



Recipes for Disaster

By Paul Greenberg
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Bear Stearns had just imploded when I found myself chatting with a surprisingly merry investment banker. While his clients panicked over their “risk exposure” in this time of \$100 oil, evaporating credit markets and melting ice caps, he thought much could be gained. In fact, all the real titans he knew were doubling down. His clients faced a choice. Did they want to be dinosaurs or cockroaches? Did they want to do nothing while the world crumbled, or did they want to scuttle and flit, gobbling up the morsels of growth that bubble up even in bad times?

For a certain brand of writer, a third possibility is eminently more appealing, one in which the ecological devastation of American-style capitalism sets off The Crisis that will at last devour titans, dinosaurs and cockroaches alike. While our immediate crises always have a way of looking like The Crisis, they have until now petered out. In light of the present crisis (as of now, still small “c”), however, two eco-millennarian novels — an old one called “Ecotopia,” by Ernest Callenbach, and a new one, **WORLD MADE BY HAND (Atlantic Monthly, \$24)**, by James Howard Kunstler — are worth a look, particularly if you are considering doubling down once more before the end times.

Literary utopias tend to emerge when an appropriate niche opens up. The niche that suited “Ecotopia” in the early 1970s and the one that now accommodates “World Made by Hand” have certain similarities. Shortages and unrest in the Middle East foreshadow the end of oil. A brewing recession gives rise to doubts about our economic fundamentals. An unpopular president wages an unpopular war. And across the country, a growing eco-consciousness raises hope that a different system might replace classic, marauding American economic progress.

“Ecotopia,” like “World Made by Hand,” is set in a not-too-distant decade where, as Callenbach puts it in a kind of wonky, Harper’s-of-the-future prose, “the burden of outlays for an enormous arms establishment caused a profound long-term decline in the world competitiveness of American civilian industry,” and where energy crises have “bred economic disruption and price gouging.” But the novel is redolent with the optimism of the baby-boom generation in full swinger mode. A Pennsylvania-born writer who became an editor at the University of California Press and part of Berkeley’s eco-futurist scene, Callenbach combined the change-or-die message of science fiction films like “Soylent Green” with the free-love attitudes of the Haight to produce a tale of paradise regained. Self-published in 1975 and reprinted in 1977 by Bantam, “Ecotopia” went on to sell nearly a million copies.



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The novel opens with William Weston, a journalist for The New York Times-Post, receiving an unprecedented assignment: to visit the nation of Ecotopia 20 years after “independence.” Comprising what was once Oregon, Washington and Northern California, Ecotopia seceded after defeating the economically doomed United States in a Vietnam-style “helicopter war.” Secessionist movements are also afoot in the Great Lakes region and the Southeast, yet Ecotopians look at the likely end of the United States as an opportunity. As Weston writes in his increasingly sympathetic dispatches, Ecotopians realized just in time that “economic disaster was not identical with survival disaster for persons — and that, in particular, a financial panic could be turned to advantage if the new nation could be organized to devote its real resources of energy, knowledge, skills and materials to the basic necessities of survival.”

And devote they do. After a few hard years of transition, life in Ecotopia is pretty awesome. Cutting-edge comforts like plastic hairbrushes and drip-dry polyester shirts are missing, but the workweek is only 20 hours. Labor is rewarding and communal, and involves things like replanting forests, studying the language of whales, creating modular homes and, if you happen to be black, making and exporting music from the hub neighborhood of “Soul City.” A normally depressing thing like a hospital stay is livened up by a massage (with a happy ending). And if you are lucky enough to connect with an Ecotopian woman (though not much luck is required), you might find yourself doing it in the hollowed-out burl of a giant redwood. But don’t get the wrong impression: Ecotopian couples are “generally monogamous,” Weston reports, “except for four holidays each year, at the solstices and equinoxes, when sexual promiscuity is widespread.”

In short, it is a lot of fun to live in Ecotopia — much more fun than dwelling in the mournful Hudson Valley town of Union Grove, the setting of “World Made by Hand.” While “Ecotopia” is a 1970s West Coast idea lab where a square can learn to “get it,” Union Grove (a ringer for its creator’s hometown, Saratoga Springs) is a contemporary East Coaster’s torture chamber designed to sock it to shortsighted, petroleum-guzzling Americans. Indeed, despite a stint at Rolling Stone in the early ’70s, Kunstler has remained steadfastly un-Californian throughout a career that has produced scathing critiques of modern suburbia like “The Geography of Nowhere” and his popular blueprint for surviving the end of oil, “The Long Emergency.” In 1999, Kunstler went long on Y2K, predicting “loss of comfort and modern convenience,” possibly escalating into disease and chaos. But that bad bet hasn’t dampened his bearish enthusiasm. On his blog, he greeted 2008 by asking, “Has there ever been a society so exquisitely rigged for implosion?” Unlike Callenbach, who imagined a society actively choosing a sustainable alternative in the face of crisis, Kunstler seems to believe change will come only after The Crisis rams it down our collective throats.

“World Made by Hand” follows the life of a very depressed former software executive named Robert Earle during a single globally warmed summer. Union Grove is a beachhead of civilization after things have fallen apart. Terrorist bombs have taken out Washington and Los Angeles, oil is long gone from the town, and a powerless federal government may or may not be bunkered in Minnesota. The only thing that comes over the radio during rare bursts of electricity is the raving of preachers relishing in the



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punishment of a wrathful god. The loss of oil has robbed people of ancillary technologies like antibiotics and rubber, as well as certain pieces of vocabulary. Women, who have reverted to “Little House on the Prairie” mode, are once again referred to as “handsome,” and any enterprise of note tends to be called an “outfit.”

Some people hang themselves in basements in despair. Others turn hobbies into trades, as Robert does with carpentry and violin playing. And Robert is among the lucky ones. Union Grovers with no source of power do nothing but work. “A plain majority of the townspeople were laborers now,” Kunstler writes. “Nobody called them peasants, but in effect that’s what they’d become.”

Kunstler is not immune to faith in social transformation, as Robert’s conversion from isolated tradesman to community-minded leader of men and handsome women attests. But he thinks it must be forced on us. In a telling (and well-imagined) motif, Robert often finds himself dreaming of speeding surreally over the landscape. When he wakes up, he realizes he wasn’t dreaming of flying but of driving. Message: Our selfish, oil-assisted present will have to fade into a dream before sustainable communal life becomes a reality.

I would prefer to live in Ecotopia, but the verisimilitude of Kunstler’s world leads me to think the future is Union Grove. Thirty years from now, it will be interesting to see if that little town seems excessively sad, richly luxurious or spot on. But for now, I’m hedging my bets. Where I live, one block east of ground zero, I’ve started keeping a compost bin and am thinking about adding a micro wind generator. Two blocks south, the damaged former [Deutsche Bank building](#) comes down floor by floor. To the north, the Freedom Tower has just emerged aboveground and may one day be full of investment bankers. Recently, though, I’ve started looking at that plot through Kunstler’s eyes. It gets good sunlight, and it occurs to me it would make a hell of a bean field.

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