fable about a hidden village in the midst of nature. An example of social perfection, here people live in self-sufficiency, harmony, oblivious to the outside world. Similarly, *Mabadi' ara' ahl al-Madinah al Fddilah (Principles of the Opinions of the People of the Virtuous City)* by Al Farabi was published in the ninth century in Arabic. In the nineteenth and twentieth century, wherein one finds a dramatic increase in future-oriented science-fiction, utopian narratives have continued in various modes. Published in 1888, Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* travels into the future and imagines Boston as a socialist utopia in the year 2000. Similarly, in *Basivi Sadi* (1945), Rahul Sankrityayan imagines a socialist utopia based on radical collectivism in the twenty-second century Bihar, India. These utopian works can be seen as case studies of the human tendency that keeps the narrative of the future active in the collective imagination of the society.

Anthropocentrism and Utopia

Speculations on the future, whether utopian or dystopian, come with a certain set of assumptions. To begin with, utopianism emerges from an optimism wherein it is believed that, in the long run, human society will get better in every aspect. In *The Concept of Utopia*, Ruth Levitas points out the expanse of the utopian tendency as following

Utopia is about how we would live and what kind of a world we would live in if we could do just that. The construction of imaginary worlds, free from the difficulties that beset us in reality, takes place in one form or another in many cultures. Such images are embedded in origin and destination myths, where the good life is not available to us in this world but is confined to a lost golden age or a world beyond death. They may also be religious or secular, literary or political. (Levitas, 01)

It can be argued that utopian approaches emerge from religious discourses wherein the kingdom of God awaits the believer where all troubles end. The desire to end all troubles of the present life also takes the route of

political, social, ecological and technological thought in utopian writings. The works of Plato, More, Bellamy and Sankrityayan are examples of social and political utopia. In the case of Bellamy's *Looking Backward* and Sankrityayan's *Baisvi Sadi* the utopian message is clearly a socialist one. In their vision of the perfect state, they imagine radical equality among all people, absence of private property, collectivism and scientific social engineering. One finds a strong note of anthropocentrism in these socialist utopias and especially in *Baisvi Sadi* where it goes to the extent of killing all animals that do not directly benefit humans and the only plants that are allowed to thrive are the fruit-bearing plants. In such utopias, everything is planned, structured, controlled and put to human use. Along with this, there is a great emphasis on militarising all aspects of human life. As it is in the tradition of the eighteenth-century enlightenment, Man is shown as the rational master of all natural objects/beings. Thus bio-ethics is a major problem in these utopian works of the nineteenth and twentieth century. The use of science to engineer, control and maintain society is a common theme in socialist utopias which comes dangerously close to totalitarian nightmares which operate in the name of structure, discipline and order.

Published in 1890, William Morris's *News from Nowhere (or An Epoch of Rest)* approaches the concept of utopia from an angle different from the state-socialism model of Bellamy. In *News from Nowhere*, not only is there no private property, money, class division, etc., but there are also no urban centres. The idyllic ecology presented in this novel sets it apart from the other socialist utopias of its time that were centred largely around the town. The ecology further registers its presence in ecological-utopian works such as *Garden Cities of Tomorrow* (1898) by Ebenezer Howard and Ernest Callenbach's *Ecotopia: The Notebooks and Reports of William Weston* (1975). The roots of utopian treatment of the ecology can be traced back to the works of Jean Jacques Rousseau, the English Romantics and most noticeably, to the works of Henry Thoreau among the American Transcendentalists.

An extension of deep ecology in its most radical form, Anarcho-Primitivism, an ecological utopian thought, has made its presence felt sharply in twentieth century ecological literature. Combining the ideas of anarchism and pre-agricultural societies, anarcho-primitivist thinkers critique the agricultural and post-agricultural developments in human civilisation. John Zerzan, the prominent anarcho-primitivist author, has

been developing the idea of anarcho-primitivism over decades in his works such as *Future Primitive and Other Essays* (1994), *Against Civilization* (1999), *Running on Emptiness* (2002), and *A People's History of Civilization* (2018). Anarcho-primitivism makes a case for the rejection of civilisation and acceptance a hunter-gatherer lifestyle within an idealised form of ecology. In the essay “Future Primitive” for instance, Zerzan critiques agricultural civilisation and technology by pointing out the assumptions that go into normalizing division of labour. He writes :

Agriculture enables greatly increased division of labor, establishes the material foundations of social hierarchy, and initiates environmental destruction. Priests, kings, drudgery, sexual inequality, warfare are a few of its fairly immediate specific consequences (Ehrenberg 1986b, Wymer 1981, Festinger 1983). Whereas Palaeolithic peoples enjoyed a highly varied diet, using several thousand species of plants for food, with farming these sources were vastly reduced. (Zerzan, *Future Primitive*, 11)

