



November 2022

## The Practical Idealism of Ecovillages

### Contribution to GTI Forum [Which Future Are We Living In?](#)

Frank Fischer

In his opening [essay](#), Paul Raskin has raised the most critical question facing the future of the next generations. When it comes to assessing the Global Scenario Group's [scenarios](#), I would first note that they have been very helpful in teaching environmental politics. Until I discovered them, I usually searched around to find ways to portray the future under severe climate change. The Great Transition proved to be a very useful framework for discussing the possibilities with students. While the scenarios can no doubt be updated, I have still found nothing more helpful.

As for the specific question—Which future are we living in?—I think that all three models will be evident for some time, depending on different circumstances around the world. The Conventional World will surely do its best to hang on for as long as possible, before turning full-scale to [Fortress World](#). How long the existing system can manage to survive is unclear. It is easier to predict the hard life for those outside the fortress; they will live with poverty, hunger, and violence. Here forms of barbarism will everywhere be present.

Unfortunately, much of the work done in the name of transition and sustainability unwittingly operates within the parameters of techno-industrial culture. I have found this to be true of many well-intentioned environmental projects, including most of the Transition Town efforts I have visited. The point is even more pertinent when it comes to academic work. Very little of the teaching and research in contemporary universities recognizes or acknowledges the need for a deeper structural transition. Nearly all of it remains safely ensconced in the [Policy Reform](#) mode, serving mainly to help sustain the unsustainable system of which it is a part.

The only sustainable strategy that I see is a holistic form of [Eco-communalism](#) which stands

outside of the techno-capitalist system and its presuppositional boundaries. Much of the discussion of the Eco-communalism, however, remains too abstract. It tends, as such, to ignore practical alternatives at hand. As the result of the effort to think through the alternatives with students, I ended up writing a [book](#) that called for Eco-communalism and presented the ecovillage movement as the most developed and available form I could identify.

To be sure, intellectual work is essential; still, however well-intentioned, it is too often disconnected from the practical tasks at hand. Here the thing that is most impressive about ecovillagers is that, on a day-to-day basis, they practice what they preach. Dedicated to living self-sufficiently in keeping with a set of ecological principles, they are idealistic and practical at the same time.

These environmentalists are essentially committed to the sort of egalitarian, nonmaterialist mode of consciousness we generally advocate. As I explored this movement, both intellectually and personally, I found well-developed networks of people living in ecovillages around the world, from Germany, Brazil, Denmark, Thailand, India, the United States, just to mention the few that I know best. I also surprisingly discovered that Senegal has developed a national ecovillage program sponsored by a central government agency, established with the help of the Global Ecovillage Network.

Operating outside of conventional economic and cultural arrangements, life in many of them is culturally rich—with films, lectures, crafts, colorful festivals, and art exhibitions—and quite livable. They are also politically engaged in environmental activism outside of their own orbit. Internally they typically practice a politically challenging form of consensus decision-making. Rather than just emphasize the idealistic features of the ecovillage model, which are to be applauded, I stressed their potential as a defensive form that people can turn to when the climate crisis hits in full force. This includes the urban variant of the ecovillage, some of which are quite impressive.

Given its goal of pioneering material sufficiency in socially harmonious communities, the movement offers a concrete, existing alternative model to build on and extend, rural or urban. Many will say that a turn to ecovillages is impractical. And that is the case at present for most. But things are starting to change rapidly, and the options might well look quite different under social

and economic collapse. As circumstances become more and more unbearable, many can discover the ecovillage—or something like it—as a viable alternative. It may not be available to the masses, but a turn to urban ecovillages, as well as eco-neighborhoods, could substantially increase its availability.

History, moreover, bears this out. During times of severe hardship, many people collectively retreat to the land, in part to grow food for their families and in part to escape social turmoil in the cities. As new generations confront similar hardships, they can discover and use the low-carbon tools and practices that the ecovillage movement has rediscovered or developed for survival in just such times. In addition, these eco-communities can serve ethically and spiritually to preserve democratic and egalitarian values essential to a sustainable transition in many parts of the world, even if only pockets of sustainability.

None of this is to say that ecovillages are the solution to the crisis. We still need to politically struggle globally for the Great Transition. But we also need to look reality in the face. The transition is not currently in the offing, and it is not at all clear if or when it will come about. Thus, as Lester Brown put it, we need a [Plan B](#). The ecovillage movement, I submit, should have a place in that plan.

---

## About the Author



Frank Fischer is a research scholar at Humboldt University in Berlin and Faculty Fellow at the University of Kassel in Germany, as well as an Emeritus Professor of Politics and Global Affairs at Rutgers University. His research focuses on environmental policy, the politics of climate change, and US foreign policy. He is a co-editor of the journal *Critical Policy Studies* and the author of such books as *Citizens, Experts, and the Environment: The Politics of Local Knowledge*; *Climate Crisis and the Democratic Prospect: Participatory Governance in Sustainable Communities*; and *Truth and Post-Truth in Public Policy*. He holds a PhD from New York University.

---

## About the Publication

Published by the [Great Transition Initiative](#).

Under our Creative Commons BY-NC-ND copyright, you may freely republish our content, without alteration, for non-commercial purposes as long as you include an explicit attribution to the Great Transition Initiative and a link to the GTI homepage.



Cite as Frank Fischer, "The Practical Idealism of Ecovillages," contribution to GTI Forum "Which Future Are We Living In?," *Great Transition Initiative* (November 2022), <https://greattransition.org/gti-forum/which-future-fischer>.

---

## About the Great Transition Initiative

The [Great Transition Initiative](#) is an international collaboration for charting pathways to a planetary civilization rooted in solidarity, sustainability, and human well-being.

As an initiative for collectively understanding and shaping the global future, GTI welcomes diverse ideas. Thus, the opinions expressed in our publications do not necessarily reflect the views of GTI or the Tellus Institute.