1. Introduction

Utopian thought has developed in conjunction with modernity. Utopian thought has drawn criticism, since it has been associated with aspirations for final political solutions, which inevitably lead to totalism. As well, it has also primarily been structured around the mindset of control, reason, and centralism, all of which have proven to be obsolete and in contradiction to the ethics of tolerance, pluralism, and dignity that has grown and spread rapidly around the world in the post-war era.

In spite this heritage, we argue that utopian thought can foster important kinds of reflexivity that illuminate our constantly transformative politics, a reflexivity that we consider the most apt to meet contemporary global challenges to development and the environment.

The concept of sustainable development has slowly but surely become accepted as a distinct element in international and domestic politics, and its overarching goal is to combine environmental protection with social and economic development in the long term. Sustainable development is now a goal accepted by the United Nations and many international organizations, including the European Union. In various ways it is included in the policies of most countries, rich or poor. At the same time, ever since the report of the World Commission on Environment and Development, *Our Common Future* (1987), sustainable development has been criticized for being too conformist, too vague, and too mainstream. For some analysts, it has lost its potency—if it ever possessed any [1].

In this article we argue that it is as a utopian concept that sustainable development can play an important part in politics; as such, it has a transformative power for politics and policymaking around the world. This requires a utopian thought that transcends three fundamental aspects of modernity: scientification or the notion of fixed truth, fixed territoriality and fixed final goals for politics.

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The development of the formal utopian genre (“utopia proper”), as well as philosophical reflections on utopias and utopian thought, was not only simultaneous with the development of the project of modernity, but also closely linked to it. Utopian thought has been apparent in flourishing work on various ideologies, mainly in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and also frequently evident in its corollary form, the dystopia—i.e. critique of current trends and hopes. Moreover, utopian thought and utopias have always addressed the moralities, social relationships, and technological projects that have either already been developed or have been conceivable as part of the future.

Kumar, among others, argues that the utopian way of thinking about future alternatives is typically “Western”. Outside the Western world, there has not been a tradition of utopian thought: “Other varieties of the ideal society or the perfect condition of humanity are to be found in abundance in non-Western societies, usually embedded in religious cosmologies. But nowhere in these societies do we find the practice of writing utopias, of criticizing them, of developing and transforming their themes and exploring new possibilities within them” [2].

Because of this close relationship between Western modernity and utopian thought, the latter is partly based on tenets of modernity that have turned out to be problematic. As will be developed in this article, these tenets concern the roles of, and relationships to, space, time, and knowledge.

2. Modernity and utopian thought

The concept of modernity is frequently cited in the social sciences and humanities, so we will initially pinpoint some central elements of what is commonly held to distinguish modern utopian thought. Analytics have highlighted different features of modernism and presented different suggestions as to how modernism and modernity should be pinpointed theoretically. While these differ in detail, most of them have tended to stress the following three characteristics in the mindset of modernity.

One, demystification and desacralization has been a key feature since the beginning of modernity, peaking in the Enlightenment, with its striving for “disenchantment”—in Weber’s terminology. Two, the idea of progress, of a linear development toward higher stages in the history of humankind, has been just as important [3]. As a paradox, this idea has flourished side by side with the notion of a final goal, where society at last reaches its full potential. Taken together, this means a break with tradition and strong connections to history. Three, the view of development as basically a collective project can be discerned as basic to most political efforts in the modern era [4,5]. The central unit has been mankind, and a collective striving toward creating a society of harmony and affluence has basically been taken as a given.

The following criteria of modernization listed by Habermas in The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity seem to be broadly accepted: (1) the formation of capital and the mobilization of resources; (2) the development of means of production and the increase of labour productivity; (3) the establishment of centralized political power and the formation of national identities; (4) the proliferation of the right of political participation, of urban ways of life, and of formal schooling; (5) the secularization of values and norms [6].

We emphasise three fundamental aspects of modernity are particularly important in light of utopian thought on sustainable development: “blueprints” or the notion of fixed final goals for politics, scientification or the notion of fixed truth, and nationalism or the notion of fixed territoriality. Breaking with these three categories of modernity is what distinguishes utopian thought on sustainable development as a transformative politics, from the conventional modern utopia as a blueprint for totalitarianism.

