Imagining the end of capitalism: ‘the practical-political value of utopian thinking’ for the climate movement.

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Abstract: In Archaeologies of the Future (2005), Fredric Jameson stresses ‘the practical-political value of Utopian thinking’. Because it was easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism, Utopia was all the more attractive and urgent: ‘this increasing inability to imagine a different future enhances rather than diminishes the appeal and also the function of Utopia’ (p.232). The importance of utopianism, especially as ‘action critique’, is confirmed in the history of social movements. Reforms are more likely to be achieved when a social movement challenges the system by demanding a much better, different future. There are lessons here for the climate movement. Critiquing capitalism and demanding a much better, safe climate economy is more likely to result in governments enacting emissions reduction measures within capitalist parameters, in order to legitimate capitalism. Australian examples of the ecotopian imagination are examined in the ideas of Ted Trainer, Tony Kevin, Tim Flannery and Beyond Zero Emissions. These all go some way towards imagining the end of capitalism or at least a capitalism transformed fundamentally through restraint and regulation by a green state. These ‘meditations on the impossible’, as Jameson would have it, are of potential practical-political value in achieving reform such as emissions reduction strategies, if combined with energetic ‘action critique’ on the part of a strong grassroots climate movement demanding more than mere reforms.
At the United Nations climate change Summit in Copenhagen in December 2009, Archbishop Desmond Tutu told protesters: ‘They marched in Berlin, and the wall fell. They marched in Cape Town, and the wall fell. They marched in Copenhagen—and we are going to get a deal’ (Cryderman 2009). Yet they did not get a deal in Copenhagen; and Tutu’s observations are wrong. Protesters did not just march in Berlin; they tore the wall down. Demonstrators did not merely march in Cape Town; they engaged in decades of civil disobedience and even armed struggle.

**Utopianism and social movement mobilization**

The British Met Office and the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration recently reported ‘clear and unmistakeable signs of a warming world’, with each decade since the 1970s hotter than the preceding one; and greenhouse gases were the glaringly obvious explanation.¹ The immense task being undertaken by the international climate movement focuses attention on the issue of effective social movement action. How can the climate movement achieve its aims to ensure a safe climate future by persuading governments and transnational institutions to enforce a significant reduction in greenhouse gas emissions? Is utopian thinking, as Fredric Jameson argues, of ‘practical-political value’ (Jameson 2005, xi-xii).

According to Ernst Bloch in *The Principle of Hope*, ‘all freedom movements are guided by utopian aspirations’ (Bloch 1986, 7). Moreover, of particular relevance to

social movements, going ‘on the attack’ is a characteristic of utopianism. As Fran Shor emphasizes, utopianism is not simply a theoretical critique but also an ‘action critique’ of dominant norms and values (Shor 1997, 121). An emphasis on will and passion, preparedness to act to transform the world in line with the utopian ideal is central to the history of utopianism (Manuel 1965; Shor 1997, 119).

Utopianism is most relevant to social movement mobilisation when understood not just as thought but also as action. The American civil rights movement is an example of the powerful combination of utopianism in both thought and action. It was not just Martin Luther King who had a dream, but other civil rights leaders, such as Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee leader Ella Baker, a former National Association for the Advancement of Colored People organiser. She stated: ‘we are not fighting for the freedom of the Negro alone, but for the freedom of the human spirit, a larger freedom that encompasses all mankind’ (Zinn 2002, 103; Shor 2004, 176). At a mass meeting in Mississippi in July 1964, a Freedom Rider enthused: ‘I sat and watched faces that had been transformed with hope and courage … That sense of hope was so strong, so pervasive that each of us there felt with complete certainty that there can, there will, be a better world and a good life if we work for it’ (Shor 2004, 179).

They achieved reforms, because they worked for much more, through utopianism in action as much as in thought, defying segregationism in practice as well as rhetoric. Rosa Parkes’ refusal to move from the whites-only section of a bus and similar rebellious actions by many other brave African Americans were crucial in achieving some part of Martin Luther King’s dream. Prior to the civil rights movement, African Americans had not even started to make progress. Herbert Haines’ examination of this movement concludes that the reforms it achieved were brought about because it demanded so much more. In response to the challenge posed by its radical flank, the
civil rights movement mainstream was buttressed financially and politically by institutions of government and civil society; and significant policy reforms were enacted (Haines 1988).

