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# International Relations Ingredients in Utopia: An Analysis of Callenbach's *Ecotopia*

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## Abstract

*This research paper aims to investigate the ingredients of international relations in Ernest Callenbach's utopian novel Ecotopia (1975). First, this paper analyzes the concepts of Utopia and International Relations. Then, it explains and finds out that Ecotopia, an earth-friendly place that has seceded from the U.S. for about two decades because of its involvement in nature degradation activities, has cut off its relations with the U.S., but Ecotopia is not isolated from the rest of the world. The U.S. sends William Weston, a top international affairs reporter, and the protagonist, to make eroded diplomatic relations with Ecotopia amicable. But he finds Ecotopia as a live-worthy place and decides to live there permanently. Ecotopia has established relations with other nations politically, economically as well as culturally. Except with the U.S., Ecotopia is involved in importing iron from other nations and exporting cultural artifacts to them. Ecotopian Government has applied a deterrence policy with the U.S., so it has run nuclear fission plants though such projects are against the ethics of a utopian nation. Ecotopians blame America for being an imperialist nation and waging wars against different nations. They believe that big nations must secede further into small nations so that they can manage their natural resources making them earth-friendly. This research concludes that a utopian work also includes different ingredients of international relations.*

**Keywords:** Diplomatic relations, Ecotopia, green environment, power, secession. Utopianism

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William Weston, a top international affair reporter and the protagonist of the novel *Ecotopia* (1975) by Ernest Callenbach, describes the condition of a seceded nation, Ecotopia. For a project, 20 years after its secession from America, he visits the place that consists of Northern California, Oregon, and Washington to assess its present condition. America's antagonism with this nation since its secession has stopped close observation of the activities that have been happening in Ecotopia. So the aim of William Weston's current visit to Ecotopia for six weeks is to create good relations between the two nations. After a long effort, the US Government permits Weston for the journey to "heal the fratricidal breach that rent the nation -so the continent can stand united against the rising tide of starvation and revolution" (Callenbach 2). Weston has heard various rumors and speculations about Ecotopia, and he aims "to search out the realities behind the rumors, to describe in concrete detail how Ecotopian society actually operates, to document its problems and, where that is called for, to acknowledge its achievements" (4). He, at first, meets the Ecotopian Assistant Minister of Food and knows about the Ecotopian agriculture system and sewage management. He knows more about food and sewage systems from pamphlets

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given to him by the Assistant Minister. The Assistant Minister says, “The first major project of his industry after Independence...had been to put the country’s food cycle on a stable state basis: all food wastes, sewage, and garbage were to be turned into organic fertilizer and applied to the land, where it would again enter into the food production cycle” (17). Ecotopia has reduced its food production capacity because of the lack of export to the US as a result of the political crisis.

Ecotopia is a nature-friendly place that has applied various measures to keep nature free of pollution. The new towns have been declared as car-free zones where individually owned vehicles are prohibited. The emphasis has been given to proficient rail lines where vehicle use is drastically limited. Ecotopia has rejected crowd-creating games. Weston finds no games like baseball, basketball, ice hockey, boxing, and wrestling as usually played in the US. Instead, people in Ecotopia get a lot of attention on swimming, sailing, gymnastics, ping-pong, tennis, chess, and volleyball. The Ecotopians are also engaged in war games. Weston knows that the Ecotopians have rejected modern technology because they consider material goods ecologically offensive, so “electric can openers, hair curlers, frying pans, and carving knives are unknown” (40).

Ecotopia has a competitionless economy that has adopted a 20-hour workweek provision so people have much free time for leisurely activities. The Ecotopians are close to nature and spend almost savage-like lives. They spend much time in the woods, which are sources of different materials. They regard trees “as being alive in almost a human sense” (58). After applying various methods and organizing massive educational and medical campaigns as well as decentralization, the population has declined to a controllable level. The great emphasis is on the importance of women in society. “Ecotopian life is strikingly equalization in general- women hold responsible jobs, receive equal pay, and of course, they also control the Survivalist Party” (64). The leader of the party is a woman, named Vera Allwen, and she is also the President of Ecotopia. Sex is taken as a usual activity in Ecotopia. People do not care much about it. They have the thinking that sex is similar to eating and drinking. The reporter Weston falls in love with Merissa and has physical relations with her frequently. Weston finds himself strange to the Ecotopians in the beginning days of his visit to Ecotopia, but, as he spends time there, he changes himself surprisingly and, at last, admits himself an Ecotopian and starts thinking in an Ecotopian way. His view changes from ego-centric to eco-centric, and he becomes a lover of Ecotopia. So, instead of returning to his native country America, he determines to live in Ecotopia, and sends a letter to Times-Post editor-in-chief, Max. He writes, “I have decided not to come back, Max. You’ll understand why from the notebook. But thank you for sending me on this assignment when neither you nor I knew where it might lead. It led me home” (167). He is fully satisfied with the eco-masculine situation of Ecotopia, and he calls it his home.