2.1. The notion of fixed final goals for politics

All through the processes of modernization one thing remains, namely destruction. As Berman has developed at length, destruction is always the backdrop of creation and change. In his analysis of Goethe’s Faust he states: “he [Faust] won’t be able to create anything unless he’s prepared to let everything go, to accept the fact that all that has been created up to now – and indeed, all that he may create in the future – must be destroyed to pave the way for more creation. This is the dialectic that modern man must embrace in order to move and live” [7]. According to the logic of capitalism, in the struggle for profit and growth, this creative destruction is happening faster and faster. This creates an experience of mobility in society, acceleration in history, and what Habermas has called “a changed consciousness of time” [4]. Following on this is another particularly modern experience, an orientation toward the future, to a specific horizon of expectation that opposes the traditional experiences of previous generations [6]. The intensifying sense of time, the continuous speeding up of processes, and the orientation toward the future results in a fundamental dislocation: “the centre of attention becomes the future, and the emotional relation to the future becomes one of dread and uncertainty” [8]. In a sense, modern humans could be described as living beyond reality, always in the rushing passage of time, which is either too late or has yet not happened, and that can only be grasped as in a dream. This de-centering or dis-embedding effect becomes more intense and more rapid with the increasing transformation of social conditions in general.

One essential feature of the notion of final goals for politics pointed out by Lyotard and others is a general decline in the ideological hold of common projects, codified as “grand narratives” or metanarratives [9]. The narratives in focus are more or less related to the Enlightenment project of progress: i.e. those of disenchantment, the praising of authoritarian science, of formal democracy, of emancipation, and of the market economy. Through these narratives’ decline, it is argued, a postmodern state of mind has come into being, which is in fact the victory of modern “culture over the modern society it
aimed to improve through throwing it wide open to its own potential” [10]. Bauman, along with many others, interprets our actual historical condition as one in which the “all-eroding destructiveness” has been turned toward its own functional apparatus. While modernity is restless transformation (through creative destruction) in search of the ultimate and perfect social organization, postmodernity is modernity without any hope of arriving at that end. What is gone, it is argued, are not only the traces and reminiscences of traditional societies, but also the strong power of the institutions that were central to modernity—as long as it was conceived of as a collective social project based on common basic definitions of the good.

It is apparent, however, that this restless creative destruction is simultaneously an impetus for a parallel engagement with the final goal, of coming home to a state of perfection. The result is an antinomy within the modern utopia: endless progress driven by the idea of final perfection. And there are signs in contemporary politics and public discourse that this antinomy is still important. This is apparent in the politics of the environment, where certain features of modernity, such as endless progress, flourish in the discourse of ecological modernization. At the same time, a classical utopia in the form of a society in harmony with nature, operating within its limits, based on natural principles and a universalized ethics, is often cited.

2.2. The notion of fixed truth

In recent decades, a shift has occurred in one cornerstone of modernity’s utopian thinking: scientification, or the notion of fixed truth. Beck, among others, argues that we are witnessing a shift from an industrial society to a risk society [11]. Just as in the nineteenth century, when religious world views and hierarchical social orders were demystified, science and technology are now being demystified among scientists, experts, and lay people. The impetus for this shift, he concludes, is the unprecedented side-effects of industrial society, the risks that threaten all people and even humanity as such [11]. We will here concentrate on Beck’s analysis of the role of science and on his concept of “reflexive modernization”, which we consider to be closely related to his analysis of what has happened to science and technology in the post-war era.

Beck follows the general view that there is a fundamental break between modern and pre-modern society, a break coinciding with the early process of industrialization. As well, there is another, still ongoing shift from this primal phase of modernity that was initiated around the beginning of the 1970s. This shift, he argues, results from the unintended effects of industrial society, that is, new kinds of risks or dangers that are not primarily local (as had hitherto been the case), but that fundamentally threaten people at a global level. Thus, what now threatens people are epistemologies and political beliefs typical of modern society as developed in the industrial era, and that these have made modern society itself into a subject of modernization. According to Beck’s perspective, modernity becomes reflexive, as it scrutinizes its basic institutions and principles in order to adapt to the side-effects it generates. According to this interpretation, modernization is no longer primarily about more effective production, increased turnover of capital and products, eliminating misery, and social control, or in Beck’s own somewhat uncritical conceptualization, about the distribution of wealth—as if this had ever been the case. From now on, modernity will rather be about the distribution of risks. According to Beck, material needs are now basically satisfied, and the current general insecurity pertains to those immense threats relating to nuclear war, nuclear energy production, the ozone-layer, climate change, and the poisoning of ecosystems, food, and our houses—in brief, our total living conditions. The simple facts that money is power, that the income gap is increasing, or that the numbers of malnourished are on the rise, now amounting to roughly 850 million, is left out in this analysis. The problems with this analysis of the distribution of power and wealth, however, would be a topic for another article.