It was the utopianism of the anti-capitalist movement from the late 1990s onwards that inspired Fredric Jameson to ponder ‘the practical-political value of Utopian thinking’. Writing in the heyday of this spectacular movement, he noted with good reason that ‘Utopia seems to have ‘recovered its vitality as a political slogan and a politically energizing perspective’ (Jameson 2005, xi-xii). It is easier, he notes, to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism (Jameson 2005, 199). Utopia is therefore all the more attractive and urgent, because ‘this increasing inability to imagine a different future enhances rather than diminishes the appeal and also the function of Utopia’ (Jameson 2005, 232).

Anti-capitalism is inherently utopian: it is indeed easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. The utopianism of this movement is apparent in its rhetoric. Demands issued from the ‘Battle of Seattle’ and other anti-capitalist mobilisations reveal an emphasis not merely on ameliorating the effects of capitalism but on the need to replace capitalism entirely with a different, better system. This is expressed succinctly in the principal slogans of the anti-capitalist movement: ‘Human Need not Corporate Greed’ and ‘Another World is Possible’ (Charlton 2000, 4-10; McNally 2002). As anti-capitalist campaigner Susan George stated at a mobilisation in Nice in December 2000: ‘We are demanding to change the world totally, it’s not nothing. It’s something no one has ever done in history. It won’t happen tomorrow
morning but it can be done. We have to fight and fight, again and again, until we win, all together!²

Notice the emphasis on fighting. Strategically, it was the utopian ‘action critique’ of blockading the citadels of corporate power that was a stroke of brilliance (Starr 2000, 223). Firstly, its practical effects were energising for the movement, in a way that was reminiscent of the Chiliastic horizon of utopianism discussed in Karl Mannheim’s *Ideology and Utopia* in 1936 (Mannheim 1976, 190-197). Jeff St Clair’s interviews with demonstrators on the streets of Seattle convey this euphoria (St Clair 1999, 82, 85-6). For example, he quotes a locked-out steelworker saying: ‘The things I’ve seen here in Seattle I never thought I’d see in America’ (St Clair 1999, 95). John Charlton’s interviews with those at the Battle of Seattle likewise record ‘the almost breathless accounts, of people experiencing a birth of the new’ (Charlton 2000, 16). Chris Carlsson’s internet diary captured the sense of the extraordinary in his title ‘Seeing the Elephant in Seattle’, for an old saying from the Civil War was to ‘see the elephant’, meaning to see something quite remarkable. And his diary was confident that: ‘The ruling class ideology of endless prosperity and growth in a democratic capitalist world of “free” countries has suffered a slap across the face in Seattle. History has asserted itself” (Carlsson 2000).

Secondly, the utopian ‘action critique’ of summit-hopping was how it became a politically effective social movement. The practical-political value of utopianism was confirmed in this movement’s impact: until 9/11 re-stabilized the capitalist world order, a reform movement developed within important transnational institutions—the World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Trade Organization (WTO), World Economic Forum (WEF) and GO8—in response to the challenge of anti-

capitalist utopianism. Anti-capitalist activists had successfully created a serious public relations problem for these institutions, coyly termed a ‘legitimation deficit’ by political scientists. These institutions had valued their regular summits as a form of legitimation for their ideologies and practices; they did not want to hold these meetings in high-security locations, such as Okinawa and Qatar, which they became obliged to do. They were disconcerted to be confronted by demonstrators contesting the consequences of their decision-making, so sought to make strategic compromises to assuage the protest movement. The international magazine, *Marketing*, reported on 30 August 2001: ‘Even the IMF and World Bank have agreed to meet with anti-globalisation activists’.

European governments responded to anti-capitalist protests with talk of the Tobin tax. To Jameson’s mind, this was an ‘ingenious but social democratic’ invention (Jameson 2005, 56). He maintains the Tobin tax is better appreciated as ‘a properly Utopian defamiliarization of a dilemma than as a practical-political program’ (Jameson 2005, 218). The point to be stressed is that talk of the Tobin tax constituted a reforming practical-political response to defuse anti-capitalist discontent.

