
Karen Litfin writes that the purpose of *Ecovillages* is to ‘sketch a global portrait of the leading edge of sustainable living in the early twenty-first century’ because ‘sustainability is not an option, it is the ground rule for inhabiting our home planet’ (p. 32). She is largely successful in this endeavor as her sketch is based upon her 2012 travels to 14 ecovillages around the globe.1 Her analysis is buttressed by her own background as a political scientist who researches and teaches about sustainability. Her efforts are a welcome addition to the small but growing literature on ecovillages and intentional communities, and her book now moves past Jonathan Dawson’s *Ecovillages: New Frontiers for Sustainability* (2006) as the most reader-friendly, accessible, and engaging book on the phenomenon of ecovillages. *Ecovillages* is intended to appeal to a large, popular audience. Therefore, at times it reads as a travelogue and personal narrative with minimal use of scholarly analysis and footnotes. Those readers desiring a more sophisticated and academic handling of the material may be disappointed. She clarifies, however, why she chose this audience and writing tone, stating that one goal of the book is to ‘share my gleanings with ordinary people who want information about how to transform their lives and the inspiration to actually do so’ (p. 14, author’s italics). Given this tone and overall content, the book ideally serves as an excellent primer for an undergraduate class.

The book begins with an overview that addresses her choice of this research, these 14 ecovillages, and the timeliness of the book. We then encounter a quick snapshot that introduces each ecovillage, followed by Litfin’s unique contribution to analyzing the ecovillage movement, or what she calls ‘E2C2’. This is her attempt to move sustainability discussions beyond the entrenched three-legged stool model of community, ecology, and economy to a new model of ecology, economy, community, and consciousness.2 During her travels, Litfin realized that ‘questions of deeper meaning and cosmological belonging are very much alive’ (p. 31) in all of the communities she visited, and to understand ecovillages we must understand the ontological commitments and longings of those who reside there. The next four chapters of the book are a comprehensive investigation into the proposed new model (E2C2) that weaves together personal narrative, a fleeting literature review, and evocative ethnographic data. The book finishes with ‘Scaling It Up’, Litfin’s attempt to think through how to apply ecovillage lessons to our own Peak Oil neighborhoods and places of residence.

1. It should be noted she did not visit any in Latin America, Russia, or Israel (*kibbutzim*), so ecovillages in these global regions are not part of her ethnography and research.

2. There are a variety of three-part models utilizing different terms that focus on environment, society, and the economy.
She recognizes that—given the reality that most humans will not join ecovillages, and the ever-shortening time before anthropogenic climate change drastically limits the chance to create fully adaptive and resilient urban/suburban/rural modes of dwelling—the best option is to apply E2C2 lessons in our own communities beginning now.

Litfin argues that because narratives and stories matter (p. 3) the meta-question becomes, ‘how shall we live?’ (p. 5) in a way that bridges the gap between today’s hyper-individualism and the reality of planetary interdependence (p. 46). For Litfin, ecovillages as ‘self-contained collective endeavors’ (p. 51) and centers of learning and sharing become the incubation plot for gestating new answers to the above question. She found that four common perceptions underlay the 14 global ecovillages she visited, and together these inspire residents to navigate the inevitable collapse of the ‘energy extravaganza of the twentieth century’ (p. 51). These four are a perception that the ‘web of life is sacred, and humanity is an integral part of this web’ (p. 16); we are rapidly approaching planetary tipping points for many key environmental metrics; holistic responses to this will be from the ground up; and ‘saying yes is a greater source of power than saying no’ (p. 16). Taken together, these lead to the key insight of ecovillages: ‘sharing is the essence of ecovillage life’ (p. 22). This means sharing food, labor, resources, dreams, struggles, friendships, stories, music, laughter, and political struggle—all elements of our human birthright and also strategies to move us toward sustainability and a ‘culture of belonging’ (p. 148). Litfin believes this formulation is anathema to mainstream, fossil-fuel-driven industrial societies.

Related to this belief and thus the chapter that is probably most pertinent to readers of this journal is Chapter 6, ‘Consciousness: Being in the Circle of Life’. Here Litfin attempts to distill ontological and metaphysical views from the 14 ecovillages broadly and her research confidants specifically. On one level, ‘ecovillagers are divided in their beliefs about God, spirit, or nonmaterial reality’ (p. 149), which led her to group them as either spiritually focused, spiritually eclectic, secular, or interreligious (p. 150). Nonetheless, ‘at the heart of [convictions that permeate ecovillages] lies one simple premise: that we are inseparable from nature—and the sooner we wake up to that fact, the better for everybody’ (p. 150). This is because, for Litfin, ‘Consciousness is the vitally important subjective dimension of E2C2. Whatever our metaphysical beliefs, sustainability turns out to be an inside job’ (p. 151). Litfin proceeds to contextualize her findings within the Thomas Berry/Brian Swimme lineage of The Universe Story (2014 [1994]), and she claims to have found ample evidence in many ecovillages that this story is actively intuited and disseminated by ecovillage participants. Thus, her analysis privileges an insider, Western, liberal understanding of the unfolding of consciousness and a surface-level ecotheology.

I found this insider lens deeply problematic and highly unsatisfactory. While her evidence seems sufficient to make certain arguments, her overall analysis of the role religio-spiritual beliefs and practices play in the creation, maintenance, and dissemination of ecovillages lacks scholarly sophistication. I would prefer to see Litfin the scholar highlighted in this section by use of insights from deep ecology, lived religion, Bron Taylor’s notion of ‘dark green religion’ (2010), Gaia theory, ecofeminism, and other helpful lenses, rather than her Universe Story-based exegesis interspersed with her own narrative about her personal spiritual growth. Litfin does not engage the academic literature on religion and nature nor contextualize or critically analyze the ways in which the people she studies understand or construe the Universe Story.
Thus, she offers a narrow window through which to view the rich cultivation of ecovillages, lumping them together as manifestations of a particular, ethnocentric strain of scholarship. I think this points to a larger issue facing academia, however, which has no easy answer: How do we encourage our colleagues in various disciplines to cultivate more robust, nuanced understandings of religion–nature interactions wherever they occur? Further, what are appropriate theoretical and methodological tools that can help generate and sustain this robustness?

This criticism aside, Ecovillages is highly successful in meeting its stated goals. This is largely due to Litfin’s writing, as it is her commendable effort in straddling the line between researcher, expert, teacher, explorer, and desire to ‘walk the talk’ that the book succeeds in bringing the reader along for her journey. Two voices explain this journey. One of these articulates Litfin’s personal struggles with putting into practice insights gleaned on her research itinerary (an inner voice); the other represents the collective voices expressed through quotes culled from over one thousand pages of transcribed interviews with over 140 interlocutors (at least ten per ecovillage), which signifies a rich, diverse, comparative data set that is unique to ecovillage literature. Readers of the JSRNC who are researching ecovillages or teaching courses on ecotopias will benefit greatly from this book, while others who are looking for evidence of terrapolitan citizenry, dark green religion, the unfolding of the Universe Story, and/or how a political scientist teaches and researches about human–nature interactions will also find much to engage within its pages.

References


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3. This website offers several updated versions of The Universe Story on DVD.