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# CIVILIZATION AS THE UNDESIRED WORLD

## Radical Environmentalism and the Uses of Dystopia in Times of Climate Crisis

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*Stine Krøijer*

**Abstract:** Unlike the concept of utopia, an explicit concern with dystopia is almost completely absent from anthropology. This article describes the technologies or uses of dystopia among a group of radical environmental activists in Germany. Dystopia means an undesired or frightening society or place, and, according to the activists, describes our current society and civilization—a consumerist lifestyle and overexploitation of nature that will inevitably lead to environmental collapse. This image is used politically to create estrangement and to make distance from undesired others and their practices. The article suggests that an analytical attention to the political technologies of dystopia might be of broad relevance for efforts to understand politics at our present historical conjuncture where utopias seem to have disappeared from mainstream political life.

**Keywords:** climate change, dystopia, ecotage, environmental activism, forest, wilderness

Civilization is exercising violence against us and against other species. Against the Earth! It is threatening to exterminate us all. In that light, our acts of ecotage are a lesser crime to prevent a greater one.

— Fox, Germany, 2016

In contemporary science fiction, visions of catastrophic climate change flourish alongside dystopian renderings of future societies in disturbed landscapes on an overheated planet. These stories—often set in a different world or in a



not-all-too-distant future—cast a critical gaze on human behavior in the present, describing the potentially (and increasingly probable) disastrous effects of human cynicism, greed, and exploitation of nature. A literary genre dubbed ‘cli-fi’ has been evolving over the past years to tell the story of climate change, global warming, and the dystopian future that humanity might face. This trope was discernible even in the early feminist climate fiction of the late Ursula Le Guin, who, in *The Word for World Is Forest* ([1972] 2015), unfolds the story of a distant forested planet that has been invaded by Yumens sent on a mission to clear-cut the land and (space)ship the timber back to an already tamed and deforested Terra. In the process of colonization, the military logging colony enslaves a peace-loving green-furred humanoid species, the Athsheans, who used to live in little bands in perfect harmony with their forest. As the story, and the resistance to enslavement and natural devastation, evolves, the Athsheans develop a taste for killing, mirroring the habits of their invaders. In this way, by extrapolating a trend of her time, Le Guin describes how everything might end—in the total victory of an environmental ethic of overexploitation of nature and deadly conflict between species.

Today, the story of civilization processes gone environmentally wrong is far from confined to science fiction. Dystopian visions of future climate change are widespread in political life, often linked to critiques of the short-sightedness with which we have treated Mother Earth and (mis)managed our common resources. In this social and political climate, anti-civilization sentiments have emerged as an integral part of various groups’ experience of their immediate social world. Le Guin’s *The Word for World Is Forest* is said to have inspired the epic and widely popular 2009 film *Avatar*, which is often evoked by environmentalists to venerate the spirituality of nature and to describe the troubled position of indigenous peoples in contemporary resource conflicts (Taylor 2013). Questions are raised about our current society being the pinnacle of civilization and progress.

In this article, I describe the life of a group of radical environmentalists who live in a forest in Germany, which they have occupied to protest against lignite mining.<sup>1</sup> The group depicts contemporary capitalist civilization as inherently dystopian since its undesirable environmental practices are engrained in our society and in the everyday thoughts and actions of its members. The dystopia is not in the future, but in our present society, which serves as ‘the undesired world’ that must be avoided and mobilized against politically.

Whereas novelists and literary theorist have wholeheartedly explored dystopian visions as a means to understand our present era, an explicit engagement with dystopia is almost completely absent from the social sciences and from the discipline of anthropology in particular. Inspired by efforts to understand the role of utopian visions in shaping collective forms of action and state-building projects (see Buck-Morss 2000), anthropologists have engaged

the concept of utopia in studies of indigenous and peasant rebellions in Latin America (Arguedas 2001; Fernández and Brown 1991; García de León 2001; Rus et al. 2003; Stern 1987) and in debates over the global justice movement and its ‘figurations of the future’ (Krøijer 2015) or ‘grounded utopianism’ (Price et al. 2008; cf. Graeber 2009; Maeckelbergh 2009; Razsa 2015). Whereas the peasant rebellion literature casts utopianism as a form of millenarianism, that is, as a quasi-religious dreaming or striving for a better society in a time and place beyond the present, the second body of literature describes utopianism not as future oriented, but as immanent in present forms of action and politics. In both these trends, utopian visions are prioritized analytically in the process of understanding political mobilization and change, while entangled dystopian visions fade from view. This suggests that we, in the celebration of the diagnostic qualities of the concept of utopia, have been ignoring the ways in which dystopia works as a powerful technology for drawing people together and legitimizing unlawful actions or simply for discontinuing relations with undesired ‘others’.