James Goodman has researched the rise of dissenting voices within the WEF in response to ‘dramatic public explosions against neo-liberal globalism’. The WEF became an advocate of ‘globalisation with a human face’ and invited Vandana Shiva and international trade union leaders to participate in discussions (Goodman 2000, 45-47). The World Bank under James Wolfensohn started to portray itself as an agency dedicated to eliminating world poverty and conceded that many of its neo-liberal policies had exacerbated poverty. World Bank chief economist Joseph Stiglitz stated in 2002:
Until protestors came along there was little hope for change and no outlets for complaint … It is the trade unionists, students, and environmentalists—ordinary citizens—marching in the streets of Prague, Seattle, Washington, and Genoa who have put the need for reform on the agenda of the developed world (Stiglitz 2002, 8).

The impact upon the WTO of the summit-hopping ‘action critique’ was felt immediately—during the Battle of Seattle in late 1999. With a state of civic emergency declared, a 7.00 p.m. curfew imposed and demonstrators kept down with bullets and tear gas, this action in the streets stiffened the resolve of the African delegates inside the WTO, according to St Clair: ‘They refused to buckle to US demands and coaxing. They hung together and the talks collapsed’ (St Clair 1999, 96).

The important point here is that reformist initiatives only started to happen because utopianism in rhetoric but predominantly as action critique threatened the legitimacy of corporate globalisation. On 23 July 2001, the meeting of the GO8 in Genoa issued a press release which deplored the anti-capitalist protests and pledged to do more to ensure the world’s poor shared in the benefits of globalisation (ABC News, 23 July 2001). Without the protests to deplore, there would be no promises to the poor. Without anti-capitalist utopians to destabilise transnational corporate institutions and unsettle their proponents, there would have been no reform movement. If 9/11 had not intervened, more might have been achieved. In a brief space of time the anti-capitalist movement showed that reforms are more likely to be achieved when a social movement demands a different, better future, especially if such utopianism is expressed in actively confrontationist ways.

The importance of being extreme was pointed out as long ago as 1890 by Oscar Wilde in his famous essay on The Soul of Man Under Socialism:
What is said by great employers of labour against agitators is unquestionably true. Agitators are a set of interfering, meddling people, who come down to some perfectly contented class of the community and sow the seeds of discontent amongst them. That is the reason why agitators are so absolutely necessary. Without them … there would be no advance towards civilization (Wilde 1973, 1082).

Wilde reiterates the practical-political value of utopianism in his famous remark:

A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at, for it leaves out the one country at which Humanity is always landing. And when Humanity lands there, it looks out, and, seeing a better country, sets sail. Progress is the realization of Utopias (Wilde 1973, 1089).

Utopianism is of practical-political value because ‘advance towards civilization’ or ‘progress’ occurs when agitators sow sturdy seeds of discontent and Humanity confidently sets sail for a better country.

For example, women in Britain did not get the vote by asking nicely. They had tried that for years and years and had got nowhere. Then the tactics changed dramatically with the suffragette movement, to direct action, refusing to be bound by laws the women had no part in making. This monstrous regiment of women was condemned for its tactics; but its effect was to strengthen the position of those who argued within the mainstream political parties for votes for women, resulting eventually in the enfranchisement of females. Decades later during the ‘second-wave’ of feminism from the late 1960s, it was the women’s liberationists demanding complete sexual equality and being outrageous on the streets that frightened
governments into passing legislation to mitigate the effects of patriarchy. Important reforms such as laws promoting equality of opportunity in education and employment, outlawing discrimination on grounds of gender and providing funding for child-care were enacted in many countries in response to a vigorous women’s movement demanding considerably more: an end to patriarchy. It is appropriate that a documentary film produced in 2011 about Australian second-wave feminism is called *Utopia Girls* (www.utopiagirls.com.au).