In this shift, science gets a new role. While science was earlier conceived of as a vanguard domain, feeding technology and orienting and directing the process of industrialization, from now on it will be known as an area of conflicting authority and to some extent as the origin of both gigantic risks and, ironically, the only possibility of adapting to them. As a result of this new role, Beck argues that a momentous demonopolization of science’s knowledge claims is occurring: “science becomes more and more necessary, but at the same time less and less sufficient for the socially binding definition of truth” [12]. While the earlier period was distinguished by unbroken faith in science and progress (“primary scientization”), a new phase has been entered, in which science is becoming demystified (“reflexive scientization”). This is not to say that there was no previous critical engagement with scientific practices, but that this critical attitude is now spreading among lay people. In the initial phase, that of primary scientization, all the negative side-effects of technological and scientific activities could be handled within scientific institutions, becoming incentives to further and expanded scientization: “This transformation of mistakes and risks into opportunities for expansion and perspectives for the development of science and technology generally tended in the first phase to immunize scientific development against the critique of modernity and civilization, and made it ultra-stable, so to speak. Actually, however, this stability was based on a restricted application of the idea of methodological scepticism; within the scientific practices (at least according to the pretension) the rules of criticism were generalized, while simultaneously the scientific results were enforced towards the social domain and lay people in an authoritarian manner” [12].

In the second phase, that of reflexive scientization, the critical logic of science is applied to the principles and practices of science itself. Modernity becomes more radical, in a sense more modern, in that its foundation, critical science, becomes the target of its own critical principles. Beck traces this unbinding of scepticism to two parallel processes: changes in the theory of science and in the practice of research [12]. He claims that “the agents of rupture are the disciplines of critical application of science to itself—the theory of science and the history of science, cognitive sociology and the sociology of science, psychology and empirical ethnology, and so on” [12], and that this decomposition of scientific dogmas has been going on
since the beginning of the century. Moreover, in scientific practices, conflicting hypotheses are becoming common and scientists more deliberate, and, Beck maintains, they generally regard themselves as pursuing an activity without making claims to truth: “Approaching a scientist with the question of truth is almost as embarrassing as asking a priest about God” [12].

In addition, traditional democratic institutions are losing power, and new kinds of politics, sub-politics, are arising. By this Beck denotes a new political culture in which the sphere of production can no longer develop without considering the moral judgments of its decisions in the public sphere. Politics has now moved on, manifesting itself as discourses of legitimation, as demonstrations, as civil disobedience, as critical investigations in the media, etc. This is a de-centring of politics that cannot be reversed [12].

All in all, what is developing is a “reflexive modernity”, which is not a modernity in which reflection automatically goes deeper or is applied to new spheres of society, but a society that is dis-embedding the social relationships of industrial modernity, of the modernity that signifies a break with traditional society. In The Reinvention of Politics: Rethinking Modernity in the Global Social Order, Beck compares the two phases of modernity by distinguishing the following six pairs of contrasting characteristics [11]. The first is that uncertainty is returning and replacing beliefs in linearity and control in science and social planning. The second holds that the impetus of social change in industrial societies is instrumental rationality and reflection; in reflexive modernity, however, the basic impetus comes from the side-effects of applications of this rationality. Third, while industrial society is best understood as a semi-modern society, including traces of both pre-modernity and a limited counter-modernity and critique of the project as such, the society of reflexive modernity is one of a radicalized modernity in which counter-modernity, whatever forms it will take, is strengthening. Fourth, while people in industrial society left behind the social relationships and ways of life of traditional society, people in society today are leaving behind the forms of life characteristic of industrial society. Fifth, the problems of functional differentiation and organization in autonomous or semi-autonomous spheres of society are being replaced by the problems of the functional co-ordination, cross-linking, and fusion of differentiated subsystems. Finally, the fundamental fault line in class-structured society, the left–right dimension, is being replaced by a new set of problematic relationships, such as safe–unsafe, inside–outside, and political–apolitical.

2.3. The notion of fixed territoriality

Territoriality has been essential to utopian thinking in the period of modernity. The ideal society was to be realized within the fixed boundaries of a territory. The territory was regarded as a given future content, so utopian thinking was attached to territoriality—a spatial construct with intrinsic normative implications of how a geographical area should be defined and understood.

Territoriality classifies an area; it stipulates what is included, meanings, relationships, hierarchies, etc. It entails some sort of communication, by means of maps, laws, pictures, symbols, and narratives. It also implies an attempt to influence and control access to an area. In this process, it distinguishes an inside from an outside; that is, the utopian territory is constructed as a denial and critique of the world that happens to be beyond its borders, be it the obsolete world, the misled world, or whatever world represents the “other”. In any case, the territoriality of modernity has involved a strategic striving to affect and control people, phenomena, and relationships, by demarcating and acquiring control over a geographic area. A geographic area is laden with meaning and symbolic content, which is communicated to us [13]. Sociologist Gellner states that one of the essential concomitants of industrial society is the kind of cultural homogeneity demanded by nationalism [14]. Industrialism demanded a flexible social order, and cultural homogeneity could accomplish a flexible mobility. The only organizations that could provide this were relatively large and tightly organized states. By building on the idea of the cultural spirit of community within country boundaries, the nation state served as a functional political unit for the industrial society. The development of a national community came as an answer to the rootlessness of the industrial society, as an expedient adaptation to the nation state as a political-economic unity. Culture became a necessarily shared medium for the citizens of industrial society [14]. However, cultural homogeneity is not inseparably tied to nationalism; it was but one of its important characteristics while globalism is certainly another. The nation state provided the shared common culture necessary for industrialism’s demand for a flexible social order. The development of Fordism demanded not only larger markets but larger cultural units. Economic and cultural globalization can be seen as the inevitable development of the logic of capitalism; after the industrial nation state had fulfilled its function, globalization took over. Of course, we have not yet seen the culmination of this phase of late capitalism, whatever form it may take.