An exception to anthropology’s disinterest in dystopia is the evocation of environmental catastrophes in the ethnographic literature on the Anthropocene and on disturbed or ruined landscapes of modernization and progress (Gordillo 2014; Haraway 2015; Haraway et al. 2016; Harms 2013; Latour 2014; Moore 2016; Stoler 2008; Tsing 2015). While the ethnographic renderings in this literature seldom fail to evoke the horrors of a man-made planet, there is usually an interest in the ‘worlding’ going on in destroyed landscapes or emerging through multispecies connections (Tsing et al. 2017). To me, this hints at the way that a subtle utopianism lingers on in the analytical attention to the constructive process of world-making, even though the open becoming-with-other-species no longer offers complete alternative worlds, but only possibilities of new connections. A more explicit attention to dystopia, however, could illuminate how such processes go hand in hand with techniques (narratives, performances, and practices) that foster distance and disconnection.

Historically, the concept of dystopia has been employed to describe an undesired and frightening society or place (Gordin et al. 2010: 1), even though it can also be understood as a utopian project gone wrong or one that works for only part of the population (*ibid.*; Sargisson 2012). This is exactly the meaning and use among the environmental activists I have studied, who contrast the Euro-American celebration of progress, in the name of which nature and other lands and species should be tamed and exploited, to the promise of wild, undomesticated, and untamed forms of life. As the introductory quote illustrates, the horrors and violence of capitalist civilization are cast as an existential threat, which leads activists to compare themselves to indigenous peoples (who in this setting stand in for the wild). This suggests that in developing an anthropology of dystopia, paying close attention to

how utopian and dystopian narratives are interwoven is an important line of inquiry. Their content, and the comparisons made, can tell us a lot about how certain groups see society.

Together with Matthew Carey and other colleagues, I have nonetheless argued for the necessity of following a different analytical path—one that explores how dystopian imaginaries are used in political life (Krøijer et al. 2018). So even though utopias were without doubt the most prominent political technology in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—a motivational force that also served to rally people behind the ideologies of (opposing) political projects and to legitimize the sacrifices they demanded—today commonly shared ideologies about a better society seem to have disappeared even from mainstream politics (Žižek 2005). We found that political life has become saturated with arguments *by* dystopia (Krøijer et al. 2018: 6). This implies that dystopia has become a potent political argument that is used to paint pictures of undesirable or even frightening places or future scenarios, which must be avoided at all costs. These cautionary stories are created by magnifying or extrapolating from current conditions, occurrences, or trends, such as migrant flows, virus outbreaks, terrorist attacks, climate change, or technological possibilities of surveillance (Claisse and Delvenne 2015: 155; Krøijer et al. 2018). They seem to work as dystopian visions by defamiliarizing the known world, creating estrangement and distance, and by warning against the catastrophic consequences of pursuing particular courses of action. More often than not, this turns into a conservative defense of the prevailing order or even a nostalgic longing for the past.

Fieldwork in the occupied forest and within the German anti-coal movement, carried out intermittently between 2015 and 2017, has led me to believe that dystopian visions are thriving in environmental activism and are played out even in groups whose primary ethos is ostensibly to create a better world for human and non-human beings alike. Among activists in the forest occupation, dystopia is mainly spatially organized: it emerges as ‘a civilized zone’ outside the forest, and it becomes epitomized by the consumerist lifestyle pursued by local villagers who live around the forest and mine. The activists’ vision of civilization as dystopian does not mainly take the form of cautionary stories or narratives, but is performed in actions that are aimed at producing distance from these undesired others and their lifestyle. Not unlike the literary techniques found in cli-fi and in Le Guin’s *The Word for World Is Forest*, estrangement, distance, and awkward comparisons are techniques used to criticize current society and raise questions about the ways of the world, questions also raised through similar techniques in parts of classic anthropology (Clastres 1987; Lévi-Strauss [1955] 1977). In the following, I shall describe how estrangement, distance, and comparison are part of a technology of dystopia, employed to criticize the present and to devise strategies for how to prevail in a horrible world.

## Estrangement through Ecotage

Two activists, whom we will call Lynx and Wrench, have been hanging out for most of the day in the little library in the base camp of the forest occupation while waiting for the night to fall. The library, one of the few wood-built shacks in the forest occupation, is used for storing books and ‘zines’, as a living room on cold days, and as extra sleeping space for traveling anarchists and other visitors. It is January, freezing, and high season for logging, that is, the time of year when the energy utility company RWE is permitted to clear-cut sections of the old growth forest to expand one of Germany’s largest lignite mines.<sup>2</sup> It is also the time of the year when Lynx, Wrench, and other activists most eagerly engage in ecotage (environmentally motivated sabotage) to curb the continuous encroachment of the mine on the forest.