Ernest Callenbach presents Ecotopia as a utopia with the concept of secessionist environmentalism. Utopia is a politico-social idealism that has also been used in art. In Manuel and Manuel’s view utopia is “The conception of a heaven on earth that underlies Western utopian thought presupposes an idea of perfection in another sphere and at the same time a measure of confidence in the human capacity to fashion on earth what is recognized as a transient mortal state into a simulacrum of the transcendental” (17). Utopia is the vision of a new society. In Bookchin’s opinion the power of utopian thinking “questions all the presuppositions of the present-day society is its inherent ability to see the future in terms of radically new forms and values” (281). When people find problems in the current situation, they start thinking about the

place of perfection which does not include the problems and shortcomings of the current time. Ernest Callenbach is also not satisfied with the current situation of America and presents in this novel a place that discards all shortcomings of current America. His *Ecotopia* is rooted in the green movement of America that is attached to the social and political movements of the 1960s. Referring to Brian Toker, Kassman asserts,

By 1966 or 1967...a genuine counterculture had been born. This counterculture rejected materialism, obedience to authority, and traditional work to sexual roles. As a liberated alternative to the dominant culture, values very similar to those of Greens (living simply in harmony with one's environment, personal choice or freedom, nonviolence and communitarian caring for others) were evident" (2).

Utopianism goes back to prehistoric times. The concept of the ideal state can be found in Plato's *Republic* and in Socratic dialogue. "Plato provides a fundamental account of the ideal state in the *Republic* which rejects the truth claims of epic poetry and dramatic performance" (Mitchell 6). "In Aristotle, we find the frame of an ideal constitution and also an account of the institutions governing many Greek states" (Berner et al 37). The great inspiration for utopian writing throughout the ages is Greek social and political thought. Sir Thomas More, Jonathan Swift, Thomas Carlyle, George Orwell, Margaret Atwood, Ernest Callenbach, Ursula K. Le Guin, and Marge Piercy are some of the utopian writers in the modern western world who have discussed social idealism in their artworks. Werner Christie Mathesen mentions the purpose of literary utopia saying, "One of the principle aims of literary utopia is to make us want to live in different kind of society than the present" (59). In Greene's view, "Utopia is a malleable and elastic concept. The term refers to an ideal society" (2). Utopia is "the good state that we must strive for but may not actually exist except in theory" (Lockyer and Veteto1). In fact, utopia is a word in Greek that means "no place". Greene refers to historian Russell Jacoby and shows his assent about two forms of Utopia, "'blueprint Utopianism' which is implicit in the realization of a government promised on a utopian model; and 'iconoclastic utopianism' which, simply said, is the need for the idea of utopia to live in our imagination" (2). Giving his view on utopia Nelson argues, "As a no place, it provides a platform for a fully realized other world that finds expression in modern fantasy fiction" (10). He further asserts, "Utopia is presented as a construct, not simply to criticize European shortcomings, nor to offer actual workable solutions but to create a space for critical thinking and an attitude of openness to new possibilities" (13). The projection of the utopia is into the future or some distant place. Utopia is a vision of an orderly city or city-dominated society. In Frye's opinion "The utopia is a speculative myth; it is designed to contain or provide a vision for one's special ideas, not to be a theory connecting social facts together" (323). He further posits, "a utopia is an ideal or flawless state, not only logically consistent in its structure, but permitting as much freedom and happiness for its inhabitants as is possible to human life" (325). Frye also explains the society that the utopian writer tries to speculate. He says, "The utopian writer looks at his own society first and tries to see what, for his purpose, its significant elements are. The utopia itself shows what society would be like if those elements were fully developed" (324). He further points out, "The utopian writer looks at the ritual habits of his own society and tries to see what society would be like if these ritual habits were made more consistent and more inclusive" (337). Callenbach also provides an alternative eco-friendly utopia for us to live. Ecological degradation has caused various problems in our everyday life.