As capital now operates at a global level, the distance between production and consumption is often huge. What is bought in one country today is generally produced in another part of the world, and the consumer’s knowledge of the conditions in the workplace where the commodity is produced is, with very few exceptions, minimal. In addition, the labourer’s control of how to use his or her skill, and over the qualities of the products and processes contributed to, is minimal. The labourer is just one commodity among others. Production in the phase of late capitalism describes perfectly what is denoted by the concept of reification. Second, the power of states and their influence on production is declining profoundly as capital is organizing itself globally, and there are certainly few means to attract multinational companies and production units except by means that to some extent conflict with the interests of local populations. Taken together, the reification and disempowerment of states circumscribes democracy and individual control of life, and what is left is at worst a consumerism that now embraces the entire world, though with extremely unbalanced consuming powers. There are, however, also tendencies that work in the opposite direction.
A major impetus to the globalization of the natural resource discourse was to solve contradictions in the post-war world order. By manifesting the global extent of resource problems, the political and social interests in natural resources that were controlled by different people and classes the world over could be neutralized.

Globalization involves an intensification of the awareness of the world as a single entity in which there are no real isolated spaces. In Western environmental debate this has been described in metaphors such as “spaceship Earth”, “the global household”, and “the global village” [15,16]. In addition to its conceptual implications of a “shrinking world”, globalization involves a material compression of the world. This material compression has enforced the need for inter-governmental organizations over the past century, which have facilitated anever before seen level of multilateral co-operation. The global and regional politics of trade liberalization has greatly increased both the value and quantity of international trade in goods and services since World War II. This dramatic increase in transnational transportation and the flows of capital, resources, and information reinforces the need for international harmonization and delineated standards for products, production, and consumption. The transboundary character of many environmental issues and the social and economic consequences of ecological degradation connect ecosystems and social systems. However, the benefits of globalization and its related trends are unevenly distributed across countries, and societies and groups of people differ in the extent to which they embrace and support many of the dominant material and non-material trends of harmonization and globalization [17–22].

States frequently jointly identify and realise common interests (and sometimes even common values and beliefs) through repeated communication, interaction, and co-operation, creating multilateral institutions and organizations that reflect these common interests [17,23]. In turn, these multilateral institutions and organizations can influence the interests and behaviours of states. International co-operation, political as well as economic, needs not only agreements, but instruments to ensure compliance. We have witnessed an increasing legalization in treaty making over a few decades, with increased legal precision, obligation and delegated authority [24]. Whether this will continue increasing, or whether recent difficulties in the WTO signal a weakened trend toward strengthening the mandates of international regulating bodies, remains to be seen.

The processes of globalization have become an important framing for the notions of fixed territoriality, in relation not only to capitalism but also to the struggles for ecological adaptation and resource conservation. In global environmental politics, universalizing views have frequently been expressed predominantly by northern industrialized countries, stressing the need for all countries irrespective of level of industrial development to address (transboundary) environmental issues. The Stockholm Conference, and many later co-operative endeavours, can be seen as efforts to promote common interests by assigning countries common responsibilities. The theme of the Stockholm Conference was fittingly Only One Earth. Similarly, the Stockholm Declaration attempted to promote a common outlook and laid down common principles for policy action. The Stockholm Action Plan and other later policy programmes, such as the World Conservation Strategy and the World Charter for Nature, presented strategies for governments based on common responsibilities. The logic of these processes has often been that space can be universally understood and defined, which in turn has generated clashes between the many contradictory interests linked to most places.

In conclusion, three particular characteristics of modernity have been problematic for utopian thought: first, the idea of a completely delimited territory ruled by centralized control; second, the perception that a supreme form of knowledge exists—i.e. modern science; three, the idea of a prospect of realizing paradise on earth, i.e. achieving the perfect society. In the following, we shall discuss how the concept of sustainable development has the potential to break this impasse of utopian thought.

3. The international politics of sustainable development

Sustainable development is a policy project that is aimed at interlinking the environment and development, alternatively showing that they in reality are by nature utterly interlinked. To frame the policy concept of sustainable development, we will briefly outline the development of the concept in its international context.