The forest occupation was established in 2012 as the continuation of a summer camp organized by the German anti-coal movement in the Rhineland to protest against the prolongation of lignite mining in an area that comprises some of Europe’s largest open-cast mines. The Hambacher mine, for example, covers an area of approximately 85 square kilometers, and RWE, the company operating the mine, plans to keep expanding it until 2040. RWE also recognizes that this mine is Europe’s largest single emitter of carbon dioxide.<sup>3</sup> Several local villages have been displaced in the process of expanding the mine, and the company has, since the beginning of its operation in 1978, felled the majority of a 5,500 hectare old-growth forest, known for its extraordinarily high biological diversity. Despite efforts of reforestation by designing a new ‘artificial’ forest, the felling of the old-growth forest has produced opposition from local villagers, who held the forest as a commons (*bürgerwald*) until 1978, and from environmental activists, who have poured into the area from German cities and neighboring countries.

Activists who arrived here before Lynx and Wrench have established various tree-sits in tall oak and beech trees to protect the forest from being cut down. Tree-sitting as a tactic in environmental activism was first employed in the US, Britain, and Australia in the early 1980s to stop road building and other infrastructural projects. It was used particularly on the West Coast of the United States by Earth First! to prevent the clear-cutting of forests (Hill 2000; Jordan 1998; Taylor 2008, 2010; Wall 1999). Imported to Germany through the Earth First! network, the tactic coincided with a growing frustration over, and loss of confidence in, elected politicians and the international system’s ability to act on the climate crisis and ensure a clean energy transition in Germany.

The tree-sits are supported by a base camp, established on a piece of land lent to activists by a local farmer who is also a stern opponent of the mine expansion. The night before our conversation in the library, Lynx and Wrench had “been for a walk” in the company of a small group of people to “have a

look” at the installations of several company pumping stations, which are used to lower the groundwater level around the mine. Activists agreed that this is causing the forest to suffer from water shortages, evidenced in the shortened leafing period. With the expedition, their hope was to “expand the territory of operation,” as Wrench phrases it, but instead they had been caught in the headlights of one of the many patrol cars of the security company hired by the mine. To avoid confrontation, which had been frequent over the previous months, the group hid at the edge of the woods and took a long detour back to camp without “having achieved anything.” In the camp’s library, the afternoon passes slowly, practicing climbing knots, fantasizing about delicious foods and sweets, and exchanging views on literature and the impending environmental catastrophe.

Another target being discussed that afternoon is one of the company’s radio and mobile antennas located at the edge of the mine. ‘Someone’ has already prepared a handful of bicycle tubes filled with easily inflammable material, which have been hidden in the forest. To reach the antenna, it is necessary to sneak and creep across a stretch of open, already clear-cut land, Lynx explains. Large stacks of timber and long grasses will be the only hiding places along the way. “Those stacks of timber just make me feel so sad,” Wrench comments. “When looking at them, you just feel the urge to burn something.” Wrench has a background as an Earth First! activist and has been involved in ongoing protests against the expansion of Heathrow Airport in England. He is a strong advocate of ecotage, a form of sabotage with environmental motives aimed at polluters or destroyers of the natural environment, which was popularized in the environmental movement in the US by Edward Abbey’s (1975) book *The Monkey Wrench Gang* (cf. Taylor 2008). But over recent years, Wrench has developed stronger anarcho-primitivist sensibilities, expressing a desire to go to Finland to spend at least a few years on his own in the forest. We talk about how this resonates with Henry David Thoreau’s (1962) life in the forest. But now things are different, Wrench argues. “This civilization is going to fall, and most of humanity will go down with it,” he says. He asks if I have read Derrick Jensen’s (2006) *Endgame*, a two-volume book on the problem of civilization and how it must be destroyed. “The rats, our companion species, are probably the only ones who will survive unless we learn to live in the wild,” he continues, while pointing toward the wooden floor of the library where the rats, the activists’ collective plague, are in hiding for the day. He changes the subject back to the aesthetic qualities of ecotage: “An antenna burns like a Christmas tree. It takes several hours and is visible in the whole area. It affects not only RWE, but the entire telecommunications system.” He finishes: “Not everybody in the camp is happy about that, as the security of the occupation also relies on phones. But you simply need to make yourself independent of those things.”