Ecotopia is a version of utopia which derives from the Greek words *Oikos* (household or home) and *topos* (place). So verbally ecotopia means 'home-place'. In Merchant's view, Callenbach's *Ecotopia* is the first utopian work to explore "the possibility that a society could live in harmony with its environment while continuing to utilize many of the advances made through modern technology" (quoted in McCutcheon 149). It is a kind of "modern green classic". In Mathisen's opinion "Ecotopia is an egalitarian society where the enterprises are owned and controlled by the workers. It represents a sharp break with consumerism, productivism, and individualism of present-day US society" (59). Ecotopia is a futurist perfect place that "envisions an earth-friendly future where the people of this nowhere land have already accomplished the goals set by the scientists and environmentalists worldwide" (Radhakrishnan 214). In *Ecotopia* decentralization of power is regarded as a logical answer to the danger of monopolization of power. In the novel, Weston's main purpose is to meet Vera Allwen, the President of Ecotopia, to talk about the reunion between the USA and Ecotopia. De Haan also agrees that "Weston has been assigned to officially meet Ecotopia's President in order to re-establish the diplomatic relations between the USA and Ecotopia in hope that the two countries could be reunited" (6). But the reality is that Ecotopia has totally blocked the borders with the USA. As a result, its diplomatic and economic relations have been broken with the USA. However, it "is totally relatively open to the rest of the world because it hosts international art exhibitions as well as tourists, imports iron and exports the culture (music, poetry, novels) of the black segregated enclaves" (9). *Ecotopia* describes the green ideology that "enables people to contentedly live within ecosystems' ability to regenerate" (Lohmann 179).

Utopianism is related to international discourse because the issues raised in the utopia are not related to only a nation. Utopia is an idealistic concept of international relations. It longs for a better world having a perfect society without war, and with hopes and dreams. The focus of International Relations, in a broader sense, is on the issues of war and peace, conflict and cooperation, diplomacy and cross-border transaction, globalization, and the operation of non-state institutions such as Amnesty International or the United Nations (Brown and Ainley 3). But in the narrow sense, International Relations is inter-state relations. The role of a state is pivotal in the arena of International Relations. States may have cooperative or conflictual relations between them. Paul Sheeran puts, "Relations between states through the flow of people, money, information, and trade create friendships, alliances, and antagonisms, which produce various dynamics that necessitate the need for treaties, agreements and diplomatic needs to reduce conflict and promote cooperation" (vi). Frederick S. Dunn views that International Relations may "be looked upon as the actual relations that take place across national boundaries, or as the body of knowledge which we have of those relations at any given time" (quoted in Ghosh 4). These cross-border issues are subject to International Relations. Peu Ghosh states:

Apart from political science, IR draws upon such diverse fields as economics, history, law, philosophy, geography, sociology, anthropology, psychology, and cultural studies. It involves a diverse range of issues including but not limited to: globalization, state sovereignty, ecological sustainability, nuclear proliferation, nationalism, economic development, global finance, terrorism, organized crime, human security, foreign intervention and human rights (2).

Various writers have given different types of features of utopia in their writings. But one common feature is that utopias "are places we may *wish* for rather than *hope* for" (Brincat 582). Utopia

reflects national and global concerns which are also issues of international relations. Paul Sheeran highlights the international nature of utopias. He posits, “The exotic, the unreal, and the mysterious attracts travelers all over the world. It is a pilgrimage to a place, a location imbued with the fiction of possibilities” (4).

Callenbach’s *Ecotopia* is also a utopia that envisions an ideal state in which people could live in harmony with a green environment. The research question in this article is “what ingredients of International Relations have been included in the utopian novel *Ecotopia*?” The aim of this paper is to analyze elements of International Relations inherent in the novel *Ecotopia*. In other words, this article argues that the novel *Ecotopia* comprises different ingredients of International Relations. A utopia is an ideal place and it seems to be separate from other countries, but since it is attached to socio-politics, it cannot be out of the relations with other countries. So Callenbach’s utopian novel *Ecotopia* also incorporates various ingredients of International Relations.

Power is the central and influencing feature of relations between and among nations. In view of Deveteket. al. international relations “is a world of friends and enemies where power rather than justice will determine international outcomes and where states effort to put their trust or security in them” (4). *Ecotopia* is also concerned with the power of the nation. *Ecotopia* has relations with the US from which it seceded though it has blocked its relations with it. The novel overtly or covertly describes its past and present behavior with the U.S. The U.S. has been unknown of the condition of *Ecotopia* for about two decades because “old antagonisms have too long deterred close examination of what has been happening in *Ecotopia*, a part of the world once near, dear and familiar to [the U.S.], but closed off and increasingly mysterious during the decades of independence” ( Callenbach1). Diplomatic, military, and strategic relations are the main issues of International Relations. Will Weston goes to *Ecotopia* for the purpose of correcting America’s deterred diplomatic relations with it. *Ecotopia* is a peace-loving and nature-friendly place that shuns war, but the *Ecotopians* have been keeping a number of atomic fission plants though, in the name of reducing environmental pollution, they have closed oil-and gas-fired power plants a few years after the independence. *Ecotopia* has kept “the massive thermal –gradient power-plant at Punta-Gorda” (102). It is because of the strategic plan of *Ecotopia* to blackmail the U.S. to avoid its attack on *Ecotopia*. It is the deterrent foreign policy of *Ecotopia*. The *Ecotopians* have still a fear of being wiped out by the U.S. One of the *Ecotopians* reacts with Weston in a meeting “We are a small nation on the periphery of a very large one. Persisting in this ecological craziness will sooner or later lead to an armed conflict, and we will be wiped out. We know what you did to Vietnam, what you’re doing in Brazil. Our atomic mines might turn out to be a bluff. Then it could happen here too” (48). He hopes that Weston’s visit to *Ecotopia* can “lead to resumption of normal relations between the two countries” (48). As a result, there may be an exchange of power plants and a gradual growth of economic interdependence.