Pointing out the superiority of the primitive hunter-gatherer life over the contemporary technological life he writes in *Running on Emptiness: The Pathology of Civilization* :

There has been a potent revolution in the fields of anthropology and archaeology over the past 20 years, and increasingly people are coming to understand that life before agriculture and domestication – in which by domesticating others we domesticated ourselves—was in fact largely one of leisure, intimacy with nature, sensual wisdom, sexual equality, and health. (Zerzan, *Running on*, 69)

It must be noted that being an anarchist and a primitivist, Zerzan is not suggesting a conversion to hunter-gatherer life en masse, rather, he uses the anarcho-primitivist system as a critique of the contemporary era with its technology-driven power-hierarchy, discrimination, alienation and lack

of positive freedom. The discourse of deep-ecology which argues for a non-anthropocentric view of nature shares its theoretical orientation with anarcho-primitivism. Works such as *Eco-Socialism: From Deep Ecology to Social Justice* (1993) by Bill Devall, *Deep Ecology for the Twenty-First Century* (1995) by George Sessions (ed.), and *Deep Ecology: Living as if Nature Mattered* (2001) by Bill Devall and George Sessions (eds.) present deep-ecology as an ally of Green-Anarchism and Anarcho-Primitivism where a radical intervention in the power-hierarchy, civilisational structures, anthropocentrism and technological destruction of the world is challenged. The resultant philosophical stance blends together the traditions of utopia, anarchism, environmentalism and non-anthropocentrism to critique the direction in which the global human civilisation, led by technology, is presently moving.

From the above discussion it can be inferred that the anarcho-primitivist thought along with other environmentalist discourses are guided by sets of dualisms between nature and culture, ecology and technology, utopia and dystopia etc. This line of thought essentially fixes the elements of either sides of the binaries into metaphysical monoliths, as if nature, as an idea and also as a material entity, can really be reducible to a definition or as if the streams of causality over thousands of years can really be summarized into the nature vs civilisation binary. Dystopian works of literature and cinema also take a similar viewpoint wherein civilisation and technology are metaphysically frozen problems that must be resolved by rejecting them, or at least, by not advancing further in those realms. It is the non-manageability of technological growth which is at the centre a number of works of dystopian fiction. The scale of technology grows to such a magnitude that only centralised and totalitarian administrative entities seem powerful enough to handle them. The reaction to this assumption that advanced technology can only be managed by totalitarian administrative entities has given rise to its techno-phobic critique in the form of dystopian novels and films like *1984*, *The Terminator*, *Blade Runner* etc. The rise of dystopian literature in the second half of the twentieth century can be understood against the background of impending catastrophes like the atomic bomb, totalitarianism and the climate crisis. With the rising effects of global warming on the lives of more and more people and the failure of the global institutions to make any real change on the ground, new kinds of suffering have emerged. Terms such as climate-change, climate-refugees and climate grief are being heard

with increasing regularity in the media. Rising social inequality, environmental problems, health issues due to pollution, economic insecurities, political turmoil etc., along with the ever-accelerating technological advancement, surveillance and control have created a perfect condition for inspiring end of the world scenarios in fiction and cinema. In the present discourse where the fear of totalitarian governing agencies manifests itself as the fear of technology, Solarpunk intervenes in the discussion and presents an alternative way of thinking about the future. Solarpunk chooses to step out of the 'nature is good and technology is bad' binary to blend nature and technology in a hopeful, almost utopian way.

The Solarpunk Alternative

Solarpunk developed and evolved as a reaction against the pervasive dystopian outlook of the contemporary science fiction. Instead of falling back into a techno-phobic primitivist regression, solarpunk imagines a progressive and harmonious co-existence of ecology and technology. With its roots in punk, its artistic expression and politics of decentralisation, solarpunk is critical of vertical power structures. It is against the ownership, control and execution of high-technology by centralized bodies of power. Instead, it advocates for a decentralised form of society where political and economic decisions are taken directly by the members of society as per radical-democratic strategies at the local level. Solarpunk keeps the utopian dream alive in literature and art wherein the world and civilization need not regress into a reactionary primitivism or accelerate into a technological dystopia. Solarpunk argues that the ecology, human learning and technology can be realigned to create a more just, sustainable and happy future for all.

