

Bioregionalism: A Sense of Place

Book review

Madame X

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a review of

HOME! A Bioregional Reader edited by Van Andruss, Christopher Plant, Judith Plant, and Eleanor Wright. New Society Publishers, Santa Cruz, CA. 1990, 181 pgs. \$14.95.

This collection of thirty-one essays is a stimulating introduction to the notion of bioregionalism. Bioregionalism presents a model for a conscious transition from a late industrial society to a society which values community as well as freedom and diversity, a society which emphasizes the limits as well as the regenerative powers of the earth.

Several themes in the Reader are similar to FE perspectives: the destructiveness of civilization and technology; the connection between native peoples' reverence for the earth and their physical harmony with the biosphere; the urgent need for radical transformation if ecological collapse is to be averted.

The first six essays in the book comprise a section titled "What is Bioregionalism?" No precise or restrictive definition of bioregionalism was elaborated, but one clearly senses an attitude. Jim Dodge introduces the idea this way, "Bioregionalism is from the Greek bios (life) and the French region (region), itself from the Latin regia (territory), and earlier regere (to rule or govern).

Etymologically, then; bioregionalism means life territory, place of life, or perhaps government by life. Furthermore, according to Dodge, "If you can't imagine that government by life would be at least 40 billion times better than government by the Reagan administration, or Mobil Oil, or any other distant powerful monolith, then your heart is probably no bigger than a prune pit..."

Dodge goes on to discuss various biological criteria for what constitutes a region (biotic shift, watershed, landform, elevation, cultural factors) without being compelled to state which of these is to be preferred. There is an attitude of letting things take shape on their own.

Bioregionalism doesn't refer to cutting up land and peoples according to watersheds or some abstract scheme. It refers to a deeper understanding of our connectedness. It is not about redefining our sharply demarcated boundaries. It is about expanding them, allowing them perhaps to overlap. As Berg puts it, "Bioregions are the natural locales in which everyone lives."

Readers of the *Fifth Estate* may recall seeing the essay, "Earth Diet, Earth Culture" by William Koethke, [FE #325, Spring, 1987]. His essay poses the question, "How much of the planet life does your Cadillac cost?" Mass production capitalist, communist or otherwise—of food or automobiles or any other commodity, requires organization and control of masses of tractable people. It causes a physical devastation to the environment of similar magnitude and importance to the cultural and spiritual devastation of human beings. Or, as Koethke puts it, "It is freedom and organic life traded for Cool Whip."

The Haudenosaunee, also called the Six Nations Iroquois Confederacy, make a statement in a later chapter which is equally emphatic. "The destruction of the native cultures and people is the same process which has de-

stroyed and is destroying life on this planet. The technologies and social systems which have destroyed the animal and the plant life are also destroying native people. This process is Western Civilization...”

Existing political entities will lose their legitimacy if they continue to abuse the land. The very notion of ‘community’ must clearly be expanded. A community in fact does not end at human boundaries. Rather humans exist in a community with local trees, plants, birds and animals. In Northern California, people seeking to elaborate an ecologically sound position have attended community hearings to “represent” the Douglas Fir, the Ponderosa Pine and the Spotted Owl, sometimes in full costume. This kind of consciousness brings people out at hearings and in front of bulldozers to defend the land or trees. Clearly, no one of us can adequately represent another of our own species, let alone a plant or a rock. But, as native peoples have shown, it is possible to consider, respect, and at least partially protect our non-human neighbors.

Gary Snyder emphasizes that Native American creation mythology referred to North America as Turtle Island. Does this matter? Canada, Mexico, North America, USA, Turtle Island—aren’t names human constructs with no inherent relation to the land they describe? “The State is destroyed but the mountains and rivers remain,” notes Snyder. Yet insofar as the name dialectically reflects and shapes our consciousness of our environment, perhaps it is crucial. The sine qua non of future existence is increased human awareness of the environment.

Just as Marx emphasized that human social classes were relevant to understanding history, Snyder tells us that there are non-human “classes” now entering history: animals, rivers, rocks, and grasses. Bioregionalism expects and values human cultural diversity as well, seeing it as a natural response to varied locales and niches. Over the past year, as I heard news of the many changes in the former USSR and Eastern Europe, I recalled some of Snyder’s comments. While the liberal media tend to depict hostility, narrow-mindedness, and disintegration, other interpretations may sometimes better apply.

Snyder states that cultural pluralism and multilingualism will be found in the natural scheme of things. “We seek balance between cosmopolitan pluralism and deep local consciousness. We are asking how the whole human race can regain self-determination in place, after centuries of having been disenfranchised by hierarchy and/or centralized power. Do not confuse this exercise with ‘nationalism’ which is exactly the opposite, the impostor, the puppet of the state, the grinning ghost of the lost community,” he writes.

Contradictorily, the anthology contains references to various sorts of liberal lobbying efforts, formation of congresses and similar activities mentioned by writers who don’t seem to share Snyder’s critical interpretation of nationalism. Nonetheless, I hope Snyder’s position will receive the attention it deserves.

The great strength of the bioregionalist concept is its emphasis on ecological concerns as the primary concerns of the community, while at the same time emphasizing freedom, diversity and interconnectedness. Thus, it is a viable model for a post-industrial, post-communist, post-capitalist, participatory community.

After being introduced to bioregionalism by this anthology, I find its paradigm elaborates many of my deepest concerns from a standpoint that is both radical and practical. These words from Max Cafard, a New Orleans-based bioregionalist, inspired me most “regional politics do not take place in Washington, Moscow, and other seats of power. Regional power does not sit; it flows everywhere. Through watersheds and bloodstreams. Through nervous systems and food chains. The regions are everywhere and nowhere. We are all illegals. We are natives and we are restless. We have no country; we live in the country. We are off the Inter-State. The Region is against the Regime—any Regime. Regions are anarchic.”

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