The concept of sustainable development as defined and popularized by the Brundtland Commission emerged as a response to the long-standing North–South conflict over environment and development issues, from the 1960s to the 1980s [24,25]. In addition, many of the ideas and assumptions that are at the core of the concept of sustainable development and the issues discussed in the Brundtland Commission report Our Common Future go back at least to the preparations for the Stockholm Conference [1]. This included the belief that economic growth could benefit environmental protection, the necessity of addressing environment and development in an integrated manner across issue areas in domestic and international planning and policy making, and the need for an intergenerational focus. Through the Brundtland Commission and UNCED, an attempt was made to stimulate better implementation in both developing and industrialized countries.

In the preparations for the UN conference on the Human Environment held in Stockholm in 1972, the North–South tension posed a great challenge. To overcome these, the conference process profoundly spelled out the central assumption of the sustainable development hypothesis: environmental protection and economic development are intrinsically linked. Not only can they be achieved simultaneously, but continued economic development was also presented in the preparatory work as the “only answer” to most environmental problems [24].

Recognizing the failure to live up to the broader goals formulated at the Stockholm Conference, the UN General Assembly established the World Commission on Environment and Development in 1983. Combining members from the global North and South, it re-explored ways of achieving environmental protection simultaneously with economic and social development. The report Our Common Future focused on the concept of “sustainable development”, defining it as development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet theirs.
Protection of the environment should not be seen as a merely sectoral interest, but as integral to all economic and social development [1]. The report popularized the sustainable development concept and made it widely known. Subsequently, the UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) 1992 was designed to further integrate environmental management with economic and social development. Its 27 guiding principles for achieving sustainable development represent a delicate balance between the interests of the global North and South. The Rio Declaration acknowledges that “the rights to development must be fulfilled so as to equitably meet developmental and environmental needs of present and future generations”, and that “environmental protection shall constitute an integral part of the development process and cannot be considered in isolation from it” [26]. The principle “common but differentiated responsibilities” launched by the 1992 Rio Conference is a fundamental principle of utopian sustainable development thinking. The basic contents of the principles were formulated in the preparatory work at and the declaration of the 1972 Stockholm Conference.

Ten years later, the UN World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in Johannesburg in 2002 was arranged to regain some of the momentum that was lost after the Rio Conference. The WSSD plan of implementation specifically identifies poverty eradication, changing unsustainable patterns of production and consumption, and protecting and managing the natural resource base for economic and social development as the overarching objectives of, as well as the essential requirements for, sustainable development. Still, debate continues regarding the balance between the three pillars of sustainable development—ecological, social, and economic development [24].

The Brundtland Report is not utopian in the sense that it envisions totally new policies and measures in a future society; rather, it foresees a society based on current institutions and practices: “We have been careful to base our recommendations on the realities of present institutions, on what can and must be accomplished today” [1]. The Commission had a explicit mandate to induce political action, give new momentum to the stalled implementation of the admirable agreements reached at the Stockholm Conference more than a decade earlier. At the same time, its vision of politics as based on intra- and intergenerational equity, for example, is clearly utopian in that it is not simply a projection of current trends.

4. Utopia unbound

Although the specific content of sustainable development varies depending on the political settings in which it is used, we argue that how it has been framed in UN policy making gives it three elements that challenge the three problematic elements of modernity described above. These three characteristics distinguish sustainable development from the seemingly likeminded discourse of “ecological modernization”; we call these characteristics the disintegration of fixed territoriality, a never-ending story, and prismatic blueprints.

4.1. Disintegration of fixed territoriality

Sustainable development is an ambiguous concept. The interpretation of the concept changes over time and, even more so, in different settings—the various local interpretations of sustainability are manifold. The concept has various focuses, specific interpretations, and practices in alliances of countries (such as the G7 or EU), in international organizations, in NGOs (local and international), in various local settings, and among a broad range of competing actors in many countries. The concept and discourse of sustainable development have proved to be complex, many-faceted, and heterogeneous [27]. As such, they can work to enforce the notion of fixed territoriality, but also to challenge it. Here, we briefly outline how the sustainable development concept has evolved at the international level.

The sustainable development agenda posits fundamental questions concerning the world system. Planetary equity is one element in the utopian thinking of sustainable development. The background to this vantage point was inherent in the United Nations Charter and elaborated when formulating the environmental and development concerns in the UN world conferences at Stockholm, Rio, and, most recently, Johannesburg.

The United Nations Charter from 1945 stipulates that governments have a responsibility to co-operate to achieve peace, freedom, human rights, and social and economic progress for all people. The United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights a few years later commenced the post-war era by framing universal human rights based on the inherent dignity of humans. The Declaration was in essence a reaction to the cruelties of World War II, and to Nazi war crimes in particular. Modernity had displayed a shocking face; science played a central role in the deadly threats to humankind in the form of nuclear weapons, and to human dignity in the form of Nazi genocide. In an effort to reformulate visions for human interaction, utopian goals and ethical principles for social and economic development were agreed on in general terms of freedom, justice, and peace in the world. For example, Article 22 stipulates: “Everyone, as a member of society, has the right to social security and is entitled to realization, through national effort and international co-operation and in accordance with the organization and resources of each State, of the economic, social and cultural rights indispensable for his dignity and the free development of his personality” [28]. Other principles articulated the right to food, clothing, housing, medical care, and necessary social services as well as to free speech, trade unions, property ownership, etc.

