

Through the Working Class

Ecology and Society Investigated Through the Lens of Labour

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Turning Modernity Upside Down

La Belle Verte, Island and the Making
of Non-capitalist Ecologies

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Abstract Through a contrast between primitivist classless utopias and the modern world, Coline Serreau's film *La Belle Verte* and Aldous Huxley's book *Island* suggest modern 'progress' obstructs the creation of healthier relations with our own bodies, with other humans and non-human nature, and how self-sufficiency, voluntary austerity and non-hierarchical mutual aid relations produce the opposite effect. Ensuring environmental protection and human freedom in non-capitalist ecologies will involve the rejection of (and the creation of alternatives to) the pillars of Western modernity.

Summary 1. Introduction. – 2 Alternatives to Modernity, Alternatives to Alienation: *La Belle Verte* and *Island*. – 3 Conclusion.

Keywords Western modernity. Non-capitalist ecologies. Ecomodernist socialism. Primitivist utopias. Alienation from species-being.

1 Introduction

Modernity is increasingly being questioned in debates around ecosocialism and post/non-capitalist ecologies. Recently, several scholars and activists have critiqued ecomodernist socialism and fully automated communism for failing to seriously consider the ecological and class implications of technology-driven progress, and for preventing ecofeminist critiques to penetrate in these imaginaries of change (Angus 2017, Barca 2018, Vansintjan 2018). In line with these efforts I would like to reflect here on Coline Serreau's film *La Belle Verte* and Aldous Huxley's book *Island*, which have the virtue of showing the various ways in which modern 'progress' obstructs the process of establishing healthier relations with our own bodies, with other humans and non-human nature. By imagining primitivist classless utopias and critically examining everyday life in modern societies, they show that modernity alienates humans from what Marx (1959, 31-2) called "species-being", artificially separating us from our belonging to a greater (human and non-human) whole.

Island tells the story of Will Farnaby, a British journalist who accidentally arrives on the island of Pala, where Buddhist philosophy and “primitive communism” form the basis of social and ecological relations. His visit to this island entails both, the discovery of a new society and an encounter with modernity through the critical eyes of Palanese people. *La Belle Verte* takes its name from a utopian planet where anarchy is the basis of human relations and the modernist ideal of progress is inverted. Its inhabitants define the industrial era as “competition, mass production of useless objects, wars, nuclear technology, diseases without cures, in sum, a prehistoric period!”. The film tells the story of a BelleVertian woman called Milá in her visit to Paris, where she often “disconnects” earthlings from modern consciousness, making them mentally advance 500 years.

2 Alternatives to Modernity, Alternatives to Alienation: *La Belle Verte* and *Island*

La Belle Verte and *Island* expose the unhealthy social and ecological relations upon which modern capitalist societies are based and propose non-alienating ways of relating to our bodies, to other humans and non-human nature within and outside the realm of material production.

Contrary to the ecosocialist modernist and fully automated communist ideals, in these two utopias wellbeing and environmental protection equal self-sufficient, austere and ‘primitive’ lifestyles. Central in BelleVertians and Palanese people’s healthy relationship with non-human nature is the fact that they are proud manual labourers who produce what they eat and obtain their needs by transforming nature (and hence polluting) as little as possible. In *La Belle Verte* everyone is a farmer and people offer their surplus production to others in annual planetary meetings. They also decide collectively the number of pregnant women based on the harvest. BelleVertians do not have beds, they sleep on the grass, in a sort of straw nests. They bathe in lakes and their education and leisure require few objects. This lifestyle emerged after a period where those making business with damaging products were judged as culprits of genocide and crimes against the planet. Targets included key pillars of contemporary capitalist economies: food and chemical industries, weapon, tobacco, alcohol, pharmaceutical and nuclear companies, car producers as well as architects, doctors and politicians who got rich by allowing these companies to exist and expand. Afterwards there was a boycott period where people stopped buying all their technological devices or threw away them because of their negative health and ecological consequences.

In Pala people feel the resources they have in their island are enough for them and refuse to extract oil and earn money by exporting it. Their respect for nature is associated to a broader culture that connects Pal-

nese people with the rest of the universe while acknowledging individual diversity:

adolescents are helped to experience their transcendental unity with all other sentient beings and at the same time they're learning, in their psychology and physiology classes, that each one of us (not only humans) has his own constitutional uniqueness, everybody's different from everybody else (202).

Such holistic consciousness emphasises humans' belonging to a greater whole and therefore individuals' responsibility within society formation:

We teach children love and confidence, but...they're made to understand that Pala isn't Eden. It's a nice place all right. But it will remain nice if everybody works and behaves decently (191).

This perspective makes unnecessary the use of police methods in the maintenance of communitarian relations. This is why Palanese people define communism as 'voluntary associations of men and women on the road to full humanity' (171). Similarly, for BelleVertians it is nobody and, at the same time, everybody, who rules their planet. They relate to each other in egalitarian and gentle ways, and feel sorry for earthlings' superiority complex and reliance on hierarchies:

I hope that in 200 years they (Earthlings) have had the time to get rid of hierarchy./ Ah, no, hierarchy over there is something. All bosses, all of them believe to be superior to something else: men think they're superior to women, the people from the city to the people from the villages, adults are better than the children, human beings are superior to animals and plants, and then there are the races!

Serreau also shows how alienation from human and non-human nature is reproduced through space, and particularly urban space. During her first strolls in Paris, Milá is surprised by Parisians' bad mood and lack of empathy, by the lack of rivers in Paris, the predominance of concrete over grass, the abundance of dog excrements on the streets and Parisians' tolerance to high air pollution levels.