*Ecotopia* has seceded from the U.S. for many reasons. One of them is America’s imperialist policy:

Indeed, in the context of the Cold War, the U.S.A. was losing the Vietnam War, tried to maintain control over underdeveloped countries and launched secret wars against uprisings. Therefore, the American government spent a large amount of money on the arms race, which generated a profound long-term decline in the world competitiveness of American civilian industry [and]... a widespread misery (de Hann 50).

The imperialist policy, an ingredient of International Relations, was a cause of the secession of Ecotopia from America.

Though Ecotopia is separated from the U.S., the notes and journals prepared by reporter Weston tell much about its relations to the rest of the world. Ecotopia has a certain trade with many countries. Ecotopians are secretly financing the secessionist movement in different parts of America. It justifies that they are interfering with the internal affairs of other nations. In International Relations Theory this type of activity is referred to as terrorism. Ecotopian ideas have generated unrest among American youth. Ecotopians reject “the long march toward one world of peace and freedom, to which America has dedicated itself on the battlefields of Korea, Vietnam and Brazil” (Callenbach 151). They prefer “only separatism, quietism, a reversion towards the two-bit principalities of medieval Europe, or perhaps even the tribalism of the jungle” (151). Ecotopians believe that “the era of the great-states, with their promise of one ultimate world-state, would fade away (151). They reject a worldwide communications network and jet travel. Instead, they prefer flying into small, culturally homogenous groupings. In Ecotopians’ opinion “Separatism is desirable on ecological as well as cultural grounds- that a small regional society can exploit its ‘niche’ in the world bio-system more subtly and richly and efficiently (and of course destructively) than have the super powers” (152).

Will Weston is not only a reporter of international affairs, but he is a diplomat, in other words, a de facto American Ambassador or an unofficial envoy to Ecotopia. He meets the Ecotopian President Vera Allwen and presents American President’s “case for normalization of relations, explaining the advantages, chiefly economic, that could ensue for Ecotopia” (147). But the President of Ecotopia denies the chance of reunification. Instead, she claims that “all the large countries should break up into smaller ones, that even if her government wanted reunification her people would not stand for it, and so on” (148).

Communications in Ecotopia have been decentralized. Unlike in America, “the fundamental Ecotopian press law forbade multiple ownerships under any circumstances: that is, the corporations that owned magazines, newspapers, TV, and radio stations were required to divest themselves of all but one operation in each city” (109). The international news coverage in Ecotopia is surprisingly competent. “Because of the lack of diplomatic relations..., information on U.S. events is skimpy and derived mainly from European Press services. World news on the other hand seems to be excellent: for instance, the Ecotopian papers had run accounts of the latest American air strikes in Brazil more than a week before [American] newspapers had...” (110-111).

A racial problem is an international issue because it is prevalent in some Western countries. In many apartheid societies mainly the dominant white have enforced rigid segregation in many aspects of life. But in Ecotopia “the black minority has itself enforced a similar segregation” (101). But this segregation is different from American and African segregation because it is voluntary. Will Weston feels fear that this type of racial disharmony in Ecotopia may cloud the future of America as well.

The visit of Weston “has been made possible through arrangements at the highest diplomatic level. It will mark the first officially arranged visit by an American to Ecotopia since the secession cut off normal travel and communications” (1). It was an opening in American foreign policy to Ecotopia. The American side believes that Weston’s visit will be a milestone to make

eroded relations between the U.S. and Ecotopia amicable. Understanding Ecotopia will benefit the cause of international good relations.

Callenbach's *Ecotopia* describes an earth-friendly place that has separated from the U.S. for about two decades because America is involved in nature degradation activities. Ecotopia is a kind of Utopia that is ecologically live-worthy to human beings. It is an ideal state in which people could live in harmony being assimilated with nature to a green environment. Ecotopia is isolated from America, but it has relations with other nations politically, economically and culturally. American International affairs reporter William Weston goes to Ecotopia to make America's eroded diplomatic relations with Ecotopia amicable. Ecotopians are also aware of Ecotopia's relations with America, and the rest of the world. They blame America for being imperialist and waging wars against different nations. The novel *Ecotopia* justifies that a utopian work also includes different ingredients of international relations.

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