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Bioregionalism: A Brief Introduction and Overview

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Introduction

While it can be argued that bioregional principles have been the norm for most of human history, contemporary bioregionalism emerged in the mid-1970s as a response to a growing recognition of the extent to which modern industrialization and consumerism contribute to ecological degradation, social alienation, and reduced levels of self-fulfillment. Bioregionalism can be briefly defined as a social movement which seeks to recover a sense of place and a sense of community by revitalizing ecologically sustainable and culturally diverse societies in the context of their local geographical areas, or “bioregions.” Useful introductions to the thought and practice of bioregionalism can be found in Berg (1978), Andruss et al. (1990), Plant and Plant (1990), McGinnis (1999), Desai and Riddlestone (2002), and Thayer (2003).

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What is a bioregion?

The term *bioregion* (literally “life–place”) was originally coined by Allen Van Newkirk (1975) and the concept was further elaborated by the field biologist, Raymond Dasmann, in his influential textbook, *Environmental Conservation* (1984). Van Newkirk and Dasmann had both been interested in classifying and mapping regions with respect to their natural features rather than arbitrary political boundaries (see also Aberley 1993). Peter Berg, an early promoter of bioregionalism, had been a close associate of Van Newkirk and Dasmann, and also of Gary Snyder (1969), whose neo-tribalist writings had an important early (and later) influence on bioregional thought. While acknowledging the role that the natural sciences could play in determining the boundaries of a bioregion, Berg proposed that the term be regarded primarily as a cultural, rather than a scientific concept. In “Reinhabiting California,” an early manifesto of the bioregional movement, Berg and Dasmann wrote that a bioregion “refers both to geographical terrain and a terrain of consciousness—to a place and the ideas that have developed about how to live in that place” (1977, p. 399). Bioregionalism attempts to overcome the “nature vs. culture” dichotomy by seeing the two as forming a symbiotic relationship with each other.

Kirkpatrick Sale, influenced by the “small-is-beautiful” philosophy of E. F. Schumacher (1999 [1973]), first explored the possibility of creating economically self-sufficient, politically decentralized, and culturally diverse local communities in his book, *Human Scale* (2007 [1980]). In his comprehensive treatment of bioregionalism, *Dwellers in the Land*, Sale suggests that bioregions can be distinguished by “particular attributes of flora, fauna, water, climate, soils, and landforms, and by the human settlements and cultures those attributes have given rise to” (2000 [1985], p. 55). While granting that the borders of bioregions are fluid rather than discrete, Sale identifies three different types, nested one within another: *ecoregions*, large territories sharing similar native vegetation and soil types (e.g., the Ozark Plateau); *georegions*, mid-size areas identified by mountain ranges, valleys, and river basins (e.g., the White River watershed in the Ozark Plateau); and *morphoregions*, smaller units

marked by changing life forms and human land use patterns (e.g., specific locales within the White River watershed). In Snyder's gloss, "A place on earth is a mosaic within larger mosaics" (1990, p. 27).

Noting that some of the criteria used to define bioregions are mutually exclusive, Alexander (1990) has suggested that bioregionalism be regarded more as a sensibility and an environmental ethic than as a science. Sale (2000, p. 43) concurs that the final boundaries of bioregions are determined not by nature but by people, in accordance with their own sensibilities (see also Berg and Dasmann 1977, p. 399). Bioregions are social constructs in the sense that they are based not only on objective criteria but also on human subjectivity. Taking issue with Sale's definition of a bioregion as a "life-territory . . . governed by nature, not legislature," Alexander (1996) has further argued that the laws of nature do not dictate how local cultures will interact with their local environments; rather, the same bioregions are capable of supporting a wide variety of cultural forms, with scope for human choice. Most bioregionalists, including Sale, would probably agree, pointing out that there is a subtle but important difference between the relatively uncontroversial claim that natural laws set the parameters within which a variety of viable cultures can potentially develop and the highly problematic position that the laws of nature dictate how cultures will or should interact with their environments.

Frenkel (1994) has similarly contended that bioregionalism shares certain affinities with environmental determinism, the largely discredited theory that geographical features determine all aspects of a society's cultural, economic, and political development. McTaggart (1993), to the contrary, argues that bioregionalism has more in common with the opposing view, geographical possibilism, which holds that regional environments merely make possible certain forms of culture while precluding others. Nature and culture co-evolve in a dialectical relationship, with each transforming the other. The objective of bioregionalism is to achieve a co-adaptive fit between local cultures and local environments. Parsons (1985, p. 4) characterizes bioregionalism as an "action-oriented cultural geography," while Berthold-Bond (2000, p. 18) sees it as involv-

ing a “reciprocal interaction” between place and self-identity. In Snyder’s words, “Our place is part of what we are” (1990, p. 27).