The UN Charter and the Declaration of Human Rights were largely silent on the role of issues relating to the natural environment in achieving these crucial human goals. As indications of widespread and severe ecological deterioration and threats became recognized in the 1960s, voices were quickly raised to expand government and UN activities into the environmental field. Speaking in 1970, UN Secretary-General U Thant remarked that “never in the twenty-five-year history of the United Nations has there been a problem of more relevance to all nations than the present environment crisis”. He
continued, arguing that “the time has come for the United Nations, in the spirit and letter of the Charter, to be a center for harmonizing the actions of nations in solving the problems of the human environment” [29]. Currently, these challenges are embedded in the sustainable development agenda.

Post-war co-operation and policy making on the environment and development have been characterized by conflicting interests and views between industrialized countries and developing countries, or between the global North and global South. This controversy marked the debate and often cast its shadow over policy making and implementation. Attempting to overcome this controversy was a major task of the Brundtland Commission, as well as the driving force of the preparations for and holding of the Rio Conference. This tension between the global North and global South on environment and development issues has been characterized in terms of a tension between universalizing and differentiating views of globalization [25]. In contrast to universalizing globalization, described above, many actors, in particular from developing countries, have stressed differences in domestic conditions and interests between the global South and global North. Accordingly, they have argued for more differentiated responsibilities between industrialized and developing countries for addressing environment and development action. Developing countries have criticized the perceived cultural, economic, and political hegemony of the global North, stressing that improving social and economic conditions is the most effective way to achieve improved environmental conditions in developing countries. While many of the developing countries’ concerns have been recognized in political declarations, few of their priorities survived the implementation phase.

The World Commission on Environment and Development was requested to formulate “A global agenda for change”. The framing of their mandate reflects the notion of universalizing globalization; the Brundtland Commission frames the crises as one common crisis. The various crises that have resulted from human activities are no longer compartmentalized in nations or sectors. The global crises “are not separate crises: an environmental crisis, a development crisis, an energy crisis. They are all one”. It also describes global sustainable development as a “common interest”. However, it also specifies that there can be no compartmentalization of the politics fostering sustainable development, neither globally or nationally: “No single blueprint of sustainability will be found, as economic and social systems and ecological conditions differ widely among countries. Each nation will have to work out its own concrete policy implications. Yet irrespective of these differences, sustainable development should be seen as a global objective” [1].

As well, the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities, one of the 27 principles agreed on in the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development of 1992, looks, at least formally, at differentiated commitments and measures to foster sustainable development. It establishes: “In view of the different contributions to global environmental degradation, States have common but differentiated responsibilities. The developed countries acknowledge the responsibility that they bear in the international pursuit of sustainable development in view of the pressures their societies place on the global environment and of the technologies and financial resources they command” [26]. Both contributions to environmental degradation as well as technological and financial capacities define the level of responsibility according to this principle. However, it could be argued that since the principle not only determines levels of action based on contributions to environmental degradation (the “polluter pays” principle), but also on financial and technological capacity, it presupposes a uniform view of what is needed to take action to achieve sustainable development. In praxis, however that is not the case, which the intense negotiations on burden sharing in the climate framework convention make evident.

UN policy making on sustainable development is marked by a constant struggle between the universalizing and differentiated views. The Rio Declaration only once mentions the importance of the local level: “Indigenous people and their communities and other local communities have a vital role in environmental management and development because of their knowledge and traditional practices” [26].

In contrast, Agenda 21, the programme of action for sustainable development from UNCED, has a specifically local focus: “Activities that will contribute to the integrated promotion of sustainable livelihoods and environmental protection cover a variety of sectoral interventions involving a range of actors, from local to global, and are essential at every level, especially the community and local levels. Enabling actions will be necessary at the national and international levels, taking full account of regional and subregional conditions to support a locally driven and country-specific approach” [30].

Agenda 21 stresses the empowerment of local communities and community groups through increasing local control of resources, strengthening institutions, and capacity building. It emphasizes a greater role for NGOs and local levels, although predominantly as “delivery mechanisms”. The action programme stipulates “the principle of delegating authority, accountability and resources to the most appropriate level” [30]. This should ensure that the actions taken would be proper both geographically and ecologically. A separate initiative on the role of local authorities in strengthening Agenda 21 was presented in one of its 40 chapters; it stipulates, among other matters, that a local authority, through consultation and consensus-building, should “enter into a dialogue with its citizens, local organizations and private enterprises and adopt a local Agenda 21” [30].