Whether the content of this conversation reflects pure fantasizing or real acts, I do not know. Ecotage is not subject to collective policy making in the

occupation, but something that individuals or smaller affinity groups can make their own decisions about. The same holds for decentralized direct actions against the trains carrying lignite from the mines to the power plants around the mines, and ‘pinprick’ actions directed at the monstrous diggers and conveyor belts in the mines. Independent of the truth value, however, the conversation reflects a view of civilization as dystopian. When activists in the German forest occupation talk about civilization, they are referring to an advanced stage of development resting upon natural resource exploitation, industrial agriculture, and modern comforts and conveniences, but also any kind of civil, obedient behavior. Therefore, our conversation also reflects a desire to get rid of certain modern inventions, such as telecommunications, which, together with the stacks of timber, come to stand for everything that is wrong in society. Vandalism and ecological sabotage are not only effects of estrangement; they also produce further enmity, the loss of relationships, and a desire to turn away from society, for example, by leaving civilization behind in order to live in a forest. The stories about ecotage actions—in which freedom-loving people are pitted against the destructive forces of the mining industry, its infrastructure, and its security apparatus—make society appear unfriendly and hostile. The parallel to the antagonism and hostility in Le Guin’s *The Word for World Is Forest* should be obvious here: hostile actions not only result from but also breed enmity and estrangement, which always seem to be the first ingredients in the use of dystopia in political life.

## **Making Distance**

In continuation of the stories about civilization as an undesired place located in our present world, a range of activist practices are concerned with establishing a distance from such places, persons, and practices. We first return to Lynx in order to unpack the various ways in which activists seek to make distance and discontinue relations to the surrounding world, and how these actions evoke dystopia as “what the others want.”

After a more successful evening expedition, Lynx is spending the night in one of the tree-sits in an area of the forest called beech-town, a group of 30-meter-tall copper beeches some 15 minutes’ walk from the base camp. The tree-sit Lynx usually occupies is named Aquarium because of the many windows in the little tree house and the transparent plastic roof over the bed, which provides an ample view of the sky. Lynx is in her early twenties and has hitherto mostly been engaged in anti-fascist activism. During the summer, she participated in the anti-coal movement’s Ende Gelände summer camp and civil disobedience action, aimed at occupying and shutting down a mine in the Rhine-Ruhr district for the day. Forcing a mine or one power plant out of the



many towering in the area to shut down or work at reduced power even for a limited period communicates a message to the public, but it also embodies the solution—leave fossil fuels in the ground to impede the climate catastrophe. The slogan *Ende Gelände*, an imperative that loosely translates as “Here and no further,” plays on the multiple meanings of how destructive activities in a particular area must end or be terminated. During the event, Lynx met some activists from the forest occupation who seemed more permanently engaged in anti-mining, and she decided to come back for a skill-share camp in the forest during the fall and to stay on for the winter. “I was attracted by the high level of activity compared to my hometown,” she explains as we walk through the forest. “We just used to be hanging around smoking pot, but after seeing this I became quite eager to figure out how little I can live on.” Over the past months, she has become an able climber, but as well as occupying a tree-sit, something that can easily make one “go into a winter torpor” during the dark months, she has recently teamed up with Wrench and a few others to participate in nocturnal actions.

“You probably noticed that things have changed around here,” she says after we get onto the platform of the tree-sit. Earlier in the day, we had been looking at a map of the forest taken from RWE’s annual logging plan, which had been leaked to activists by a company employee. “As you saw, they felled almost everything they intended to—a bit more actually,” she adds and continues:

Last Thursday, they started logging in our part of the forest. Most people were in the camp kitchen eating breakfast, when two guys came running in from the forest, shouting that The Polar Express [the name of a tree-sit] was gone. We put on camo[ouflage] and masks and ran out while yelling in order to scare them off. There were at least 20 security [guards/personnel], but they withdrew to one of the bridges as we arrived. We followed them, one of the windshields on their truck was shattered, but it only made them turn around and attack us. I first thought that the truck would drive away, but then it headed right at us while we were on still on the bridge. Fledermaus was hit. Afterwards they dragged him onto the truck and beat him up. Now he is in jail and badly hurt. Things have escalated quite a bit since then. We did not have a lot of discussion about it; it just seemed necessary. It has had the positive effect that they have withdrawn from our part of the forest. Last month they were hunting us when we were moving to and from a tree-sit. We needed to show them that this is an outlaw area.

From our tree-sit, the diggers in the mine are heard only at a distance. In comparison to the forms of hide-and-seek between mining security personnel, activists, and police that increasingly resulted in violent encounters such as the one described by Lynx, the trees feel like a safe place to be. Her story conveys how the forest and treetops are at a safe physical distance of threatening others,

whom it had been crucial to force into withdrawing from the forest. Her concern with distance makes it clear to me how the world is cast as dystopian, namely, as a spatial struggle between good and evil forces struggling to outdo one another.

