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Bioregionalism: The Need for a Firmer Theoretical Foundation

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Bioregionalism has been called the ‘politics of place’ (Michael, 1983). It has a number of characteristics. These include a belief in *natural*, as opposed to political or administrative, regions as organizing units for human activity; an emphasis on a practical *land ethic* to be applied at a local and regional scale; and the favoring of locally and regionally *diverse cultures* as guarantors of environmental adaptation, in opposition to the trend towards global monoculture (Alexander, 1990).

Jim Dodge (1981), bioregional author and activist, has offered a different set of characteristics. They are: *natural systems* as the source of physical and spiritual sustenance; *anarchy*, or the decentralization of political institutions to a scale where face-to-face interaction and self-management become possible; and *spirituality*, a belief in the sacredness of the web of life.

Bioregionalism emerged in the early 1970s as the product of an intermingling between biogeography and the California counter-culture. Peter Berg, the acknowledged ‘father’ of bioregionalism, had been involved in the Diggers and the San Francisco Mime Troupe. In 1973-74, he met the esteemed ecologist, Raymond Dasmann, who was interested in counter-cultural movements as a vehicle for more ecologically-oriented values (Dasmann, 1974). He had also contributed to the delineation of large terrestrial zones known as ‘biogeographical provinces’.

Though intrigued by them, Berg felt that, for the purposes he had in mind, Dasmann’s biogeographical provinces were too large and lacked any reference to culture (Zuckerman, 1989). Building on the work of Canadian Allen Van Newkirk, he developed the concept of ‘bioregion’ as a unit intermediate between these provinces, and ecosystems or collections of ecosystems known as ‘landscapes’ (Parsons, 1985).

The first major statement of the new philosophy was Berg and Dasmann’s “Reinhabiting California,” published in *The Ecologist* in 1977, and later republished in an anthology, *Reinhabiting A Separate Country*. In this article, Berg and Dasmann (1978, p. 218) state that the term bioregion

refers both to a *geographical terrain* and a *terrain of consciousness* [italics added] - to a place and the ideas that have developed about how to live in that place. Within a bioregion the conditions that influence life are similar and these in turn have influenced human occupancy.

Berg and Dasmann claim that human cultures are differentiated at a bioregional

scale - that at the bioregional level, the "geographical terrain" coincides with a "terrain of consciousness", expressing itself in specific cultures. These, in turn, help shape the land, as with aboriginal peoples changing the landscape of southern New England through the controlled use of fire (Carr, 1990).

Bioregionalists have purported to see a correspondence between the Native "culture areas" mapped by Kroeber and their own conceptions of bioregions, or other regional configurations, such as the vegetation regions mapped by Shelford (Carr, 1990). I have examined such maps and fail to see the correspondence. What I know of Native cultures leads me to believe that there is some match at the *biogeographical province scale* (e.g. plains cultures, boreal forest cultures, and Eastern woodlands cultures). This is not to say that there is never a match between the "geographical terrain," at a bioregional scale, and the "terrain of consciousness." There may well be, but we have to first establish our criteria for designating a bioregion, and then specify at what historical stage this correspondence occurs.

Bioregionalism: Materialist, Idealist and In-Between

There are four possible approaches to delineating bioregions, and examples of each can be found in the bioregional literature. First, one can take an *environmental determinist* position - the view that nature *determines* culture within the context of specific regions (Sale, 1985). In arguing this position, one has to be specific about which geographic criteria one is using - hydrology, physiography, climate, vegetation, or animal life? Each will give a different sized (and configured) bioregion. Or, alternatively, are we talking about some fusion of all of these criteria, which can be revealed only by some as yet unspecified methodology?1

A second position is that there is a *correspondence* between culture and nature at the bioregional scale, rather than a one-way cause-effect relationship, and that each impacts on the other to an equal degree (Carr, 1990). The problem, however, lies in showing that such a correspondence exists, except perhaps as a transitory phenomenon.

Third, one can take a possibilist approach (as it has traditionally been called in geography) and say that geography merely sets *certain limits*, or provides certain resources, and that regions in their full development are principally the products of culture (Mumford, 1970/1938).

Finally, one can say that the terrain of consciousness is everything - that wherever people *think* they are is where they are. What's important is that people re-orient themselves ecologically; the precise boundaries of that re-orientation are unimportant. Thus, even if tribal boundaries (or other boundaries manifested by an earth-centred culture) do not match any specific boundaries in nature,

these constitute a bioregion.

From a theoretical and historical point of view, the third position makes the most sense, though for reasons of practical politics, I think popular conventions (where strongly held) should be allowed to determine boundaries. The third and fourth positions do not actually contradict one another. If regional configurations are largely a product of culture, then where people *think* they are *is* where they are.

