

## Food, sewage, and "stable states"

### Excerpt from *Ecotopia* section titled "Food, sewage, and "stable states""

San Francisco, May 6. When I arrived at the Ministry of Food for my interview with the Minister, I was unhappy to find that she was too busy to see me. I was introduced instead to an Assistant Minister, a man in his early thirties, who received me in a work overalls outfit. His office was also surprisingly unimpressive for a person of importance. It had no desk, no conference table, no soft chairs. Along one wall was a cluttered series of wooden filing cases, bookshelves, and tables covered with papers in utter disorder. Against another wall was a kind of laboratory set-up, with testing equipment of various kinds.

The Assistant Minister is, like many Ecotopians, unnervingly relaxed, with a deep, slow voice. He sprawled on woven cushions in a sunny corner of the floor, under a skylight with some kind of ivy hanging near it, and his lab assistant produced hot water for tea on a Bunsen burner. I squatted awkwardly, and began by asking my carefully prepared questions about Ecotopian agricultural output. These were ignored. Instead the Assistant Minister insisted on giving me "a little background." He then began to discuss, not agriculture at all, but sewage. The first major project of his ministry after Independence, he said, 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. Every Ecotopian household, thus, is required to compulsively sort all its garbage into compostable and recyclable categories, at what must be an enormous expenditure of personal effort; and expanded fleets of garbage trucks are also needed.

The sewage system inherited from the past, according to the Assistant Minister, could only be called a "disposal" system. In it sewage and industrial wastes had not been productively recycled but merely dumped, in a more or less toxic condition, into rivers, bays and oceans. This, he maintained, was not only dangerous to the public health and the life of water creatures, but its very objective was wasteful and unnatural. With a smile, he added that some of the sewage practices of earlier days would even be considered criminal if carried out today.

"In my papers over there," he said, "you can find historical reports of great sums being spent on incinerators to burn up sewage sludge. Their designers boasted of

## Food, sewage, and “stable states”

relatively smog-free stacks. We were of course accused of ‘sewer socialism,’ like our Milwaukee predecessors. Nonetheless, we constructed a national system of sludge drying and natural fertilizer production. After seven years we were able to dispense with chemical fertilizers entirely. This was partly through sewage recycling, partly through garbage composting, partly through reliance on some novel nitrogen-fixing crops and crop rotation, and partly through methods of utilizing animal manure. You may have seen from the train that our farm animals are not kept in close confinement like yours. We like them to live in conditions approaching the natural. But not only for sentimental reasons. It also avoids the gigantic accumulation of manure which is such a problem in your feedlots and poultry factories.”

Naturally, this smug account roused all my skepticism, and I questioned him about the economic drawbacks of such a system. My questions, however, met a flat denial. “On the contrary,” he replied, “our system is considerably cheaper than yours, if we add in all the costs. Many of your costs are ignored, or passed on through subterfuge to posterity or the general public. We on the other hand must acknowledge all costs. Otherwise we could not hope to achieve the stable-state life systems which are our fundamental ecological and political goal. If, for instance, we had continued your practice of ‘free’ disposal of wastes in watercourses, sooner or later somebody else would have had to calculate (and bear) the costs of the resulting dead rivers and lakes. We prefer to do it ourselves. It is obviously not easy to quantify certain of these costs. But we have been able to approximate them in workable political terms—especially since our country is relatively sensible in scale.”

I obtained the detailed analyses on which his assertions are based, and have studied them at leisure. Extensive objective research would be necessary to confirm or disprove them. They do appear to be surprisingly hard-nosed. Of course the Ecotopian situation has allowed their government to take actions that would be impossible under the checks and balances of our kind of democracy.

Next I asked the Assistant Minister about Ecotopian food production and processing. I knew he must be aware of the great achievements of our food

## Food, sewage, and "stable states"

industry in recent decades, not only in the introduction of synthetic meat and other protein foods, but also in pre-cooking and packaging generally. I was curious to see how he would justify the regressive practices that, according to many rumors, had returned western agriculture to the dark ages, and cooks to their chopping blocks and hot stoves (microwave ovens being illegal in Ecotopia). Again I quote his reply at length. It is, I am discovering, characteristic of the way in which Ecotopians justify extremist policies.

"You must remember," he began, "that Ecotopia at the beginning was faced with a stupendous surplus of food production capacity. California alone had produced about a third of the food eaten in the United States. Oregon and Washington had enormous fruit and grain production. We could produce, therefore, something like five times the amount of food needed by our own population. With food export to the U.S. ended because of the political crisis, our problem was how to shrink our agricultural output drastically. At the same time we wanted to end extractive and polluting practices in farming. Luckily, the new employment policies, which reduced the normal work week to about 20 hours, helped a lot. Also we were able to absorb some surplus farm labor in construction work required by our recycling systems. Along with simplification in food processing, we also achieved many economies in food distribution. As your grocery executives know, a store handling a thousand items is far less difficult and expensive to operate than one handling five thousand or more, as yours do. But probably our greatest economies were obtained simply by stopping production of many processed and packaged foods. These had either been outlawed on health grounds or put on Bad Practice lists."

This sounded like a loophole that might house a large and rather totalitarian rat. "What are these lists and how are they enforced?" I asked.

"Actually, they aren't enforced at all. They're a mechanism of moral persuasion, you might say. But they're purely informal. They're issued by study groups from consumer co-ops. Usually, when a product goes onto such a list, demand for it drops sharply. The company making it then ordinarily has to stop production, or finds it possible to sell only in specialized stores."

"But surely these committees are not allowed to act simply on their own say-so, without scientific backing or government authorization?"

## Food, sewage, and "stable states"

The Assistant Minister smiled rather wanly. "In Ecotopia," he said, "you will find many many things happening without government authorization. But the study committees do operate with scientific advice, of the most sophisticated and independent type imaginable. Scientists in Ecotopia are forbidden to accept payments or favors from either state or private enterprises for any consultation or advice they offer. They speak, therefore, on the same uncorrupted footing as any citizen. Thus we avoid the unfortunate situation where all your oil experts are in the pay of the oil companies, all the agricultural experts in the pay of agribusiness, and so on."

This was too much. "No doubt," I said, "it is scientists of this type who have frittered away the great industrial heritage you possessed at Independence, and wrecked your marvelous street and highway system, and dissolved your fine medical centers. What benefits of civilization are they prepared to undermine next?"

"I will not speak to any but food questions," he replied. "I can provide you with whatever evidence you require to prove that Ecotopians eat better food than any nation on earth, because we grow it to be nutritious and taste good, not look good or pack efficiently. Our food supplies are uncontaminated with herbicides and insecticides, because we use cultivation for weeds and biological controls for insects. Our food preparation practices are sound, avoiding the processing that destroys food values. Most important of all, our agriculture has reached an almost totally stable state, with more than 99 percent of our wastes being recycled. In short, we have achieved a food system that can endure indefinitely. That is, if the level of foreign poisons dumped on our lands by rain and wind doesn't rise above the present inexcusable figures."

The Assistant Minister scrambled to his feet, went to his shelves, and pulled down a half dozen pamphlets. "You will find some relevant information summarized here," he said. "Let me recommend that, after you have digested it, you follow Ecotopian ways in not wasting it." ...

- *Ecotopia* by Ernest Callenbach (digital pages 53-60)

Source:

Callenbach, E. (2009). *Ecotopia: A Novel*. Bantam.