After a long morning stretching into the early afternoon, during which we rest, talk, and drink coffee in Aquarium, hunger and boredom make us leave the tree to seek more company and to find some food in the camp kitchen. After a visit to another tree-sit in Oak-town, we head to the base camp where we learn that there is no food, although new provisions seem to be on the way. We are told that a group of people have “headed into civilization,” that is, gone to the nearest village to fetch water from the homes of a group of local citizens supportive of the forest occupation and to collect old bread from bakeries and damaged vegetables from the greengrocer’s. Other people have gone farther away to dumpster dive for food in supermarket containers. With this and periodic donations, activists are able to cover their most basic needs, but good food is seldom plentiful and availability of provisions always uncertain. Non-vegan, unwholesome, or industrially produced foods that are sometimes brought back from the dumpster diving trips are sneered at and not allowed into the camp kitchen, but they can be eaten in the thicket behind the camp where a non-vegan “freegan” kitchen is set up. Here the “contaminated food,” as one activist calls it, is seemingly cleansed before ingestion through its closeness to the forest. Because food is ingested, many environmental activists (also including those outside the forest) consider food practices to be an important area of everyday activism where capitalist permeation of the body is at stake in both material and symbolic terms. Policing the borders of the occupation and controlling bodily boundaries thus become part of the same endeavor—to avoid, establish, and create a distance from a dystopian world.

Overall, activists strive to avoid participating in the conventional, capitalist economy by buying as little as possible, hitchhiking instead of paying for public transportation, and resisting desires for consumer goods and conveniences—needs that are said to have been instilled in all of us. Consumerism is frowned upon, whereas dumpster diving and stealing are described as legitimate forms of foraging and scavenging on the leftovers of a capitalist economy run riot, which leads normal people to discard still useful things. Although experienced as liberating, however, at least when plentiful, scavenging in the litter and remains of a lost civilization never seems far from the epic scenes of science fiction films.

Life in the forest is seldom easy due to the fear, paranoia, and recurring clashes with police and security personnel; the scarce provisions; and the difficult conditions for organizing reproductive labor, such as firewood collection, dishwashing, cooking, and maintenance of compost toilets. Because of these conditions and feelings of threat and vulnerability, everybody would from time to time leave the camp, travel to visit family and friends, or go to the nearest

autonomous social center to shower, do laundry, use the Internet, or simply get some rest in a warm bed. These journeys ‘into civilization’ are surrounded by a sense of guilt, and can sometimes produce reactions of tacit disassociation or comments of disavowal from fellow activists, suggesting that the person is yielding to the products and attitudes that the collective is trying to avoid. Yet fortifying an interior moral barricade against other people’s weaknesses and cultivating a community defined by other norms and values were only partially effective for creating a distance from undesirable practices.

On the one hand, the physical confrontations (serve to) render visible the evil face of capitalism in the form of repressive violence that defends the status quo and upholds the privileges that private companies like RWE have in Germany. On the other hand, ecotage, tree-sitting, and the everyday practices of people in the base camp combine to turn the little forest into a space at an ‘internal distance’ from capitalist civilization, or an outlaw area, as Lynx put it. It was strategically located in the symbolic center of capitalism (Krøijer 2015: 58) or in the “belly of the beast,” as a popular song in the camp would have it—that is, in the middle of the industrial energy complex of the Ruhr district. This spatial organization of the tree-sitters’ dystopia makes distancing even more crucial, but difficult. Activists feed off the waste and excesses of the very same civilization that they wish to cut away from; as a consequence, liberating oneself becomes a constant labor of transformation. It calls for a particular form of endurance that requires minute attention to every single action, which sometimes leads activists to burn out, give up, or simply leave the camp.

What I have sought to convey is how dystopia is not only a narrative about an undesired place. It also becomes immanent in a range of practices and actions that uphold this image. As in science fiction literature, ‘the making of distance’ refers to a physical distance that serves to render other, or even familiar, ways strange. Paradoxically, activists depend on the help of local villagers to make ends meet, but they also detest what they see as the villagers’ passivity and all-too-comfortable lifestyle. “They say that if the forests should have been saved, something should have been done 30 years ago,” a young girl who lives in the camp comments, “but it is hard for me to see how they can hold that against us.” In casting the surrounding society as dystopian, local villagers are depicted as “Mercedes-driving sell-outs” whose lives depend on the mine. The docility even of friendly villagers is experienced as colluding with the will of politicians and big business in making ‘the system’ endure, and in this sense, our present dystopian civilization is what somebody else wants: it is the result of the desire of ‘others’ and of their inability to change their unsustainable practices. Despite techniques of creating distance, this close entanglement of utopia and dystopia in every single act entails that the ‘fall of civilization’ becomes a slow, long-lasting continuity, which is consequently seen as unlikely to culminate anytime in the near future.

What activists regard as dystopia is, in other words, the utopian project of others—the dream of material progress, which rests on the mastery, taming, and exploitation of lands and other species (Krøijer et al. 2019). In this sense, a dystopia is a utopian project ‘gone wrong’, as noted by Gordin et al. (2010)—one that ‘works’ for only parts of the world’s peoples and beings.