Through this and other examples, Serreau and Huxley defetishise key cultural elements and symbols of progress in modern Western societies, such as medicine, music, sport, academia and the cult of beauty as well as the work relations within them. They do so by exposing the close line between perfectionism and emotional repression in these contexts through the objectification of human beings in these contexts. In *La Belle Verte* 'disconnected' football start hugging and dancing with members of the

opposing team in the middle of a match. ‘Disconnected’ musicians break the order of a classical music concert, jumping on their chairs, dancing, improvising lyrics and playing other music styles. A dialogue between Milá and a woman who explains her reasons for using lipstick Serreau also exposes how women are pressured to be attractive to everybody in modern societies:

and what is this for? (Milá, hereafter M) / It is to put it on your lips (Parisian woman, hereafter Pw) / Is it a medicine? (M)/ No, it's to be pretty (Pw)/ Pretty? (M) /To be sexy (Pw) /Sexy? (M)/Yes, to be attractive (Pw)/ Oh, to whom? (M)/To everybody (Pw)/It must be difficult to do this... oh I see, it's a medicine so that everybody loves you, is that right?... and if you don't wear it, nobody will love you. Is that right? (M)/ It's difficult to explain (Pw)... (the woman becomes sad).

Huxley questions Western medicine through Palanese people’s eyes, who define it as “50 per cent terrific and 50 per cent nonexistent” because it focuses on cure “but has no methods for increasing resistance” (67). In contrast, Palanese medicine is preventative and raises awareness about the patient’s relation to her own body. Therefore, rather than diagnosing the problem, doctors’ role is to keep people physically and emotionally well. Palanese medicine is therefore about teaching people the way of going through life. It provides answers about the food people eat, about the way in which they make love, what they see and hear and about their feelings for being in the world.

Through a Palanese person’s description of his encounters with academics in Cambridge, Huxley shows the paradox between Western education’s emphasis on knowledge and its ignorance of human bodies’ rhythms and needs:

I was thinking of two people I met when I was at Cambridge. One of them was an atomist physicist and the other was a philosopher. Both extremely eminent. But one had a mental age outside the laboratory, of about eleven and the other was a compulsive eater with a weight problem he refused to face. Two extreme examples of what happens when you take a clever boy, give him 15 years of the most intensive formal education and totally neglect to do anything for the mind-body related with the learning and the living (208).

In contrast, BelleVertians and Palanese people are emotionally wise and practise physical as well as mental exercise everyday. They are encouraged to exercise their bodies through work and games, and are provided with mechanisms to know their bodies better so to use them more efficiently (not for the profit of somebody else, as in capitalist production, but for their

own benefit). The following dialogue between Will, the British journalist, and a Palanese doctor illustrates this idea:

So you take digging and delving as a form of therapy? (W)/As prevention. In Pala even a professor puts in two hours of digging and delving each day. (PD) /As part of his duties? (W) /And as part of his pleasure (PD)/ It wouldn't be part of *my* pleasure... I take children get this kind of training (W)/ From the first moment they start doing for themselves... by the time they are fourteen they have learned how to get the most and the best out of any activity they undertake. And that's when they start working. Ninety minutes a day at some kind of manual job' (PD) (143).

In line with contemporary indigenous and feminist movements, Huxley and Serreau see advanced societies as those where kindness and affection are a central element of everyday social and ecological relations. In the following paragraph a woman shares Palanese peoples' techniques for treating babies with Will Farnaby:

Stroke the baby while you're feeding him; it doubles his pleasure... Then, while he's sucking and being caressed, introduce him to the animal or person you want him to love. Rub his body against theirs. Food plus caress plus contact plus good equals love. And love equals pleasure, equals satisfaction (189-90).

Similarly, Serreau equals human progress to kindness and curiosity. When Milá 'disconnects' the head of an obstetric unit of a Parisian hospital, he changes the way he relates to others at work. He stops being authoritarian, starts relating to his colleagues in affectionate and non-hierarchical ways, and confesses his ignorance about deliveries to a mid-wife, who is below him in the labour hierarchy. Unafraid of his lack of knowledge about the subject and enthusiastic about learning, he starts asking a postpartum woman about her experience of delivering a baby.

In these utopias progress also means better ability to pay attention to ourselves and to our non-selves, hence better ability to notice the importance of and beauty in other humans and non-human nature. In *Island*, Palanese birds constantly tell Will the word 'attention' and in *La Belle Verte* after being disconnected from modern consciousness, the obstetrician starts admiring his colleague's curly hair; a Parisian woman becomes deeply interested in the shapes of a lettuce leaf; and a man who had just become irritated after having received a minor dent in his car starts hugging trees and people while thanking them.

3 Conclusion

Technologies symbolise human progress and wellbeing, and so do cities, petrochemicals, western medicine and academia. But, do modernist approaches to ecosocialism really consider the social, environmental and emotional costs of that which represents modernity? Huxley's and Serreau's reply to this question would be "no, they do not". I fully concur with them. The basis for dreaming and building healthier socio-ecological systems are relations: healthier and more conscious relations with our own bodies, with other humans and with non-human nature. This means defetishising capital and everything that represents advancement in the Western world today. More importantly, it means conceiving ourselves holistically within and beyond the sphere of material production, making care a central aspect of our social and ecological relations. As *Island* and *La Belle Verte* show, this 're-connection' to the greater (human and non-human) whole to which we belong will not fully take place unless we refuse to key elements of modernity such as technologies, hierarchies and consumerism and we voluntarily adopt communitarian economic systems based upon an even distribution of work.

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