Region as an Evolutionary Concept

Even allowing that cultural phenomena are the ultimate determinants of bioregional boundaries, *whose* culture, and *which aspects* of culture? Geographic boundaries differ depending on whether one is considering hydrology, vegetation, physiography, or wildlife. Likewise, different cultures relate to *different aspects* of their environment, and their spatial manifestations will differ accordingly. Bruce Mitchell (1989, p. 2) has written that

”natural resources are defined by human perceptions and attitudes, wants, technological skills, legal, financial and institutional arrangements, as well as by political customs. What is a natural resource in one culture may be ‘neutral stuff’ in another culture. Resources... are subjective, relative, and functional.”

There is nothing in the Great Lakes bioregion that dictates that people must grow corn; the soils and climate merely *allow* it. The Iroquois and Huron grew corn; the Mississaugas didn't. Was one group following a more authentically bioregional practice than another? The Iroquois learned their food-growing techniques from tribes far to the south. This was a cultural adaptation. This kind of cultural *diffusion* is a constant throughout human history, and is at odds with more essentialist interpretations of bioregionalism.²

Moreover, groups are not rooted in specific regions; they are constantly migrating and displacing one another. The Welsh and Bretons may seem like the authentic bioregional occupants of their respective bioregions, but they got where they are by displacing even more primordial inhabitants. This process of migration and conquest is a constant throughout human history. How does this fit in with bioregional theory?

Toward A More Nuanced Bioregional Methodology

In order to develop a more nuanced approach than ‘one bioregion, one culture,’ I have created a typology for looking at the way various cultures have related to the same land base. If physiographic, vegetation, and hydrological regions are the principal kinds of ‘natural’ regions,³ then it can be argued that ‘social’ regions are of three types also: cultural, political, and economic.⁴

In *The Culture of Cities*, Lewis Mumford (1970/1938) argues that physiographic and vegetational regions prevail in the early stages of cultural development, but are gradually replaced by river valleys (hydrological regions), which, in turn, are replaced by city regions - with the region being the area which is integrated by its cultural, and particularly economic, capital. Thus, there occurs a gradual shift from the predominance of natural factors to social ones. With the sharpening of the ecological crisis, directionality begins to shift back the other way.

Taking the Great Lakes as an example, hunting and gathering cultures tended to occupy vegetational regions, such as the boreal forest, the deciduous forest, or the various ecotones between them. Agricultural societies (such as the Iroquois, or the European pioneers) tended to occupy physiographic regions (regions defined by relief and soil types). Industrial cultures (such as Mumford’s ‘eotechnic’ and ‘paleotechnic’ cultures) tended to be organized around waterways - as sources of power, transport, and process and waste water (as in the example of major conurbations like Toronto, Hamilton, and Detroit).

Once established, the role of cities as centres of economic, political and cultural life tend to augment, and eventually, overshadow their geographical positioning. However, the severity of our current ecological crisis is forcing a renewed consideration of how cities relate to their surrounding natural regions. The importance of water as a life support and recreational resource, in our own post-industrial age, has strengthened the tilt towards hydrological regions as one particular focus.

At the same time, the different kinds of regions are layered, one on top of the other: agricultural capability still determines land use patterns to a large degree, and cultural, political, and economic regions compete with and often overshadow hydrological units.⁵

Conclusion

Bioregions may not exist *on the ground* (as many bioregionalists seem to believe), or they may be a product of a culture-nature interaction and hence in constant flux. This does not invalidate the concept of bioregion. There are

reasons to believe that the development of a truly sustainable society may well depend on our ability to adapt ourselves to a frame of reference *larger* than the ecosystem and *smaller* than the biogeographical province.

But, as bioregionalists themselves admit, there are *several* criteria that can be used to delimit such regions - criteria which are, in fact, in most cases mutually exclusive. It is ultimately *up to us* to decide which are most useful for our purposes, from a variety of standpoints: political acceptance, management and rehabilitation of the land base, and cultural and spiritual resonance. There will be no easy answers.

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Notes

1 For a look at someone who attempts to take all these factors, and more, into account, see Aberly (1985).

2 By "essentialist", I mean tending to see each bioregion as having a single definable 'essence' and a mode of "living-in-place" appropriate to it.

3 Faunal regions bear a fairly close relationship to floral regions. For purposes of simplicity, one can conceive of three primary, overlapping, types of natural regions: *physiographic* (the Canadian Shield), *vegetational* (the Great Lakes-St. Lawrence Forest), and *hydrological* (the Lake Ontario basin).

4 Acadia would be an example of a cultural region, Ontario an example of a political region, and an urban shadow area an example of an economic region.

5 For example, in Ontario, the watershed-based *Conservation Authorities* are weak in influence and resources compared with regional and lower-tier municipalities.

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