In conclusion, even though sustainable development still contains an idea of a global fixed territoriality, how the concept has been used in UN policy making, particularly in implementation, allows for the disintegration of modernity’s view of a fixed territoriality for politics.

4.2. A never-ending story

Even though the Brundtland Commission identifies policy goals, such as poverty alleviation, increased democracy, and sustained energy generation as important ingredients in ongoing sustainable development, it explicitly states that the exact
Sustainable development encompasses a wide range of blueprints. There have been attempts to formulate alternative visions of industrialized countries, in many ways omitting alternative interpretations originating from the South. For example, present trends diminish the options for the future: “Inaction will narrow the choices of future generations” [30]. However, the critically of resource management and substitution, recycling, and technological development must enter into the planning process, as all are part of making sustainable development an ongoing project. “In general the rate of depletion should take into account the criticality of that resource, the availability of technologies for minimizing depletion, and the likelihood of substitutes being available. Thus land should not be degraded beyond reasonable recovery. With minerals and fossil fuels, the rate of depletion and the emphasis on recycling and economy of use should be calibrated to ensure that the resource does not run out before acceptable substitutes are available. Sustainable development requires that the rate of depletion of non-renewable resources should foreclose as few future options as possible” [30]. Both the Brundtland Report and Agenda 21 firmly maintain that economic development is needed to ensure environmental protection in the long run. Nevertheless, keeping the options open is predominately associated with protecting the environment, including the resources needed for future consumption, whereas economic development is concerned with social objectives today. The goals of a “country-driven sustainable development strategy” should, according to Agenda 21, “be to ensure socially responsible economic development while protecting the resource base and the environment for the benefit of future generations” [30]. Keeping the options open also infers not passing on the externalities of current production to coming generations.

Utopian thinking now has the role of inspiring political action. This is also the purpose of envisioning a sustainable development future in the Brundtland Report: “the Commission’s hope for the future is conditional on decisive political action now to begin managing environmental resources to ensure both sustainable human progress and human survival. We are not forecasting a future; we are serving a notice – an urgent notice based on the latest and best scientific evidence – that the time has come to take the decisions needed to secure the resources to sustain this and coming generations. We do not offer a detailed blueprint for action, but instead a pathway by which the peoples of the world may enlarge their spheres of cooperation” [1].

4.3. Prismatic blueprints

In the 1970s, the politics of nuclear power brought forth what appears to be the most prominent threat to modernity in Sweden since World War II, or more precisely, a legitimation crisis expressed as criticism of growth, high technology, and contemporary rationality. Through this battle over nuclear energy, a broad and politically informed environmental movement became institutionalized. Largely the same movement is contributing today to the environmental discourse as a quite straightforward partner in the effort seemingly to salvage modernity, in the name of ecological modernization. Following this, for a while, the nuclear power discourse offered brief glimpses of unconventional and system-threatening alternative social strivings and rationales that eventually disappeared. In Ulrich Beck’s terms, there was a tendency toward reflexive modernization [11]. Another part of the story, however, is that some of the prominent features of contemporary environmental discourse, i.e. the international dimension, the importance of the concepts of risk, uncertainty, and security, and the content of scientific solutions, were intensified or born in the battle over nuclear energy. The nuclear power discourse thus exemplifies the divide according to which contemporary politics around the world has increasingly become organized in recent decades, that is, the divide between ecological modernity and the legitimation crisis of modernity in general.

The proponents of ecological modernization argue that their goal is to realize environmental policy in Northern countries by integrating environmental concerns with concerns about economic development, social objectives, etc. [31]. This goal makes it superficially difficult to distinguish between ecological modernization and its rival discourse, sustainable development, which calls for the integration of environmental conservation and economic and social goals. Some researchers frame sustainable development as an expression of ecological modernization [32], a framing that has a Western bias. As we have argued, sustainable development is also distinguished by its commitment to norms such as intra- and intergenerational equity and justice [25,33].

Hajer’s statement, that “the debate on the ecological crisis is simply recognized as being one of the few remaining places where modernity still can be reflected upon”, thus becomes a call to action [34].

The developing countries’ unease in recent negotiations of multilateral environmental agreements reflects a three-decade-long experience of negotiations and conferences, with commitments and promises of action that have been watered down when approaching the stage of implementation. Sustainable development, as currently expressed according to the visions of industrialized countries, in many ways omits alternative interpretations originating from the South. For example, the goal of poverty alleviation is left to the dynamics of the spin-off effects of economic globalization and free trade. Still, sustainable development encompasses a wide range of blueprints. There have been attempts to formulate an alternative
sustainable development utopian thinking by actors from the South. The most prominent of these is perhaps the call to 
revitalize the development of a New International Economic Order. Although this call was successfully accepted as a United 
Nations General Assembly resolution in 1974, it soon disappeared from policy making linking the environment and 
development.