Aims of bioregionalism

Jim Dodge identifies three elements which he takes to be fundamental to bioregional thought: “a decentralized, self-determined mode of social organization; a culture predicated upon biological integrities and acting in respectful accord; and a society which honors and abets the spiritual development of its members” (1981, p. 10). Berg similarly writes that the goals of bioregionalism are to “restore natural systems, satisfy basic human needs, and develop support for individuals” (2009, p. 162). Nature, society, and self can be seen in transactional terms, with each mutually constituting and influencing the other; a corresponding bioregional ethic aims to integrate local environments and local communities in ways that are ecologically sustainable, socially just, and humanly satisfying (Evanoff 2011).

A key bioregional concept is *reinhabitation*, which “involves becoming native to a place through becoming aware of the particular ecological relationships that operate within and around it,” as well as “evolving social behavior that will enrich the life of that place, restore its life-supporting systems, and establish an ecologically and socially sustainable pattern of existence within it” (Berg and Dasmann, 1977, p. 399). Bioregionalism has been criticized both by those who see it as an arcadian back-to-the-land movement out of touch with the realities of modern urbanization, a tendency Brennan (1998) refers to as “homely bioregionalism,” and by those who think its preoccupation with creating human-nature synergies offers insufficient support for wilderness preservation. In fact, bioregionalism goes beyond both an ecocentric concern for preserving pristine wildlands and an anthropocentric focus on conserving natural systems for humans use. Berg proposes that there are “different zones of human interface with natural systems: urban, suburban, rural, and wilderness,” each with “a different appropriate reinhabitory approach” (2015, p. 139). Bioregionalists have in fact paid a considerable amount of attention to urban reinhabitation (Todd and Tukul 1981;

Berg, Magilavy, and Zuckerman 1990), and also forged links with radical environmentalists devoted to wilderness preservation (Taylor 2000) and ecological restoration (Mills 1995).

The bioregional paradigm

In contrast to what Sale (2000, p. 50) refers to as the “industrial-scientific paradigm,” which favors unlimited economic growth, centralized forms of decision-making, and cultural homogenization at the national/global levels, the “bioregional paradigm” advocates the devolution of economic, political, and social power to local communities. To achieve economic security, particularly in an age of peak oil and ecological limits to growth, bioregional communities aim at economic self-sufficiency in terms of food, clothing, shelter, energy, and other primary goods rather than depend on global markets to supply their basic needs (Cato 2013). Dasmann (1984) makes a distinction between “ecosystem people,” who are able to achieve a high quality of life within their local bioregions, and “biosphere people,” who exploit resources from outside their own regions to support ever-higher levels of consumerism. While complete self-reliance is neither necessary nor desirable (Dasmann 1981), creating sustainable steady-state economies within bioregions may reduce inequalities between “developed” and “developing” countries by allowing local populations, including indigenous peoples, to maintain control over their domestic resources. Bioregionalism’s advocacy of local production for local consumption dovetails with post-development theory (Ziai 2007), and also lends support to grassroots movements within civil society advancing democratic alternatives to corporate globalization (Carr 2004), reductions in the ecological footprints of industrialized nations (Wackernagel and Rees 1996), and lifestyles based on voluntary simplicity (Mills 2002).

David Haenke’s *Ecological Politics and Bioregionalism* (1984) provided the impetus for organizing the first North American Bioregional Congress (now the Continental Bioregional Congress) in 1984, a gathering of local bioregional groups that eventually led to the formation of the Greens/Green Party USA in 1991 and the Green Party of the United

States in 2001. While proposals have been made for the creation of a “bioregional state” in which political institutions would be restructured on the basis of bioregions and governed through a system of proportional representative democracy (Whitaker 2005), bioregionalism is perhaps more compatible with social anarchism and more participatory forms of democracy that place ultimate decision-making power in the hands of local communities (Sale 1985). Such communities can nonetheless be confederated at the appropriate levels “through ecosystems, bioregions, and binomes” to deal with problems that cross local boundaries (Bookchin 1982, p. 344). Power would flow not from the global to the local, but from the local to the global. Distinguishing itself from mainstream environmentalism, bioregionalism adopts a proactive, prefigurative politics, which has less interest in protesting against the state, reforming laws and institutions, or taking control of the government than in acting directly to create practical alternatives to ecological devastation and social disintegration—“growing a new society in the shell of the old,” to paraphrase an old anarchist slogan. Promoting biological and cultural diversity at the local level enables bioregional communities to both preserve their natural environments and prevent them from being exploited by others.