## Awkward Comparisons

If utopia and dystopia are each other’s twins in our present world, one way their relation can be teased out is by scrutinizing the comparisons made in political life between desirable and undesirable societies. In the following, I describe how activists make use of awkward comparisons to generate reflections on the contemporary (dystopian) human condition and society. The comparisons are deemed ‘awkward’ because they mess with established ideas of similarity and difference, but also because they have ideological effects. In the forest, the comparative analytical move is played out through imitation of indigenous peoples of the Americas (Ger. *Indianen*) in order to invoke the contours of their utopia, but it also reflects critically back on the ways of the world.

On this rare sunny afternoon in the middle of January, when Lynx and I walk into the base camp, it is full of activity: a few people are repairing the common bicycles, while others are partaking in the digging of a five-cubic-meter hole in the ground to add another mud house to the row of eco-friendly constructions in the camp. Few of the assembled crowd had thought it worthwhile to travel to Paris to participate in the protests at the COP21 a month earlier,<sup>4</sup> particularly those engaged in turning the camp into a more permanent living space by building new mud houses. They argued forcefully that it was “more important to keep warm during the winter” in order “to make the occupation endure,” and to “focus energy in building alternatives.” From being an activist project of relentless opposition to mining, nurtured within the broader anti-coal movement in Germany, the forest occupation has increasingly developed into an experiment with ‘primitive skills’ and alternative sustainable livelihoods.

Outside the kitchen, some people are talking about the need to do something about the huge pile of dirty dishes behind the shed. “I refuse to do the dishes again. It is always the same people doing it,” Lynx says as we approach the kitchen. But she changes her mind when she realizes that it is some of the men living in the old tree-sits who have thrown themselves into this unwanted reproductive labor. While doing the dishes, I teach Lynx and the others a trick I once learned in the Ecuadorian Amazon of using sand or ash (an alkaloid) as an abrasive to get the difficult dirt off the plates while saving soap and water. My previous experience with life in indigenous communities in the Amazon, and with indigenous peoples’ involvement in environmental conflicts in Latin

America, was highly valued—and among the reasons given for granting me permission to conduct fieldwork in the forest occupation. This and other occurrences, such as being asked to make a fire in the rain “as an indigenous person would,” drove home to me how learning new everyday life skills was of great interest to activists in the camp.

In all of this, indigenous peoples are represented as closer to nature and unwilling to sell off the natural resources on which their life depends. Many activists living in the camp had destroyed their identity papers and taken on alternative names such as Fledermaus (Bat), Crow, Lynx, Mud, Wrench, or Willow, inspired by their life in the forest. By not having identity papers, activists reported that they felt liberated from their societal rights and duties, and that their alternative names made them feel “wilder” and closer to their forest environment. Through the mimicking of a hunter-gatherer lifestyle, which included raiding civilization for nourishment, activists projected their anti-civilization sentiments onto indigenous peoples.

German radical environmentalists are not alone in this admiration for and imitation of indigenous peoples. In his PhD dissertation, Tord Austdal (2016) describes how anarcho-primitivist communities in the US engage in dissemination of ‘primitive living skills’ through gatherings and movement rendezvous. In this context, skill sharing involves learning the ability to immerse oneself, connect to, and live in wilderness, for example, by acquiring fire-making skills; by learning to forage and treat leather, pelts, and steel; and by building sustainable homesteads. Among the anarcho-primitivists, wilderness is associated with the untamed place that is devoid of human tracks (ibid.: 112–113); it is a place where people can become moved and transformed through immersion. Austdal interprets activist practices as a form of ‘grounded utopianism’ (Price et al. 2008), but alongside this, the same dystopian vision of civilized society lurks within his descriptions, telling us how people should act in light of the problems of society.

The diverse activities during the afternoon in the forest occupation in Germany nicely illustrate how different anarchist tendencies co-exist in the camp: some people focus their energy on upholding the tree-sits, and some prioritize direct actions on the mine and its installations, while others see the camp and the space it offers as a possibility for experimentation with alternative livelihoods and as a place for ‘rewilding’ themselves. This makes activists in the camp slightly different from the more hard-nosed homesteaders and primitivists described by Austdal, who seem to focus all their efforts on creating and maintaining ‘wilderness’ as a time-space at a significant distance from civilization. In Germany, the closeness of the forest to the dystopian society around it, which activists constantly engage with and raid for provisions, makes a different concept of the wild emerge: it does not exclusively refer to a pristine natural wilderness, but to acts of relentless resistance or opposition inspired by

(their own narrative about) indigenous peoples. The image of indigenous peoples as ‘authentic anarchists’ (non-hierarchical, irreverent, and natural) made the repeated request for me to share indigenous peoples’ skills particularly troublesome. It was, however, simultaneously the source for understanding the role of comparisons in the uses of dystopia.