Solarpunk : Ecological and Fantastical Stories in a Sustainable World (2018), the first anthology of solarpunk was published in 2008 in Portuguese in Brazil. It contains science fiction stories on ecology and the future. It is interesting to note that solarpunk has emerged from a developing country, places that have to bear the brunt of climate change in its harshest form. In the Preface to the book, Sarena Ulibarri writes :

Weariness with dystopian plots, coupled with a growing awareness of climate change, has been a driving force in the renewed interest in ecological science

fiction in the 2010s. The term “Solarpunk” was independently coined by about half a dozen different sources amidst a host of similar terms: ecopunk, hopepunk, brightpunk, eco-fabulism, ecospeculation, etc. While it is part of the larger movement of “climate fiction,” the “solar” in solarpunk has come to represent not only the ecological aspect of this budding subgenre, but also the idea of brightness and hope. (Ulibarri, *Solarpunk; Ecological*, vi)

Using the narratives of alternative history, decolonisation and sustainability the stories in this anthology like “Once Upon a Time in a World”, “Xibalba Dreams of the West” and “Sun in the Heart.” explore a different vision of the world where ecology and technology are not at loggerheads. In solarpunk, technology is used by humans in a decentralised and sustainable way which at times can reverse the ill-effects of climate change.

The precursors to solarpunk can be found in ecological fiction and utopian writings such as *Silent Spring* (1962), *Ecotopia* (1975) etc. Solarpunk stories, as a sub-set of eco-fiction, were written and published in the second decade of the twenty-first century. Some of the prominent solar punk collections are *Glass and Gardens- Solarpunk Summers* (2018), *Glass and Gardens- Solarpunk Winters*(2020), *Multispecies Cities- Solarpunk Urban Futures* (2021), *Solarpunk- Ecological and Fantastical Stories in a Sustainable World*(2018) and *Sunvault- Stories of Solarpunk and Eco-Speculation* (2017). The authors of these stories hail from a diverse national, cultural and sexual background. For instance, if nationality is considered, the solarpunk stories in these collections have been written and edited by people from Brazil, Malaysia, China, India, USA, The Philippines, Canada, Trinidad, Finland and so on. The cosmopolitanism and the contemporariness of solarpunk fiction makes it an important movement in ecological literature and activism that deserves the attention of the academic community.

Solarpunk presents to us the third possibility in thinking about the nature-civilisation binary. When in most of the climate fiction, technology is presented as a problem, solarpunk claims that it is a problem

only when it is used in a non-sustainable way. Rather, technology can be used to reverse much of the environmental damage done so far and it can also be used to preserve the natural environment by its suitable application. The very term solar in solarpunk is inspired from renewable energy. Solarpunk suggests that alliances should be built among humans, animals, forces of nature, microbes etc. to build sustainable systems. In the introduction to *Multispecies Cities*, Christoph Rupprecht et al. point out:

Looking with wonder and awe at the myriad ways plants, animals, microbes, rivers and other more-than-human actors on this planet shape their environments with ingenuity and resourcefulness, who could think of better allies and companions in facing uncertain futures? The stories in this book explore what shape such alliances might take, the joys to be discovered, the negotiations and compromises required, and most importantly, the more-than-human ties, relationships and kinship on which such alliances might be built. They do so in places where another assumption tells us not to look: cities, which even ecologists deemed “outside of nature” until the 1980s. (Rupprecht et al, 07-08)

Along with compelling narratives, solarpunk stories engage in discussions regarding the future possibilities of designing a sustainable world. Human agency is used as a part of the solution instead of the problem, hence, solarpunk has a reasonable and non-anthropocentric human presence. In “Caught Root” by Julia K. Patt for example, there is a discussion on two possible methods of creating a sustainable society. The narrator, a resident of Hillside, a self-sufficient community infused with advanced technology, has come to visit New-Ur, another community which uses more traditional and earthly/organic systems. The debates of the narrator with the leader of New-Ur Dr. Khadir illuminate a number of aspects of how a sustainable civilisation can be best achieved. The narrator describes her first observations at New-Ur as follows :

This room, like the rest of the complex, smells like water and freshly turned

earth. It's designed to cool passively, and entering it is like walking into a cave: the air chill, damp. Shade plants—ferns, hostas, bleeding hearts—line the walls. Skylights drop sunbeams throughout.

(Patt, 09)

Clearly, the people at New-Ur try to employ as many natural ways in their community as possible, being wary of too much technological intervention. Hillside, on the other hand, freely uses technological systems made from recycled material for the same goal of sustainable living although Dr. Khadir thinks that that would create problems in the future.

I think of Arthur and Hillside, his passion for the community and the technology, his determination, his willingness to hear any idea from anyone. "I understand. We're not so different, you know. Aesthetically, we might appear to be opposites, but we share the same goals."