Whereas globalization fosters what Berg (2009, pp. 129–137) refers to as a “global monoculture,” bioregionalism champions learning and extending the lore of local cultures, including their customs, myths, and rituals. Writers on spiritual perspectives connected with bioregionalism include the Catholic theologian, Thomas Berry (1988), the ecofeminist neo-pagan, Starhawk (1990), the deep ecology scholar, Dolores LaChapelle (1992), and the philosopher/historian, Morris Berman (1981). Bioregionalism has made significant contributions to nature writing from a multicultural perspective (Barnhill 1999) and inspired a literary tradition of its own, with a corresponding ecocritical literature (Lynch, Glotfelty, and Armbruster 2012). Representative works, among many others, include the place-based poetry and prose of Gary Snyder (1974), the ecotopian fiction of Ernest Callenbach (2014), and the agrarian essays (plus poems, short stories, and novels) of Wendell Berry (2002).

Bioregionalism and cultural diversity

Bioregionalism's rejection of the meta-narratives of modernism and globalization has been interpreted as endorsing a postmodern perspective, which sees norms about how humans relate to their environments as being based in contextual "bioregional narratives" (Cheney 1993), a stance which respects cultural diversity but may also lead to insularity. Bioregionalism's emphasis on localism has been criticized on the ground that it can lead to economic autarky, political isolationism, and cultural parochialism, with a corresponding inability to effectively address global environmental problems (Dudley 1995). Others have claimed that bioregionalism encourages nativism, xenophobia, and racism, with one critic going so far as to argue that bioregionalism shares certain similarities with the right-wing ecology movement of fascist Germany (Olsen 2000). Such charges misrepresent the views of most, if not all, bioregionalists, who abhor chauvinism and fully embrace the Green slogan, "think globally, act locally."

A "post-postmodern" approach to bioregionalism avoids relativism by suggesting that *all* cultural norms can be submitted to critical reflection and imaginatively reconstructed both within and among cultures (Evanoff 2011, p. 23). Intercultural dialogue allows bioregional communities to negotiate entirely new norms that enable them to cooperate effectively with each other in resolving mutually shared problems. Bioregionalists aspire to "live regionally and yet learn from and contribute to planetary society" (Snyder 1995, p. 247). It is only when we are rooted in a particular cultural tradition that we have something worthwhile to share with people from other cultures (Helm 1981). Thomashow (1999) advocates a "cosmopolitan bioregionalism," which recognizes that persons are simultaneously located not only in local landscapes (place) but also in global systems (space). Meredith similarly sees individuals as having overlapping relations at various scales, from micro-regions to macro-regions, with communities being "interwoven between local and global affiliations" (2005, p. 93). Bioregionalism could plausibly adopt a principle of subsidiarity, which allows decisions to be made at the smallest possible level while still permitting cooperative action at larger scales

when necessary, particularly through confederal institutions. Local empowerment, rather than subservience to global forces beyond their control, is precisely what enables bioregional communities to engage in genuine acts of international (cross-bioregional) solidarity. As Berg writes, “There are opportunities for life–place political alliances at all the levels from a local watershed to a continent (and eventually other continents’ assemblies)” (2009, pp. 168–169).

Bioregionalism is an eclectic mix of practices and positions with no central authority or ideology, meaning that nothing written (or cited) here should be construed as “definitive” of bioregional thought or practice as a whole. While disagreeing at times, bioregionalism has constructively engaged itself with other schools of ecological thought, including deep ecology (Davidson 2007), social ecology (Clark 1997), ecofeminism (Fike and Kerr 1995), ecosocialism (Pepper 1993), ecoanarchism (Green Anarchy Collective 2004), ecological utopianism (Pepper 2007), and environmental pragmatism (Booth 2012). Although the Planet Drum Foundation, founded by Berg and Judy Goldhaft in 1973, continues to serve as a clearinghouse for information about bioregional activities, bioregionalism eschews the idea of creating a single centralized “umbrella organization” for the movement as a whole. Given its emphasis on intellectual as well as organizational diversity, bioregionalism does not seek “converts,” but rather encourages the formation of rhizomatic networks with similar groups working for social and ecological change. Bioregionalism shares overlapping concerns with movements promoting permaculture and community agriculture, worker and consumer cooperatives, community finance and local currencies, ecovillages and transition towns, among others (Shuman 1998; De Young and Princen 2012; Lockyer and Veteto 2013).

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