My 1993 study of Australian social movements (the indigenous, women’s, lesbian/gay, peace and green movements from the 1960s to the early 1990s) concluded that:

Their limited, but not insignificant, attainments have been won largely through the extremist postures and activities and the making of extravagant political claims. It appears that the assumption of ultra-radical political positions affects the spectrum of political debate, shifting it to a point where less radical interpretations of the same viewpoint seem reasonable. By carving out political space for themselves, the more defiant within any movement manoeuvre the less defiant into an advantageous political position. Moderate gains are accordingly achieved, not so much by moderate and respectable means, but by militant and disrespectful activity. It has been the more implacable, more truly oppositional sections of these movements that have destabilised the prevailing bases of power and challenged conservative ideological certainties to the point where the consensual mechanisms of capitalist democracy accede to the more moderate demands of other sections of the same movement. In making these liberal concessions, the system protects itself from political
developments considerably more dangerous: it reforms and modernises itself and, at the same time, raises the political profile of the least threatening sections of the social movements (Burgmann 1993, 262).

Political scientists and sociologists touch upon the practical-political value of utopianism in their consideration of the ‘radical flank effect’ within social movements that was explored by Haines’ study of the civil rights movement (Haines 1988). In the latest edition of their *Social Movements Reader*, Jeff Goodwin and James M. Jasper provide a useful summary of this effect for social movement scholars:

The existence of a ‘radical flank’—more threatening to authorities—can have diverse effects on a movement. In some cases, it undermines public tolerance for the movement as a whole, making it easier for its enemies to portray it as undesirable. Authorities may decide to repress the entire movement, not just its radical wing. In other cases, the radical flank is threatening enough that the forces of order take the movement more seriously, often making concessions. The moderate flank can present itself as a reasonable compromise partner, so that authorities give it power in order to undercut the radicals (although the moderates must distance themselves from the radicals to garner these benefits). If nothing else, radical flanks, by creating a perception of crisis, often focus public attention on a new set of issues and a new movement (Goodwin and Jasper 2009, 411).

Arguably, extremism also reinforces the convictions of the moderates. It helps to keep the moderates more focused on the task of achieving reforms. Although moderate sections of a social movement might then claim these reformist achievements as their
own, it is extremist claims and militant tactics that incline governments and corporations to give in to the moderates in order to weaken the challenge of utopianism or simple political extremism.

**Utopianism and the climate movement**

Given that the survival of life as we know it might depend on the success of the international climate movement, it is very much a movement that needs to include a map of utopia. For Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri: ‘Humanity’s survival hinges on the multitude’s preservation and construction of loving biopolitical relationships that nurture the biosphere, people, flora, fauna, land, water, air, life.’ This ‘ecology of the common’ is ‘focussed equally on nature and society, on humans and the nonhuman world in a dynamic of interdependence, care, and mutual transformation’ (Hardt and Negri 2009, 171).

The forces within the international climate movement committed to ‘climate justice’ acknowledge the necessity of utopian aspiration—anti-capitalist ecotopianism—expressed in the slogan: ‘Change the system, not the climate’ (*Green Left Weekly*, 20 January 2010, p. 3). The India Climate Justice Forum declared at its climate justice summit in New Delhi on 26-27 October 2002:

> We, representatives of the poor and the marginalized of the world, representing fishworkers, farmers, Indigenous Peoples, Dalits, the poor and the youth, resolve to actively build a movement from the communities that will address the issue of climate change from a human rights, social justice and labour perspective. We affirm that climate change is a human rights issue ... We reject the market principles that guide the current
negotiations to solve the climate crisis: Our World is Not for Sale! (India Climate Forum 2002).

When Bolivian President Evo Morales invited those assembled at the ill-fated climate conference in Copenhagen to participate in a different climate summit in Cochabamba, he stated simply: ‘if we want to save Mother Earth and humanity [people must change the capitalist system for a system based in complementarity, solidarity and harmony between the people and nature’ (Morales, 2009, 3). His opening speech to this conference stated capitalism was to blame for global warming.3 Held 19-22 April 2010, with 35,000 people representing over 140 countries, this World People’s Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth issued a ‘World People’s Agreement’, now a formal United Nations document. It states: ‘Today, our Mother Earth is wounded and the future of humanity is in danger.’ The agreement includes a comprehensive set of principles, rooted in indigenous views of harmony, complementarity and anti-colonialism; proposes a Universal Declaration on the Rights of Mother Earth; condemns carbon markets, as well as the commodification of forests for carbon offsets; calls to protect the rights of climate migrants; and demands the creation of an International Climate and Environmental Justice Tribunal to judge and penalise activities that promote climate change.4