Sustainable development policy at the international level, even though it accords a key role to science, explicitly 
recognises the importance of different types of knowledge (traditional, local, or indigenous) for implementation. Recent 
initiatives, such as efforts to communicate with indigenous Arctic groups about climate change and or the increasing 
popularity of deliberative governance through involving local stakeholders, are paradigmatic examples of this trend [35,36].

Unfulfilled commitments made at UN conferences, commitments regarding financial and technology transfers from the 
North to the South, have been an important cause of tensions and mistrust in the international policy making arena of 
sustainable development. At first glance, this controversy appears not to stem as much from the utopian thought per se, as 
from the implementation (or lack thereof) of agreed-on goals. However, the actions cannot be separated from the goals as 
such; the action leading to a goal is also part of the utopian thinking regarding sustainable development.

In general terms, utopian thought in the South often appears to be associated with a “new world order” based on the 
equitable distribution of technology, property rights, and financial wealth due to active policies enforcing redistribution. In 
contrast, in much utopian thinking in the North, it is hoped that market mechanisms will pave the way to shared goals, while 
related utopian thought maintains that nation states can maintain competitive advantages at the same time as market 
mechanisms bring about redistribution.

5. Conclusions

An important point of departure for our analysis was that utopias and utopian thought are necessary for the politics of 
sustainable development, but that they can also be deeply problematic. Utopian studies occupy a strong position in the 
humanities, but have hitherto rarely been connected with the politically prioritized policies of sustainable development. 
Utopias constitute a vital and important part of politics and social endeavours, not least in the field of environmental politics 
and its attempts to come to terms with the complex of environmental problems [38,39].

Both Hall and Harvey have underlined the importance of utopian thought in politics and practice concerning 
environmental development and planning—especially in urban planning [41,42]. It is also obvious that planning research 
contains much utopian thought and practice, not least in current works aiming to explore new, more sustainable ways to 
plan, build, and otherwise develop the socio-spatial environment [43–45]. Socio-spatial planning and how we develop the 
socio-spatial environment, in cities and elsewhere, is doubtless crucial to implementing sustainable development.

We conclude that sustainable development, as framed in UN policy making, contains three elements that challenge the 
three problematic elements of modern utopian thinking concerning space, time, and knowledge. We have labelled them the 
disintegration of fixed territoriality, a never-ending story, and prismatic blueprints.

Many interpretations of sustainable development still contains an idea of a global fixed territoriality, visible in the notion 
of a universalizing agenda – a single objective – for global sustainable development. Nevertheless, how the concept has been 
used in UN policy making, particularly in implementation, allows for the disintegration of modernity’s view of a fixed 
territoriality for politics.

Sustainable development is framed as a process, not as a static goal. Keeping the options open for the political goals and 
actions of future generations is fundamental to the intergenerational objective of the Brundtland Report and of UN 
declarations and action programmes. It could be argued that the suggested policies narrow the range of options available to 
future generations. Our point is that the intergenerational process perspective allows for a utopian thinking that distances 
itself from the notion of a final goal for politics.

Despite its detailed action programme for state-supported economic growth and environmental protection, the 
Brundtland Report states that there is no one single blueprint for global sustainable development. International sustainable 
development policy debate has borne this out, providing a sample card of political alternatives.

Looking back at the sustainability efforts of the 1990s, it is obvious that there was a huge gap between the ambitions 
expressed in political rhetoric and what was done in practice. For example, the concept and aims of sustainable development 
have frequently conveyed a message that there is no longer any conflict between ecological considerations, intensified 
technological development, and further economic growth [35,46,47]. This new message, according to which economic, 
ecological, and social issues can be harmoniously brought together in the politics of sustainable development, stands, 
however in stark contrast to practical experience from the same years, in which conflicts related to these issues are legion, at 
both the national and international levels.

The multitude of divergent and often also conflicting utopias, and the varying qualities of different kinds of utopian 
thought, can be assumed to be fundamental causes of the controversies and other difficulties emerging when the aims of 
sustainable development are to be implemented in practice, i.e. when words are to be turned into deeds. On the other hand, 
where would we go without utopian thinking on sustainable development? We need to enhance implementation toward 
achieving goals associated with sustainable development at the international level, goals such as poverty reduction, 
environmental protection, natural resource conservation, and improved health. However, to deepen public engagement in 
these endeavours, to stimulate debate as to what paths to choose and to strengthen the overall political imagination 
regarding alternative futures, the engagement should not lean too much on details and practical solutions, but rather
emphasize comprehensive views of preferable futures. This could entail a more thorough and long-term integration of the above goals into the projects of sustainable development and of politics in general. There are definitely seeds in sustainability thinking that could eventually provide the impetus to overcome the limits utopian thought has brought with it from the era of modernity.

References