To Fox—one of those who was more verbal on this point and whom I referred to in the opening of this article—middle-class life, with all its amenities and comfortable political attitudes, is the epitome of this force that is threatening to “exterminate us all.” As he pithily phrases it: “The system is in denial, as great civilizations always have been in the face of their own end.” Humans as well as non-human beings have been “domesticated,” he explains, as he had himself experienced it during a three-month prison stay, where the only thing that kept his spirits up was listening to the birds outside his window and reading books, which he borrowed from fellow inmates in exchange for cigarettes. He was detained allegedly for “throwing something” at police officers when they came to evict his tree-sit, but after returning to the forest occupation, he concentrated on managing the information point in the camp and on building relations to indigenous peoples’ struggles in the Americas.

The admiration of and tokenistic gestures toward Native Americans and indigenous peoples among radical environmentalists in Europe is not new, but seems to be growing stronger. A few people in the camp would even argue that by living the life they did, they could be compared to or identified with indigenous people, and in so doing failed to consider both the obvious differences in colonial history and unequal privileges. The common denominator, according to Willow, was a concern for “caring for the land” in the face of extinction and environmental catastrophe (Krøijer 2019). In this context, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro’s (1998) *Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism* was highlighted as a basis for the possibility of identifying as an indigenous person, due to its reference to ontological self-determination.

In the time around my fieldwork, it was particularly the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation in the US and its resistance to the Dakota Access Pipeline that evoked awe and admiration (see also Klein 2017). Such ‘noble’ cases of indigenous peoples’ involvement in contemporary resource struggles, which also included the village of Sarayacu’s resistance to oil development in Ecuador, served as examples for how to endure against the odds. Concrete relations were built through sending letters of solidarity and holding public meetings and demonstrations in support of indigenous peoples’ struggles, and by extending invitations to participate in the German anti-coal movement’s summer camps in the Rhineland.

Acquaintance with, and knowledge of, these issues and struggles stem from a variety of sources, ranging from German writer Karl May’s colorful and popular adventure novels set among Native Americans to anthropology and

alternative news sites on the Internet. To compare is to make a connection (Strathern 2004), but it can also involve a critique and disavowal of other relations: the comparative ground rested on people in the forest occupation seeing themselves as caring for the land more than other people in the area did. And in this way indigenous peoples came to serve as a convenient (utopian) counterpoint to civilization through which activists could diagnose and reflect critically upon the environmental dystopia unfolding before their eyes. In messing with similarity and difference, the comparison, when performed in speech and action, had a political end.

The irony is that contemporary environmental activists are not alone in laying performative claim to indigeneity or restyling old configurations of civilization and wilderness (cf. Cronon 1995). In science fiction as well as in anthropology, comparisons have worked as technologies for producing estrangement and distance from an undesired 'modern' world. The implicit, and awkward, comparison at play in Margaret Mead's ([1928] 1961) *Coming of Age in Samoa* is in many ways comparable to the analytical operation that the German activists are involved in. In her famous book, Mead turned the erotic freedom of the young Samoans that she encountered during her fieldwork to work as a critical lens on civilization and the strict control of young women in Puritan middle-class America. According to Mead, Samoan society was not yet haunted by the evils of civilization (ibid.: 193):

Economic instability, poverty, the wage system, the separation of the worker from his land and from his tools, modern warfare, industrial disease, the abolition of leisure, the irksomeness of a bureaucratic government—these have not yet invaded an island without resources worth exploiting. Nor have the subtler penalties of civilisation, neuroses, philosophical perplexities, the individual tragedies due to an increased consciousness of personality and to a greater specialisation of sex feeling, or conflicts between religion and other ideals, reached the natives.

Mead's admiration for the young women seemed fueled by nostalgia, with her own society cast as the undesired place. In anthropology and radical environmentalism alike, 'primitive society' has worked as model for the good life and as a utopian alternative to Puritan, hierarchical, capitalist, and modern societies. One may also think of the representation of indigenous peoples in Pierre Clastres's (1987) *Society against the State*. Based on his fieldwork among the Guayaki, Clastres, a self-proclaimed anarchist, casts Amazonian societies as inherently anarchic and as an egalitarian alternative to state-centered and hierarchically organized Western societies. This rendering of indigenous societies as anarchic has become emblematic of European exploration of otherness as a point of departure for a critique of modern society. Much later, the same 'other' vantage point is used to challenge the modern presumptions of anthropology

itself (Viveiros de Castro 1998, 2012), but also to propose that we can indeed learn a lot from the Amerindians who have (already) faced the destruction of their world. Viveiros de Castro (2015: 6) writes:

I am convinced that in the somber decades to come, the end of the world “as we know it” is a distinct possibility. And when this time comes ... we will have a lot to learn from people whose world has already ended a long time ago—think of the Amerindians, whose world ended five centuries ago ... who nonetheless, have managed to abide, and learned to live in a world which is no longer their world “as they knew it”. We soon will be all Amerindians.