In the climate crisis we are reminded of the eco-socialist argument that capitalism tends to ruin the conditions necessary for its continuation (O’Connor 1988; Benton 1989, 51-86). Capitalism not only tends to overproduction, resulting in declining profit rates and economic downturns; it also ‘underproduces’ the conditions of


production by externalizing costs and thus failing to renew or repair them (O’Connor 1998, 317). These two contradictions of capitalism ensure that capitalist economies are characterised by underuse of labour resources and overuse of environmental resources: employment options are restricted at the same time as the planetary environment is degraded (Polanyi 1944; O’Connor 1998, 314, 316, 319).

Ecotopian aspiration on the part of the climate movement is logically necessary—things cannot go on as they are. It is also tactically necessary because of the longstanding rule of social movement action that the best way to achieve reforms is to demand a different, better future, and to do so in concerted and confrontational ways. In 2011 during the carbon price negotiations between the Gillard Government and its supporters in parliament, Adam Bandt acknowledged that progressive social reforms require an active social movement when he conceded it would be much easier for the Greens to extract adequate carbon pricing legislation from the government if there were thousands on the streets regularly and vociferously protesting for an even higher price of $70 tonne.5 The extent of protests against coal seam gas exploration has prompted federal and state governments to reconsider the wisdom of rushing headlong into supporting such developments (Burgmann and Baer 2012, 308-310).

Meditations on the impossible: some Australian ecotopias6

For Jameson, the practical-political value of utopian thinking is necessarily preceded by concentration on the Utopian break itself: ‘a meditation on the impossible, on the unrealizable in its own right’ (Jameson 2005, 122). In the past decade or so some Australian climate movement intellectuals have indeed offered meditations on the

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5 National Tertiary Education Union, Climate Change Forum, Melbourne, 28 April 2011.
6 For much more elaborate discussion of these ‘meditations’, see V. Burgmann, ‘The Ecotopian Model Building of Australian Climate Change Intellectuals’.
impossible, which challenge the contradictions of capitalism and imagine alternative, better ways of organizing economy and society.

For several decades, Ted Trainer has argued that free-market capitalism and the wasteful consumer culture it spawns is unsustainable: ‘the fundamental cause of the accelerating destruction of the global ecosystem is overproduction and overconsumption’ (Trainer 1998, 8). Rich countries must embrace an enormous reduction in consumerism (Trainer 1989, 196), ideally a ‘zero-growth economy’ in which societies ‘will work hard at reducing the amount of producing and consuming going on’ (Trainer 1995, 108). Such a ‘conserver society’, committed to greater economic equality and with ‘much lower than present rates of per capita income and resource use’, would contribute to the creation of a ‘world order that is peaceful, just, ecologically sustainable and in which inequality and poverty have ceased to exist’ (Trainer 1991, 124). Trainer elaborates upon his notion of the ‘Simpler Way’, which incorporates the following principles: far simpler material living standards; high levels of self-sufficiency within households, neighbourhoods, towns and nations; relatively little trade or transport; small-scale cooperative economies in which most of the things we need are produced by local labour from local resources; much greater use of renewable sources of energy; and a commitment to human rights and social justice, particularly with regard to developing countries (Trainer 2002). In short: ‘The present desire for affluent-consumer living standards must be largely replaced by a willingness to live very simply, cooperatively and self-sufficiently’ (Trainer 2002). It is misguided for a society to allow the market to be dominant; unless market forces are under ‘tight social control’ they will destroy society and its ecosystems, for everything will be open to sale for maximum profit. It is not possible, Trainer insists, to have ‘a good society’ unless we make sure that considerations of morality and
justice and the good of society are the primary determinants of what happens. ‘In
other words there must be much social control and regulation of the economy’
(Trainer 2002).