"Not entirely," Khadir corrects me from across the table. "Hillside doesn't care about searching our past for solutions. It's all new, new, new. The shinier the better." (10)

This is followed by a debate between the narrator and Dr. Khadir regarding the benefits and dangers of automation, leisure, division of labour, alienated work and even the meaning of a good life. The story ends with an understanding that both the communities, with the same goal but different paths, would learn from each other and use the best of both the systems as allies.

Solarpunk stories reimagine the entire civilisational system along with its myths, stories and ethics. In "The Spider and the Stars" by D.K. Mok, children grow up listening to stories of heroic ecological actions by humans :

These were never stories of dragons and fairies, mermaids and centaurs. No, these were stories of fierce young women with flocks of tree-planting drones, firing seeds into the barren sands and rolling

back the desert. Ortales of ravenous
locusts sweeping across the land in
suffocating plagues, and the farmers who
responded by cultivating carnivorous
wheat. (Mok, 15)

Solarpunk acts like a connective tissue joining our current state of environmental decay with the possibility of redemption by radical human action, encapsulated in the punk aspect of solarpunk. Whether it is challenging the vertical mythological traditions of the past or random acts of punk kindness as seen in “By the Light of the Stars” by N.R.M. Roshak. Mishael, the narrator’s new friend in Hawaii, to the dismay of the narrator, believes that stars are not real as NASA would like people to believe. She does not believe that there are billions of stars in the sky, but may be a few hundred, because when she looks up, she can only see a handful through the light pollution of the glittering beach town. Just as they argue about a conspiracy theory that NASA fakes stars to get funding, they see baby turtles coming out of their nests after hatching. Strangely, instead of crawling towards the ocean as they should, they move confusedly towards the city. These disoriented baby turtles cannot see the moon and the stars, their guiding light, and instead crawl to the city to be crushed by cars :

I had always thought of sea turtles as
living entirely separate lives from us,
ocean creatures I hoped to meet someday
on a dive. But from laying to hatching,
turtles were land creatures; and the land
where turtle mothers had been laying
their eggs for millennia had slowly
become part of Honolulu’s sprawl.

Despite themselves, the turtles were as
much part of Honolulu as I was. And
while I was irritated by Honolulu’s lights
outshining the stars, I could live with it.
The baby turtles could not. (Roshak, 34)

To the narrator’s surprise, Mishael who is kind of a punk character, has altered a garage door remote to switch off lights to avoid the cops. She runs across the beach and the highway clicking off the lights of the house fronts and a few street lights so the poor baby turtles could find their way

to the ocean. The story ends in a reflective tone wherein the narrator compares Mishael, who is clever with machines but does not believe in the stars, with the baby turtles who must know, for the sake of their very survival, that there is a moon in the sky and billions of twinkling stars :

And whether she was a superhero, a supervillain, or simply superconfused, her heart was in the right place. She could've used her impossibleclicker to sow chaos across Oahu. Instead, she used it to save baby turtles. Mishael needed to see the sky without skyglow too, every bit as much as the baby turtles did. The least I could do was show her... She turned toward me. "We should," she said. "I'm open to being wrong, Grace. Show me the stars." In the darkness, my hand found hers. We stood together and watched the last of the turtles slide home into the sea. (37)

"By the Light of the Stars" draws the reader's attention to the existential crisis faced by animal-life and compares it with an epistemological limit of human beings to know and understand the universe and our place in it. The comparison of Mishael with the turtles in the backdrop of light-pollution, a topic rarely discussed even in eco-fiction, in their inability to see and connect with nature underscores the current ecological and ethical situation. Here too, the solution to the problem is not to reject technology and run off into the forest but to tackle the problems with innovative and decentralised application of technology.

Conclusion

With the above discussion and the examples, this paper has merely scratched the surface of the solarpunk movement which currently expands in writing and visual art. Solarpunk can be theoretically approached from a number of directions. In addition to the deliberate swing towards a positive and utopian imagination, solarpunk offers a number of starting points for discussions on the role of technology, private vs public ownership of technology, the meaning of growth and so on. Solarpunk does position itself in an alternative space, transcending the binaries of nature vs technology, civilisation vs culture, utopia vs dystopia etc. It

carefully gleans hopefulness from utopian literature and applies it to the dark dystopian imaginary of the contemporary zeitgeist. It acknowledges the value of human intellect and ingenuity as it believes that the human intellect, which has given rise to the Anthropocene, is also capable of curbing the ecological damage by the use of scientific knowledge, albeit not in an anthropocentric manner but as an ally to the various life-forms on the planet. Solarpunk is still quite new and questions on anthropocentrism, control of technology, governance etc. are still being discussed as the genre refines its positive speculations on the future in fiction, art and praxis.

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