Whether this extrapolation is an accurate rendering of the future in store for all of us is beside the point here, as my aim has been simply to show how distance and comparison work in anthropology—and in environmental activism—to provide a dystopian image of our time. Not unlike ethnographers working in distant places, activists make use of distance and comparison in relation to selected others as part of their political technology of dystopia. This serves to generate reflections on the contemporary human condition and society, but also to change themselves and become versions of indigenous people, who are seen as holding the promise of surviving the climate catastrophe.

## Conclusion

Dystopias can take the form of undesired future scenarios or as undesired places in the present world. Among radical environmentalists in Germany, free market capitalism and civilizational impulses are identified as those present forces that are turning our world into an environmental dystopia. Their dystopia is located in places and practices in society, and the dystopian narratives indicate what should be fought, kept at a distance, or abstained from. In their rendering, our present society is catastrophic and is likely to become more so. Contrary to other groups that might share a similar dystopian vision of climate change and its future effects, the activists described here do not combat this scenario to save civilization from downfall or to retain current conditions of life—even though ecotage actions could be argued, as Fox does, to be preventive. The current society should be dismantled, not saved.

This dystopian narrative is different from the more apocalyptic renderings of the future found in films and literature, where nature is depicted as encroaching on the debris of modern civilization. It comes much closer to Le Guin’s *The Word for World Is Forest* in which civilization is depicted as infringing on the last patches of wild, unspoiled nature. Here, too, distance and comparison play crucial roles in critiquing the ways of the modern world.



In the face of this, experiments with alternative livelihoods and human rewilding through imitation of indigenous peoples are surely strategies to survive the impending catastrophe. They are also concerned with the liberation of human and non-human beings who have been tamed and civilized by agricultural progress and industrial capitalism. Through comparison, indigenous peoples serve to reify a model for an ecological sustainable life (cf. Blaser 2013; Conklin and Graham 1995; Dove 2006; Hames 2007; Li and Paredes Peñafiel 2018). In practice, however, the activists' sustainable life is sought by moving into nature, building eco-friendly housing, cutting electricity use as well as other consumption to almost zero, recreating egalitarian relations to other species, and fighting destroyers of the environment in order to make their little world prevail. These practices are what scholars have referred to as 'grounded utopianism' in social movement literature, yet they also mirror the distancing techniques and making of other places found in science fiction (and in anthropology). By shifting the analytical attention onto dystopias, it is possible to appreciate how such actions and narratives also serve to create estrangement, identify enemies, and diagnose present (as well as future) problems. Comparisons are not only utopian, but also serve to diagnose ills of society, sometimes even by pointing backward to lost times, places, and societies.

As gleaned from current political trends and forewarning discourses, dystopia seems to be a prevalent political technology, announcing a shift in how politics is understood and practiced. Think of the political slogan "Make America Great Again" during US elections, which embodies a nostalgia for the past, or Boris Johnson's call to "Stay Alert" during the corona pandemic, which makes people individually responsible for combating an invisible threat. When dystopia is cast as a threatening future scenario, as a political technology, it becomes oriented toward conserving our existing world. It is, in short, a 'conservative' political strategy aimed at holding feared changes at bay. Nowhere is this more visible than in ultra-right concerns about migration, which use technologies of 'distance' in ways similar to what I have described here. Where utopia stresses change, dystopia is the utopia—the desired change—of someone else.

Like utopias, dystopias can be immanent in action and serve to rally people behind opposing ideological projects. Yet they do so by creating distance and uniting people in what and whom they are against. As social science researchers, we need to embrace the study of dystopia and its political uses as wholeheartedly as we have done with the study of utopia. Not only because dystopias are all around us, including in our own texts, but also because they can tell us a lot about political culture at our current political conjuncture, and about the ways and the worlds that are perceived as worthy of prevailing in the future.

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## Notes

1. In this article, people have been anonymized mainly by using cover names (some of which I have originated) inspired by their life in the forest. Certain places or acts have been partially blurred, and events have been slightly altered in order to avoid legal consequences. In so doing, the article sometimes draws on anarchist ways of speaking about direct actions by referring to an impersonal 'someone' or by describing acts as happening without referring to an acting subject, as in 'the windshield was shattered'.
2. RWE Power AG, a company of the RWE Group based in Essen, Germany, produces electricity from lignite-based and nuclear power generation. See <https://www.group.rwe/en/>.
3. This acknowledgment could be found on RWE's website at <http://www.rwe.com/web/cms/en/1904186/rwe/responsibility/environment/climate-protection/> (accessed 23 February 2017).
4. The 2015 United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP21) was held in Paris from 30 November to 12 December.

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