Tim Flannery has outlined a specific ecotopian vision of a new city in the desert on
the New South Wales/South Australia/Queensland border that would harness the
Cooper Basin’s abundance of natural gas reserves, geothermal and solar energy
(Flannery 2006). Flannery imagines an Australia that decides to build on this natural
wealth in clean energy, ‘a nation transformed from climate-change pariah to leader in
the fight for the survival of our planet’ (Flannery 2006). It would require a new city in
the desert, which he calls ‘Geothermia’:

I imagine solar-collector arrays towering over a low-rise city, providing
shade and conserving soil moisture … Perhaps the infrastructure would be
underground, and the region planted with desert trees and shrubs to soften
the local climate. Geothermia would be a city not of thousands, but of
hundreds of thousands: a place with its own critical mass. And most
importantly, it would need to be a fully sustainable city—Australia’s very
first. Building it could teach us how to live in this harsh land of ours. And
the building of Geothermia could itself become an industry, generating
mountains of intellectual property applicable in desert cities around the
world (Flannery 2008, 37-8).

Fulfilling this vision would be a Herculean effort to overcome the technical
difficulties. Australian industries and unions would have to stand behind the idea and
be willing to relocate plants and employment so as to invest in the new future.
Should we succeed, the benefits would be enormous, for what Denmark is to wind so we would become to these most promising of new energy sources. Today, wind employs more Danes than fishing. In future, hot rocks and the sun may employ more Australians than coal ever did. And we would get the opportunity to build new plant—modern smelters and refineries whose aim should be zero pollution (Flannery 2006).

Flannery acknowledges many Australians mistrust ‘visionary projects’. However, ‘the swiftly changing global environment tells us that Geothermia’s time has come, and … we … must grasp such possibilities’ (Flannery 2008, 38). Predictably, Flannery’s ecotopian vision was ridiculed by right-wing columnists for proposing an ‘uneconomic’ project (Blair 2007; Bolt 2006). Andrew Bolt in particular objected to the fact that ‘global warming catastrophist Tim Flannery … urges us to embrace a new Utopia’ (Bolt 2006).

In *Crunch Time* (2009), Tony Kevin includes a chapter ‘Southern Australia, 2060: drowning cities in a parched land’ that is dystopian about the physical impacts of climate change (Kevin 2009, 256-259) but utopian about the eventual adaptation of Australian society. Australians gradually found new sustainable ways of living in this harsher world, by rejecting the production and consumption patterns of neo-liberal capitalism: ‘There had been a sharp public reaction in the 2040s against market capitalism and the associated resources-wasting consumerism—a collective social judgement that these excesses had been the major drivers of humanity’s loss of its former climate security’ (Kevin 2009, 256). Australia adopted a ‘regulated market-economy’ (Kevin 2009, 265) with an emphasis on local economic activity, a greater sense of social responsibility and a more vegetarian diet. People turned to large-scale reliance on solar, wind, and geothermal energy, all part of a national grid. Private cars
virtually vanished and airplane travel was abolished; and railways enjoyed a revival. The new human settlements were whitewashed, sun-baked, mud-brick villages, of compact, terraced, two-storey thick-walled houses with tiled roofs and slab floors, which used abundant local clay soils and made sense in the hot, dry climate. ‘For the children being born now, those too young to remember the trauma and grief of the great evacuations from the drowning cities, life offers modest joys again. There are harvest festivals and dancing, local musicians, and story-tellers. The recent past is already fading into mythology, like stories of old Atlantis’ (Kevin 2009, 262). The ‘regulated market-economy’ is overseen by a directorate, quick to intervene against business malpractice, hoarding or profiteering from scarcities. ‘Nobody thinks about economic growth any more in the old way. Now, it is all about sustainability, trying to keep population and lifestyle in equilibrium with scarce natural resources’ (Kevin 2009, 266). Kevin concludes the description of his Keynesian ecotopia with the observation that one thing is clear: ‘humanity … has finally left its childhood behind. It now understands, from the lessons of terrible experience, that it has to live hereafter within the physical limits of its world’ (Kevin 2009, 268).

Established in 2006, Beyond Zero Emissions (BZE) is an independent, not-for-profit organization, which insists that greenhouse gases should not only be reduced immediately but be reduced to zero, because current atmospheric levels of greenhouse gases are already resulting in global climate disaster.⁷ In July 2010, BZE launched its extraordinarily ambitious scheme, Zero Carbon Australia Stationary Energy Plan, which propounds ‘a technically feasible and economically attractive way for Australia to transition to 100% renewable energy within ten years’. To make such an immediate transition, the Plan suggests we can use only the solutions that are available to us

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⁷ http://beyondzeroemissions.org/about>. Consulted 1 August 2010.
today, so it specifies this 100% renewable grid based on proven technologies that are already commercially available and that have already been demonstrated in large industries. ‘Social and political leadership are now required in order for the transition to begin’ (BZE 2010, 2). The chosen renewable energy technologies in the Plan are wind, concentrating solar thermal (CST), and solar photovoltaic (PV), with existing hydroelectric generators for system back-up (BZE 2010, 4-5). The BZE Plan reverses the normal tendency for capitalism to underuse labour resources and overuse environmental resources. It states that:

many more jobs are created with the construction of a 100% renewable energy grid than are lost with the phasing out of coal and gas from the stationary energy supply chain. The Plan will create up to 80,000 jobs from installation of renewable energy generation at the peak of construction, and over 45,000 jobs in operations and maintenance that will continue for the life of the plant … If half the manufacturing for wind turbines and heliostats is done domestically, this would create up to 30,000 jobs in manufacturing … The level of expansion in jobs would boost overall employment in the economy (BZE 2010, 13).

The Plan also confronts business-as-usual investment patterns. The total investment required to implement the BZE renewable energy system is $370 billion, averaging $37 billion per year over the 10-year duration of the Plan, equivalent to 3% of GDP. It is ‘characterised by higher upfront investment, but lower ongoing costs’ (BZE 2010, 15). The Plan concludes:

Australia has some of the best renewable energy resources in the world, and should be positioning itself as a leader in the emerging renewable
energy economy. What is required to make this happen is leadership from policymakers and society, with firm decisions made quickly that will allow this transition to occur (BZE 2010, 17).

BZE’s ecotopian vision is focused on ‘impossible’ technological development within a decade. Yet BZE also looks beyond the technology to broader transformation. According to Adam Lucas, one of its proponents, ‘BZE is under no illusions that technological change is going to “fix” anthropogenic climate change. We all know that cultural and political changes are also necessary’ (Lucas 2012, 142). BZE supports ‘far more direct regulatory interventions’ (Lucas 2012, 144). Like Ted Trainer, Lucas insists:

> current levels of resource consumption in the developed world and of the growing middle classes in the newly industrialized nations simply cannot be allowed to continue if human civilization is to survive the 21st century … concerted and urgent efforts must be made to completely transform industrial societies’ habitual modes of practice over the next few decades (Lucas 2012, 146).

**Conclusion**

These meditations on the impossible offer, at the very least, a strident critique of capitalism’s normal propensity to destroy the environment. They certainly confront capitalism’s tendency to underuse labour resources and overuse environmental resources. They envisage in very different ways the role of a ‘green state’ in restraining capitalism, ‘to move closer’ toward their ‘vision of a socially just and ecologically sustainable society’ (Eckersley 2004, 11).
Imagining an end to capitalism—more difficult than imagining the end of the world—is a necessary part of any political project that might result in governments enacting serious emissions reduction targets, regulating to phase out fossil fuels, engaging in significant reforestation, and fast-tracking renewable sources of energy and other emissions-reducing technologies. However, the insights of social movement scholarship suggest that the practical-political value of utopian thinking is realized above all through ‘action critique’. As those who have examined the ‘radical flank’ effect in social movement history can affirm, reforms are achieved by activist movements that demand much more; minimum programmes realised by moderates goaded by extremists behaving badly in mounting maximum programmes. In arguing that Utopia ‘serves a vital political function’, Jameson presents the fundamental task: ‘to articulate the Utopian break in such a way that it is transformed into a practical-political transition’ (Jameson 2005, 232-3). Ecotopian visionaries within the Australian climate movement have produced inspiring meditations on the impossible. Valuable though these are, they are unlikely to result in practical-political reform such as state action to mitigate climate change unless accompanied by a strong grassroots climate movement protesting in the streets and at the point of pollution (Burgmann and Baer 2012, 231-313).
References


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